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Senior Honors Thesis

Spring 2019

The Three Moral Questions

Abstract

This paper examines the manner in which moral theory ought to be conducted. It focuses on three questions of ethical theory: (1) Why do we conduct moral theory; (2) How ought moral theory be grounded and explored; (3) What is morally good. While many people concern their moral investigations primarily with the third question, I argue that this question of the morally good cannot be satisfactorily answered until the motivational why and methodological how questions are thoroughly examined. To frame this argument, I examine how two famous philosophers, David Hume and Immanuel Kant, answer questions (1) and (2). Based on their answers, I examine a potential problem arising from the question of the morally good, and explore a potential answer to this problem by way of Adam Smith's moral theory. My proposed answers to these moral questions seek to avoid their potential circularity and promote moral philosophy as a practical science.

Keywords

Philosophy, ethics, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, rationalism, empiricism, sentimentalism, utilitarianism, deontology

(i) Introduction

Let's begin by examining a problem that we see in the philosophy of science. Many philosophers of science, such as Popper and Kuhn, have theorized about the nature of scientific investigation and its success. Despite an abundance of such theories, we are still unable to clearly identify when we have discovered scientific truths. Einstein's theory of general relativity seemed to explain problems and phenomena that Newton's gravitational framework couldn't, and thus triumphed as the accepted theory. However, since general relativity's mainstream acceptance, scientists have identified anomalies that it seems unable to explain; general relativity still seems unsuccessful in explaining the mechanistic workings of the universe. In light of problems like this, philosophers of science cannot decide the degree at which we can say that we know true things about, for example, how mass and energy interrelate. Despite that, scientific investigation has succeeded in curing formerly devastating diseases and flying to the moon. So, in a sense, it seems like we *know* very little about how mass and energy interrelate, but our current theories of how they interrelate do seem to succeed to a considerate pragmatic degree. Is our scientific practice a success, then? It depends on what we're trying to do

Let's move to moral philosophy—the primary concern of this essay. It seems to suffer a similar problem. Ethicists can't decide on the real nature of what it is to be morally good, which seems to be a foundational moral question. Utilitarians assert that the primary morally relevant criterion is utility: an act is good iff it promotes the most well-being of all candidate acts. Such a theory is opposite Kant's, who asserts that the primary morally relevant criterion is good will: an act is good if it is carried out with good intentions.

There are strong potential counterexamples to each side of this argument for the good. Can an ill-intended act that turned out to make everybody better off have no claim to be good? Should we hold those who try to help, but make things worse in their attempt, in moral contempt? It's hard to escape the feeling that both utility and good will are morally significant, even if a theoretically satisfying way of bringing both together has proven to be elusive. They seem to be closely related, yet certainly distinct. It seems wrong to say that we can fully explain one in terms of the other, and each has such a basic appeal that it is hard to deny its moral worth. Despite that theoretical insufficiency, each way of looking at morality has clearly brought a great deal of moral phenomena into sharper focus for us.

Similar to the problem of gauging scientific success, this problem in moral theory may be usefully framed by a deeper moral question: why do we conduct moral theory? In this essay I will argue that the analysis of this motivational question can provide important framing for an explanation of the impasse we reach when trying to weigh utility against good will.

(ii) Structure

There are three essential questions under consideration in this essay.

The most important question is the motivational *why question,* "Why do we conduct moral theory in the first place?"—Effectively, asking what is the goal of moral theory? Analogous to science, answering this question will determine the degree of success of our moral investigations. The problem with this question is the lack of relevant data available for answering it. It seems almost impossible to identify evidence that can,

by itself, serve us in asserting that we are motivated by some specific principle or end goal.

The second most important question is the methodological *how question,* "How should we go about conducting moral theory?"—Effectively, asking whether moral theory should be grounded and explored empirically or purely rationally. Empirical investigations reference our perceptual experience, while purely rational investigations are conducted in terms of concepts that must be understood without any such reference. Each approach has its merits and vices. Empiricism allows us a wealth of data from which to draw conclusions, but due to the problem of induction, these conclusions cannot be considered logically sound. Conclusions drawn by pure rationality can be conclusively logically sound; they can be universally true in the same way that 2+3=5 is true. But, conducting a moral investigation purely rationally requires that we discard all of our experiences of moral situations and draw conclusions from strictly *a priori* principles—a difficult task, considering that we generally understand moral situations via our perceptual experiences.

The final question is the substantive *good question,* "What is morally good?"—Effectively, asking by which criteria we should judge moral actions. The two most common answers to this question are, again, utility and good will. Utility is generally understood as the capacity to promote well-being. Good will is generally understood as good intention: aiming to act in a positive way. These two answers are frequently pitted against each other, with their respective proponents arguing that one is more basic, or more worthy of praise than the other. Some people even argue that utility or good will is

the *only* moral good, and that all moral considerations boil down to one of these options alone.

(ii.a) The Primary Argument

The primary argument of this paper is aimed to persuade you that the *good question* cannot be satisfactorily answered until the *how* and *why questions* are satisfactorily explored and answered. In other words, I aim to persuade you that any satisfactory answer to the *good question* can only be considered satisfactory if it follows from a serious investigation of the *how* and *why questions*.

My argument relies on the assumption of the following premise:

> If a candidate answer to the *how question* (which follows from they *why question*) can explain the occurrence of a problem in answering the *good question* (and not the other way around), then the *how* and *why questions* ought to be explored before the *good question*.

Consider this example:

You are at a store to buy cleaning supplies, and you cannot decide if you ought to buy a broom or a mop. You have a substantive question, "Which is the better tool for cleaning my floor, the broom or the mop?" The answer to this substantive question depends on the motivational question, "Why do I want to clean my floor: do I just like having a clean-looking floor, or do I want to prevent disease in my guests and myself by having a clean floor?" If you just like seeing a clean floor, it seems you ought to just buy the broom and sweep up the debris on your floor. If you are concerned with the actual sanitation of your floor, it seems you ought to buy both the broom and the mop, because everyone knows you must sweep before you can mop effectively.

We see here that asking a motivational question before a substantive question can really help get better answers for the latter.

As mentioned before, the motivational *why* question of moral theory is an obscure one. It seems that we lack the data necessary for answering it conclusively. Due to this, for the purpose of highlighting the importance of the *why* and *how questions* of moral theory relative to the substantive *good question*, we will operate under the assumption of what I take to be the most plausible answer to the *why question*:

> We conduct moral theory for the pragmatic purpose of bettering human society. We want to determine how people should treat each other and themselves in order for everyone to have a more pleasant human experience.

It may seem strange to announce the paramount importance of a comprehensive exploration of the *why* question just before assuming its answer. However, I doubt that this is really a problem.

Consider again the opening analogy to philosophy of science. Two candidate answers to the *why question* of natural science are: (s1) we conduct scientific investigation in hopes of identifying the mechanistic workings of the universe; (s2) we conduct scientific investigation in hopes of using our discoveries to make life easier, whether or not they are objectively true. Though (s2) surely seems to be the more pragmatic answer, (s1) can certainly be pragmatic, too, if we use that objective knowledge to invent and engineer useful tools.

Returning to moral theory, two candidate answers to its *why question* are similarly: (m1) we conduct moral theory in hopes of identifying objective, metaphysical moral principles; (m2) we conduct moral theory in hopes of making human life better, whether or not our discoveries are objectively true. Again, (m2) seems to be the more

pragmatic answer. However, since, unlike physics, moral theory is directly concerned with human activity, it seems that (m1) can have direct, pragmatic implications, too. For, if (m1) is the case, and a satisfactory formulation of an objective moral principle were established, it would seem immoral to not use that knowledge for the betterment of our moral lives.

Imagine a scientist, who in light of the appearance of a devastating illness is motivated to find its cure. If, upon finding the cure, the scientist did not share that discovery with the rest of society, we would no doubt find him morally repugnant. Moral theory seems to be similar. If we came to understand how we may cure the moral ailments of humanity, but did not share that knowledge with society, it seems that we too ought to be held in moral contempt.

Based on this reasoning, I am comfortable assuming that our motivations for conducting moral theory are pragmatic. Operating under this assumption will allow us to examine the more easily understood and still highly important methodological *how question* of morality and its effects on the success of answers to the substantive *good question*.

In order to satisfy the requirements set by P1, I will have to convince you of the truth of the following:

> (R1) There exists a problem with the most popular candidate answers to the *good question*.
> (R2) A candidate answer to the *how question* can support an explanation for the problem arising from popular answers to the *good question*.

In hopes of convincing you that the *why* and *how questions* ought to be explored before the *good question*, I will juxtapose Kant's rationalist, duty-driven moral theory with Hume's empirically-based, sentimentalist theory in sections (iii) and (iv) of this

essay, and discuss how their ideas can be understood to instantiate cases that fulfill (R1) above in section (v). Then, in section (vi), I will discuss how Adam Smith's moral philosophy can be understood to instantiate a case that fulfills (R2) above.

(ii.b) The Secondary Argument

Considering our assumption of the answer to the *why question*, the next moral question to be explored is the *how question*.

Since we have assumed that moral theory is of a pragmatic nature, it should follow that the better grounding for moral theory is the more pragmatic grounding. If our goal is to determine how people ought to act, then it seems like we ought to explore that goal in a way that people will be able to understand. For a moral theory to be the more pragmatic, then, would seem to be for it to be more easily understood and accepted by society. When presented with a moral theory, it seems unlikely that most people would adhere to it—especially if it demands actions of them that they find unpleasant—if they could not understand the underlying justification of its principles. If we somehow come to determine the moral law, but common people cannot understand *how* the moral law has been determined or how to apply the moral law to their own lives, it seems unlikely that they will feel bound by it.

Remember, not everyone can analyze deductive reasoning at the level of trained scholars. Indeed, many of the lesser-educated people in the world are highly skeptical of those "intellectual elite" who may presuppose their right to prescribe actions to those less informed folks. If the less informed cannot truly understand why they are supposed to act in some specific way, it seems unlikely that they will do so. The best moral grounding

must be the most pragmatic—the one best understood in terms that all people can relate to.

In section (vii) of this essay, I argue that an empirical grounding is the more pragmatic—and therefore the better—grounding for moral theory.

(iii) David Hume

Hume is best known as a modern godfather of empiricism and utilitarianism. Solely in virtue of that, we can imagine how his theory will answer the questions of *why* and *good*. He asserts that we ought to explore morality through empirically observable phenomena and that utility is the primary moral criterion. Merely stating these answers, as we will see, cannot satisfy what we require for understanding the topic at hand. We must discuss and more fully understand the underlying concepts supporting the theory. We must establish *how* Hume (and Kant's) answers to the methodological *how question* can shed light on the problems with the question of *good*. In order to do that, we must look at each man's philosophical system with a certain degree of detail.

(iii.a) Hume and *How*

Hume's attraction to an empirical grounding for moral theory is, strangely enough, motivated by his own particular brand of skepticism, which he labels mitigated consequent skepticism. Consequent skepticism calls into question the accuracy of our everyday conclusions based on the dubitability of the assumptions that lead to them. Its most extreme version is sometimes called "Pyrrhonian" after its ancient practitioner, Pyrrho. Pyrrho and Hume, recognizing the fallibility of our sensory perceptions, find

reason to doubt the existence of the external universe and the objects it is supposed to contain. Considering that sensory experience is the only thing we can appeal to for the establishment of an external world, the fallibility of sensory perception presents an enormous problem for understanding external phenomena. This is the problem of induction.

Pyrrho's response to this was reportedly to submit to consequent skepticism entirely, i.e. in an *unmitigated* manner; he is said to have required force-feeding because he truly doubted that he had a body that required food—by that reasoning, he probably doubted that food even existed.

Hume believes that this is an improper response to the puzzle of consequent skepticism. From his first *Enquiry*, *Concerning Human Understanding*:

> "[A] Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or, if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail.[1]"

Essentially, Hume is acknowledging that Pyrrho's extreme consequent skepticism, despite its apparent validity, is a fruitless exercise: it cannot have any positive, practical application.

So, Hume proposes his own mitigated consequent skepticism. His formulation of skepticism agrees with Pyrrho's in every way besides its application. Where Pyrrho ignores his basic human nature in favor of his rationally established skeptical principle, Hume does the opposite. He acknowledges that his basic human nature seems fairly reliable. He does not consider doubting the necessity of eating food because eating food

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[1] 110
[2] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* 112

allows him to persist as type of thing that he has always been. Even if he did try to doubt that food would nourish him, in a moment of intellectual weakness his human nature would inevitably take over, and he would end up eating some food anyway. To not eat food would go against everything that he has ever taken to be true. Hume ignores his rationally established skeptical principle in favor of his basic human nature: he *mitigates* his skepticism.

This is the subject of Hume's first *Enquiry*. He takes pure rationality to its logical conclusion. Since that conclusion doesn't allow him to soundly assert the existence of a world that his very human nature *insists* must be there, he denies that phenomena of that world can be explored by pure rationality. Whether or not external objects exist, he has always taken them to. He has always taken them to affect him in a multitude of ways, and as long as he exists as he does, they will always affect him in a similar way. Despite not being able to soundly assert the existence of these objects, it seems like we are still totally justified in asking questions about these things, which we take to exist and affect us as a result of the type of beings that we are. If we cannot soundly examine them through pure rationality, the best way of studying these phenomena must come from an empirical grounding.

More directly from Hume himself:

> "[Human nature must be stronger than extreme Pyrrhonian doubt because philosophers recognize that] philosophical decisions are nothing but reflections of common life, methodized and corrected. But they will never be tempted to go beyond common life, so long as they consider the imperfection of those faculties which they employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations. While we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn; can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any

> determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity?[2]"

As long as the objects of our philosophical investigations are objects of "common life," as Hume calls it, we are totally justified in trusting our sensory perceptions for the purpose of those investigations. After all, we have understood the world as it has been presented to us for millennia, and we seem to have developed some pretty reliable theories operating within that realm of understanding. Seeing as we observe moral situations that occur completely within the bounds of empirical observation every day, we should see no reason to doubt the soundness of their investigation by empirical means. In a sense, moral situations are about as common as common life can be.

In a great passage from his second *Enquiry*, Hume summarizes the reasoning behind his assertion of an empirical grounding for moral theory:

> "As this is a question of fact, not of abstract science, we can only expect success, by following an experimental method, and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances. The other scientifical method, where a general abstract principle is first established, and is afterwards branched out into a variety of inferences and conclusions, may be more perfect in itself, but suits less the imperfection of human nature, and is a common source of illusion and mistake in this as well as other subjects.[3]"

Sure, a perfect, universal, purely rational moral law would be the ideal answer to all questions of morality, but such a thing is beyond our grasps. We are by nature imperfect, and are thereby incapable of cognizing such a perfect principle. Attempts to understand a moral law by pure rationality are fruitless as soon as they are undertaken, to Hume. The only way we may hope to establish any guiding moral principle is through experimentation and observation, constructing it as we learn more and more about the

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[2] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* 112
[3] *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,* 16

situations to which it could apply. Any search for a moral principle must, then, be carried out empirically, and bottom-up, not purely rationally, and top-down.

Hume clearly answers the *how question*, "Moral theory should be conducted empirically."

(iii.b) Hume and the *Good*

If morality is to be investigated empirically, there must be a central, empirically observable phenomenon that we may use to examine moral situations. Because morality involves evaluative questions, which are concerned with the good and the bad, morality must be understood through something similarly evaluative. As a sentimentalist, Hume identifies human sentiment as this phenomenon. He recognizes that pure rationality can only evaluate relations of ideas, like mathematical and logical truths. It cannot gauge the good and the bad; it is not evaluative. Human sentiment is evaluative. It gives us immediate evaluations of good and bad when we observe everyday activity. When we hear music that we like, we feel *good.* When we lose our family's money gambling, we feel *bad* about it. When we see a dog fetch a beer for its master, we feel *good* about that dog. The ability of our sentiments to evaluate what we consider good and bad makes it ideal for evaluating what we consider to be good or bad (right or wrong) moral actions.

To illustrate this point, that morality must be understood chiefly through sentiment, Hume challenges us to imagine that the opposite were true:

> "Extinguish all the warm feelings and presuppositions in favor of virtue, and all disgust or aversion to vice: Render men totally indifferent towards these distinctions; and morality is no longer a practical study, nor has any tendency to regulate our lives and actions.[4]"

[4] *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,* 15

Can we imagine a world devoid of sentiments in which morality has meaning?

If, living in such a world, we observed the excessive beating of a child as punishment, could we truly identify the act as wrong? You may immediately think, "Yes, such an act is clearly morally reprehensible," but why? Your sentiments direct you to this response, according to Hume. Absent them, only your reason may be able to supply an explanation. But reason is not evaluative; it concerns only the relations of ideas. Certainly it could tell you that the child was indeed being beaten, relating the ideas of "child" and "beating," but without sentiment, you could have no conception of "bad" to relate to the situation. Despite the difficulty in imagining ourselves without sentiment, this is a compelling example. In order for our rationality to relate the ideas of "good" and "bad" to the proper situations, we need sentiment to introduce such ideas.

How is it that sentiments determine what ought to be the object of moral approbation? Are they totally self-justifying and unguided, determining what we should approve of without reference to any deeper concept? That would not be very scientific at all. Hume has an answer to this question as well: sentiments track utility. We approve of those things that are useful and beneficial to society, and we disapprove of those things that are useless and detrimental to society. From Hume:

> "Can anything stronger be said in praise of a profession, such as merchandize or manufacture, than to observe the advantages which it procures to society? And is not a monk and inquisitor enraged when we treat his order as useless or pernicious to mankind. In general, what praise is implied in the simple epithet *useful!* What reproach in the contrary![5]"

[5] *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,* 19

This simple idea relating moral evaluation and utility is instantiated by innumerable situations. Indeed, Hume is ripe with such examples, in which our approbation directly follows utility. Consider this one:

> "Giving alms to common beggars is naturally praised; because it seems to carry relief to the distressed and indigent: But when we observe the encouragement thence arising to idleness and debauchery, we regard that species of charity rather as a weakness than a virtue.[6]"

Notice that the act of giving change to beggars is a morally good act only as long as it promotes the well-being of society. If we give beggars too much money—more than just what they need to survive—then we may be encouraging them not to find work, resulting in a detriment to society. Since our donations may allow them to avoid working and bettering society, each donation past the appropriate amount (whatever it may be) seems to actually make society worse off.

You likely experience this situation in common life all the time: when you see a homeless man on a corner panhandling with a bottle of vodka in one hand, you likely disapprove when you see another person giving him money. He clearly has enough income to live, since he has enough extra money to buy alcohol. You probably reason that one should not give him money, because to do so would encourage his unhealthy drinking habit and discourage his search for gainful employment. Such a utilitarian principle, as Hume claims, tracks and explains the sentiment of disapproval that you experience in this case, as well as in the broader pattern of sentiments that we experience in our moral lives.

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[6] *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,* 19

The intricacies of Hume's moral theory regarding the proper evaluations of moral situations in terms of our utility-tracking sentiments are not crucial for the sake of the broader purpose of this essay, but I'll mention them for the sake of completeness.

The faculty that allows us to engage with the plights of others and prompts us to take action in moral situations is sympathy. It is essential for our capacity to approve or disapprove of moral actions and characters[7]. When we see other people in agony, sympathy stirs up our sentiments, and we, as observers, feel bad too. Sympathy causes us to recognize the positive or negative utility of the situations of others.

Since we are fallible, and since we are all closer and more affectively tied to some people, like our families, it seems that our sympathies may be susceptible to socioeconomic, racial, and other subjective bias. In order to avoid this bias in our moral evaluations, Hume asserts that we should evaluate moral situations in terms of the sympathies that a reasonable, representative, cross-sectional panel of observers would hold, rather than our own, potentially biased sympathies.

In any case, Hume's answer to the substantive, *good question*, is "Utility is the primary morally relevant criterion."

(iv) Immanuel Kant

Kant is best known as a modern godfather of deontology—duty-based moral theory. His mature moral theory (produced in the last twenty years of his life) is grounded in pure rationality. From these two facts we may (as we did with Hume) assume Kant's

[7] Sayre-McCord, 209

answers to the questions of *why* and *good.* He asserts that the primary moral criterion is good will, in accordance with a supreme moral law, which is—and ought to be—grounded in pure rationality alone.

(iv.a) Kant and *How*

Up until the final twenty years of his life, Kant was a sentimentalist; he shared many of Hume's ideas about morality. Exactly what motivated him to depart from this empirical moral tradition in favor of forging his own rationalist moral framework is not quite known. He mentions Hume by name in the *Prolegomena*, crediting Hume for awakening him from a "dogmatic slumber[8]" in the field of philosophy. This may be a reference to Hume's first *Enquiry*, implying that Hume's epistemic fatalism motivated him to try and formulate a purely rational theory that allowed for knowledge of external phenomena. This is customarily credited with playing a key role in reshaping Kant's theoretical philosophy, but it certainly could have played an important role in changing the outlook of his practical philosophy, as well.

It may also be the case that he was motivated to construct a new non-empirical theory upon reading Rousseau, as suggested by the following famous passage from the mid-1760s:

> "I am an inquirer by inclination. I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge, the unrest which goes with the desire to progress in it, and satisfaction at every advance in it. There was a time when I believed this constituted the honor of humanity, and I despised the people, who know nothing. Rousseau set me right about this. This binding prejudice disappeared. I learned to honor humanity, and I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that

[8] *Prolegomena,* 4:260

> this attitude of mine can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of humanity.[9]"

An empirical moral theory requires amassing an enormous wealth of data from which one may construct an overarching, umbrella-like moral theory. However, Kant seems to reason here, if this is the case, then common folk may be disadvantaged in their evaluations of morality. After all, most people are too occupied with their everyday subsistence to concern themselves with studying such subjects extensively. It seems like an empirical moral theory may imply that only academics, or even only philosophers, can ever hope to comprehend, and may be substantially better positioned to adhere to, the underlying principles of morality. This seems to be a potentially absurd and elitist feature of grounding morality empirically. Surely it is incorrect to assume that the learned elite can form moral judgments any better than laymen can. Indeed, for Rousseau, precisely the opposite would appear to be the case.

Conveniently, Kant put a lot of thought into *how* moral theory ought to be conducted. The preface of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* explains his methodological reasoning for ultimately grounding his moral theory in pure rationality.

He begins by distinguishing between the areas of philosophy as he takes them to be: "All rational cognition is either *material* and concerned with some object, or *formal* and occupied only with the form of understanding and of reason itself and with the universal rules of thinking in general, without distinction of objects.[10]" He identifies formal philosophy as logic, which can have no part that relies on any empirical observation. He identifies material philosophy as pertaining to determinate objects and

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[9] *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, 96
[10] *Groundwork*, 4:387

the laws to which they are subject. Material philosophy has two areas, one concerned with the laws of nature, and one concerned with the laws of freedom. He identifies the former as physics and the latter as ethics (moral theory)[11].

Then, directly from Kant again:

> "All philosophy insofar as it is based on grounds of experience can be called *empirical*; but insofar as it sets forth its teachings strictly from a priori principles it can be called *pure* philosophy. When [pure philosophy] is merely formal it is called logic; but if it is limited to determinate objects of the understanding it is called *metaphysics*.[12]"

Kant's use of "pure" is a very philosophical one; to be "pure" to Kant is to be understood only in terms of *a priori* principles—principles that do not require any reference to experience. So, as the pure part of physics and ethics, metaphysics is the area of philosophy that deals with questions of nature and morality that do not need any reference to experience to be understood. There is metaphysics of nature and there is metaphysics of morals.

If physics and ethics each have these constituent pure and empirical parts, Kant reasons that we ought to treat each part with special care, doing our due diligence to preserve the integrity of scientific investigation:

> "I ask only whether the nature of science does not require that the empirical part always be carefully separated from the rational part, and that a metaphysics of nature be put before physics proper (empirical physics) and a metaphysics of morals before [the empirical part of ethics], with metaphysics carefully cleansed of everything empirical so that we may know how much pure reason can accomplish in both cases[13]".

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[11] *Groundwork,* 4:387
[12] *Groundwork,* 4:388
[13] *Groundwork,* 4:389

It is clear to Kant that, upon recognizing that physics and ethics have these distinct rational and empirical parts, we ought to examine them separately, with our investigation of the purely rational preceding our investigation of the empirical.

This makes a lot of sense. It is not necessarily the case that we can fully understand any material subject without referencing our experiences of it. However, if it is possible that such a subject exists, we seem required to explore it through pure rationality before making any empirical reference to it. For if it were the case that the subject could be fully understood rationally, to prematurely examine it empirically would be both confusing and a waste of time.

After reminding us that he means to investigate ethics and not physics, Kant states the goal of the *Groundwork*: "to work out for once a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical[14]".

He believes that the common ideas of moral law and duty necessitate such an exploration. For, if a principle is to be called a *law*, it must hold with absolute necessity for all rational agents—not just humans. A moral law, then, cannot be grounded in human nature if it is to be universal; it must be grounded in rational, *a priori* concepts. He asserts that any moral principle grounded in experience of any sort can only be called a practical rule—never a moral law.

Kant's claims until now seem to echo Hume. Hume endeavored to explore pure rationality in its entirety in the first *Enquiry*, just as Kant is proposing here. To be sure, Hume employs an empiricist methodology, but he still tries to use it to discover the rational principles underlying the operations of the human understanding. But

[14] *Groundwork*, 4:389

Hume hits a wall when he arrives at the problem of induction; he cannot establish a sound rational grounding for the functions of the human understanding in general, including those involved in making moral judgments. So, he asserts that we may only understand morality empirically. Kant, a self-proclaimed "inquirer by inclination," sees the prize beyond that wall, and ventures to break through it.

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* attempted to answer Hume's basic challenge to the very idea of finding rational principles for grounding the operations of our understanding. In doing so, Kant restricted theoretical reason to the realm of possible experience. He hoped that by enforcing this restriction, he would be able to clear up the suspicion surrounding the practical applications of pure reason. From the *Critique* named above:

> "Hence a critique that limits the speculative use of reason is, to be sure, to that extent negative, but because it simultaneously removes an obstacle that limits or even threatened to wipe out the practical use of reason, this critique is of positive and very important utility[15]."

By bounding theoretical, pure reason within the realm of possible experience, Kant seeks to justify its practical uses. The *Critique of Pure Reason*, then, plays a role similar to that of Hume's first *Enquiry*, though his methodology and conclusions differ considerably.

Kant has mentioned that there is a pure part and an empirical part of ethics. So, why is he so primarily concerned with the pure part? He answers this, concluding:

> "Thus, among practical cognitions, not only do moral laws, along with their principles, differ essentially from all the rest, in which there is something empirical, but all moral philosophy is based entirely on its pure part.[16]"

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[15] B XXV

[16] *Groundwork,* 4:389

To Kant, all of morality depends on pure rationality. This is the prize beyond the metaphorical wall: morality. Remember his reference to Rousseau; Kant believes that empirical accounts of morality make it too elitist. If he can, contra Hume, establish a sound rational grounding for morality, then he thinks he will have succeeded in bringing morality back to the common people. The empirical nature of moral theory is an afterthought, meant to help identify the proper formulation of the moral law to be applied in each moral situation that arises. The pure moral law is the only thing that can ever determine the moral worth of an act with certainty.

Kant clearly answers the *how question*, "Moral theory should be conducted by pure rationality."

(iv.b) Kant and the *Good*

We can already see that Kant's idea of the *good* will likely depend on his formulation of the moral law. So, what does Kant take to be morally good, and what about the moral law makes something morally good?

Kant actually answers the first of these questions outright in the first sentence of Section I of the *Groundwork*: "It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will.[17]" Taken at face value, this certainly seems agreeable. But Kant is not concerned with merely being agreeable; he wants to be correct.

So, what makes it the case that a good will can be the only intrinsic moral good?

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[17] 4:393

To begin, a good will is good in and of itself because it does not rely on anything else. This can be made apparent by contrasting good will with utility. Consider an especially utile man—one who is talented and intelligent and happy. It is conceivable that, absent a good will, such a man may become arrogant in virtue of his recognition of his own utility. Beyond that, absent good will, the man may press his usefulness into the service of something bad.

Conversely, it seems obvious that any man, no matter how unhappy or inutile he may be, ought to be considered morally good as long as he has a good will. As Kant puts it:

> "Even if … this [good] will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose – if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing and only the good will were left … then like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself.[18]"

For further illustration, let's imagine a person who is severely mentally handicapped. His condition is so severe that, try as he might, he cannot contribute to society in any useful way. In fact, he is a drain on the resources of those around him, and he is very unhappy because he realizes his negative utility. It seems wrong to say that this man has no moral value; he really is trying his best, after all. Kant's identification of the good will as entirely basic captures this sentiment exactly.

Now, because humans are able to, but do not automatically, act in good will, we can formulate the concept of duty. To Kant, duty is the concept of the good will "under certain subjective restrictions and hindrances.[19]" Essentially, duty arises from the fact that we don't always *want* to act in good will. We *should* act in good will all the time, because

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[18] *Groundwork,* 4:394
[19] *Groundwork,* 4:397

that's really the only good way to act, and, *because* we have a choice in whether or not we act in good will, we have a duty to do so. If we did not have a choice in the matter of acting with good will and we were "programmed" to always act with good will, then acting with good will would deserve no moral praise and we could have no duty to do so.

Importantly, in order for our acts to have moral worth, we must act not just in accordance with our duty, but we must do so *because of* our duty.

Consider Kant's example of two philanthropists. One donates his excess earnings to the needy because he recognizes that he has a duty of beneficence[20]. The other donates because donating makes him feel better about his general, day-to-day, moral repugnance. The first, duty-driven philanthropist is certainly worthy of moral praise; he acts in accordance with, and by the motivation of, the moral law. The second, self-serving philanthropist seems to deserve no moral praise. Sure, donating money to the needy is a nice thing to do, but doing so just to serve his own self-interest doesn't mean that we should think of him as a good person by any means.

So, duty requires that we act in accordance with the moral law *and* that we do so because we recognize that it is our duty as free-willed, rational beings to do so. Duty doesn't require that we actually succeed in any of our endeavors, as illustrated by the example of the inutile, yet morally good, man mentioned before. The outcomes of our actions are not what make them morally good; rather it is the underlying intentions of our actions that make them good. Kant calls these intentions "maxims."

So, what makes a maxim morally good? As we have already seen, their intended effects can have no true moral worth. If that were the case, then the maxim would only be

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[20] He has a duty to help others, when he can

good instrumentally: good in terms of the consequences that the maxim brought about. Anyway, to reference some expected outcome would be to reference something empirical. Such a reference has no place in a purely rational moral law.

Remember that Kant defined the metaphysics of morals as the division of ethics that is strictly *formal*. By that definition, a metaphysical moral law, like the one that Kant is seeking to establish, must be justified strictly *formally*. The formal requirement, because it cannot depend on any (empirical) material goodness of the end willed, can only consist in universalizability. If, then, a maxim is willed in virtue of its form and not in virtue of the end at which it aims, then—provided, of course, it does indeed have the form of universalizability—the action will consist in doing one's duty for duty's sake. That is, it will embody a good will.

Finally, we reach Kant's first formulation of the moral law:

> "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.[21]"

Let's examine Kant's moral law in terms of a simple application: cutting in line. Almost all people would probably agree that cutting in line is morally wrong—not wrong to the same degree that murder is wrong, but wrong nonetheless. Why is it that we feel this way about line cutting? According to Kant, it's because the maxim underlying line cutting could not be willed to become a universal law. If it were universal law that cutting in line was morally permissible, then everyone would cut in line. If everyone cut in line, then there would be no lines: just crowds of people—all trying to get in front of each other. So the maxim underlying line cutting cannot be willed to become universal law. So line cutting cannot be morally permissible.

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[21] *Groundwork*, 4:402

Consider a cruder example: murder. If it were universal law that murder be morally permissible, then it could be that everyone committed murder. If everyone committed murder, then there would be no people left. Hence, the maxim underlying murder cannot be willed to become universal law. So murder cannot be morally permissible.

This structure really seems to work. Imagine anything that we generally consider to be morally wrong, like lying, stealing, or cheating. None of the underlying maxims of these acts can be willed to become universal law.

From this formulation of the moral law, Kant derives the first and fundamental formulation of his categorical imperative, the formula of universal law—a command delivered to us by our pure rationality that guides our moral action in any and every situation:

> "[A]ct only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.[22]"

From this categorical imperative, Kant derives the formula of humanity—a formulation of the categorical imperative that is better suited for guiding our everyday actions:

> "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.[23]"

This practical imperative gives a better account of the nature of a good will than the previous formulations of the moral law. Consider *means* and *ends*. A shovel is a *means* to be used for the *end* of digging a hole. A cup is a *means* for the *end* of having a drink. The formula of humanity demands that we respect other rational agents as ends in

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[22] *Groundwork*, 4:421
[23] *Groundwork*, 4:429

and of themselves; we must recognize that they have their own hopes and goals and dreams, and we must treat them as such.

If you are in an American restaurant, and you don't tip your server, you are treating him merely as a means of getting food to the table. You are neglecting that he *is an end* in and of himself. That's why he has the job, after all: the job is a means of income that he may use to finance the pursuit of his own ends.

So, Kant clearly answers the substantive *good question*, "A good will is the primary morally relevant criterion."

(v) The Problem

So, we have discussed Hume and Kant's theories of *the good*. Hume asserts that utility is the primary good. Kant asserts that it is not, and that its goodness is dependent on good will, which he asserts is the *only* intrinsic moral good. Both men have fairly convincing arguments supporting their claims. A serious reading of each man's support for his formulation of the good could likely lead anyone to believe that either *good* is crucial. It seems like the reason that so many ethicists argue so fervently for each is that both of these ideas of the *good* seem to be morally relevant. It seems like there might be more than one intrinsic moral good, and it seems like a substantial number of moral theorists are too concerned with the *good* that they support to recognize that they may be at an impasse; both sides may be only partially correct because they fail to recognize the real virtue of their opposition. I take this to be a problem.

Hume explicitly acknowledges that utility might not be the *only good*. From the second *Enquiry*:

> "[I]t seems undeniable *that* nothing can bestow more merit on any human creature than the sentiment of benevolence in an eminent degree; and *that a part*, at least, of its merit arises from the tendency to promote the interests of our species, and bestow happiness on human society.[24]"

It's important to note that while Hume says that nothing can be as deserving of merit than benevolent sentiment, he credits its merit primarily to the utility that it promotes. Utility is still the intrinsic good. Most importantly here, though, we see that Hume is not asserting that utility is the *only* intrinsic good. He leaves room for other intrinsic goods that may also help explain our moral attraction to benevolence. Moral goodness may bottom out to utility, but not necessarily to utility alone; there may be other fundamentally morally good things.

Kant is far more black and white on this subject. This is demonstrated by his quote in section (iv.b) of this paper, which asserts that good will can be the only intrinsic moral good. To him, utility can only be good by its agreement with good will. Utility's goodness is a product of good will, and utility can indeed be morally bad if it is not sought for the sake of good will.

It's possible that Kant's devotion to the idea of a single moral good promoted the binary nature of this debate. Maybe utilitarians, upon reading Kant, felt the need to push back, asserting not just that utility is *a good,* but *the good*. We see people like Mill push this idea pretty hard, for example. However, the point of this paper is not to examine what led to this problematic debate; it is to examine why this debate is problematic and how (if we can) we may go about solving this problem.

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[24] 20

We seem to want utility and good will for no other reasons besides that they really both do seem to be highly morally relevant. So, is there a way that we can have both?

(vi) Adam Smith

Adam Smith may present a solution to this problem of binary *goodness.* Though more famous present-day for his economic work, *The Wealth of Nations*, before his death, his moral work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), was his primary claim to fame. In it, he proposes an empirical, sentimentalist moral theory that is grounded in a manner similar to his friend David Hume's. To sentimentalists, the proper empirically observable phenomenon by which we may study morality is human sentiment. Because they are both moral empiricists and were close friends, we will assume that Smith shares Hume's views on knowledge that we have previously discussed.

Interestingly enough, Kant reportedly wrote in a 1771 letter that Smith was his favorite philosopher at the time.[25] This may be no coincidence. Kant published the *Groundwork* just fourteen years later[26], and its final, duty-based account of morality is reminiscent of Smith's TMS.

Already we can see that Smith is an interesting figure to consider in this discussion. From a Humean grounding, he develops a theory that is far more similar to Kant's mature theory than Hume's utilitarianism.

Smith's theory is, again, sentiment-based like Hume's. He believes that our sympathy allows us to understand the sentiments of others. However, Smith's account of

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[25] Frazer, 112

[26] This may seem like a long time, but for the development of metaphysical treatises, it really isn't very long.

sympathy and sentiment is rather different from Hume's. To Smith, sympathy plays a far more crucial role. Certainly, it is the faculty that allows us to imagine and understand the sentiments and plights of others, as Smith says here:

> "In every passion of which the mind may be susceptible, the emotions of the by-stander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be the sentiments of the sufferer.[27]"

Sympathy promotes or fellow-feeling, as Smith calls it—our emotional response to the situations of others. Sympathy makes us sad when we see other people sad, and happy when we see other people happy. It guides our sentiments to reflect the sentiments we observe in others.

Smith's sympathy does more than just that, though; it helps us identify the propriety and impropriety of the actions of others. Since sympathy alerts us to the sentiments of others, it also allows us judge their actions based on the sentiments that promote them. It plays an important passive role, affecting us constantly. In every social situation, our sympathy alerts us to the sentiments of others and encourages us to try and match their sentiments. When judging moral situations, then, the sympathy of the observer and the sympathy of the acting agent are both important.

If a man who is beside himself with anger enters a room where my friends and I are having a pleasant, quiet discussion, and begins shouting and breaking things, my sympathies cause me to imagine what the causes of his anger may be. If I deem the causes of his anger to agree with his actions, then I may consider his actions to be proper. If I deem the causes of his anger to be insufficient for exciting him in such a striking way, then I may consider his actions improper.

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[27] TMS, 10

An important point for Smith is that the angry man's sympathy is important too. No matter the causes for his anger, upon entering the room his sympathies alert him to the sentiments of the room's occupants; sympathy allows him to "read the room," colloquially. Because of the nature of sympathy—its tendency to cause our sentiments to mirror those of others—the man's abrupt and interruptive entrance to the room likely causes some degree of alarm in my friends and in me. One moment we are having a calm, pleasant time, and the next, we are upset by this angry brute. Since the man does not reign in his sentiment for the purpose of preventing negative sentiments in us, the observers, it seems that he has done us a disservice.

This motions towards Smith's account of the morally relevant criteria:

> "The sentiment or affection of the heart from which any action proceeds, and upon which its whole virtue or vice must *ultimately*[28] depend, may be considered under two different aspects, or in two different relations; first in relation to the cause which excites it, or the motive which gives occasion to it; and secondly, in relation to the end which it proposes, or the effect which it tends to produce.[29]"

Notice that Smith has just given an account of moral evaluation that asserts two morally relevant criteria: two basic *goods* that a moral act must be measured in terms of. He is asserting that we must examine moral acts through their relations to proper intent *and* utility.

He has given us a theory that explains our desire to consider two intrinsic moral *goods*. His primary reason for doing so is simple:

> "Philosophers have, of late years, considered chiefly the tendency of affections, and have given little attention to the relation which they stand in to the cause which excites them. In common life, however, when we judge of any person's

[28] My italics
[29] TMS, 18

> conduct, and of the sentiments which directed it, we constantly consider them under both these aspects.[30]"

He asserts that we ought to judge moral actions in consideration of both their maxims and their consequences. We must weigh the maxim's accordance with a good will and the consequence's promotion of utility, and we ought to do this *simply because it's the way that we do*.

We can see how this is the case when we examine the case of the angry man above. Certainly he is to be blamed for the *consequences* of his actions: he has upset a group of people with whom he had no quarrel. Certainly, too, the level of blame that he should receive should be weighed against his *motivations* for acting as he did. If we imagine that he acted as he did because he had just been done some cruel injustice, then it seems that deserves less blame; if he acted as he did because he had just experienced some minor inconvenience, then it seems that he deserves more. No matter his motives, it seems clear that there really are two standards by which we ought to judge his actions.

Note that Smith's moral criterion regarding the motivation of actions is not the same as Kant's good will. It's more about gauging the appropriateness of the act relative to sentiments that cause it than it is about the act being carried out in accordance with a strictly rational account of the good will. Despite this, they are still similar in the sense that they place a lot of weight on the motivations for actions, abstracting away from consequences. Even if Smith's criterion of motivation is not the same as Kant's, per say, it still recognizes the moral importance of motivations for our evaluations of actions.

A very important part of Smith's theory is the idea of an imagined, impartial spectator. Similar to Hume, Smith recognizes the potential for biases in our moral

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[30] TMS, 18

evaluations. So, when evaluating moral actions and sentiments, he asserts that we ought to imagine ourselves in the place of an ideal, impartial spectator. We must try and feel how such a person would feel if they were to observe what we are observing. This appears to be a feasible requirement. When we are placed in moral situations, especially ones that stir up our sentiments to a substantial degree, we can often act on judgments that we form from out own biased points of views. Even the attempt to see things from the perspective of an impartial judge seems to go a long way in solving this problem, requiring us to reflect on our own potential biases and how we should feel about moral situations were our biases absent.

We ought to consider this case as providing us an answer to the problem of binary intrinsic goods discussed in the previous section; it serves to instantiate a case that fulfills requirement (R2) discussed in section (ii). In order for it to serve effectively as such, it needn't be the case that Smith's theory is *correct* (as Hume has shown us, we'll likely never know what is correct). For this to provide us a suitable solution to the problem, it merely needs to be plausible. Where strict theories of singular moral goodness leave us stuck in a box, demanding that we choose a moral criterion, Smith gives us a way to climb from the box.

Remember that the requirement demands an answer to the methodological *how question* to explain the dilemma arising from problematic answers to the substantive *good question*. In this case, our methodological answer is empiricism. By examining moral situations empirically, Smith is able to devise a theory of morality that accounted for the tension we feel between moral intent and consequences. Without prior consideration of the grounding of moral theory, it would have been very difficult to see how Smith's

account of moral criteria can be any more plausible than the utilitarian or Kantian accounts. The grounding is justification, and justification is essential for the success of any theory—especially a moral theory that seeks to guide the actions of the potentially cynical masses.

We needn't confine ourselves to choosing a side when we are talking about morality. We need to confine ourselves to answering real moral questions holistically, taking into account the full implications of our studies. Morality is not the type of thing that can be evaluated in substantive terms alone. For any answer to such a complex question such as that of the moral *good* to be satisfactory, we must fully understand the theoretical foundations that will make it true. We must take a step back and assess our goals and the proper way of going about reaching our goals before we can presume to actually address our substantive questions.

(vii) Answering the *How*

So, which grounding for moral theory is more pragmatic? We have seen an example of each methodology, and we have seen where some famous philosophers have taken each grounding. At the end of the day, the question is, which approach is more likely to result in a theory that everyone can fully understand? The final conclusion of the moral theory is not really important for its efficacy; no doubt, any successful theory that will have reached the common people will give agreeable accounts of the virtues and the vices. The important thing is the reasoning behind the virtues and vices and the morally good and bad.

If you tell someone, “Act this way; it will be better for everyone,” you cannot expect that he will follow you blindly, strictly for the fact that you have thought about this subject a lot. He will want to know, “How do you know that I should act this way?” You cannot say, “I just know,” if you really want to get him to act in a certain way.

This is one of the problems with religious-based moral theories. I don’t want to abstain from sex just because you say that God wills it so. If premarital sex really is morally wrong, I want some real, comprehensible justification for it; I want to talk to God.

Moral theorists are not God. They are not the types of things whose word must be obeyed by other rational agents for the sake of their omniscience. If they want to get people to act in a certain way, they will need to convince them why it is the right way to act. The real difficulty in this is that not all people are highly educated. Not everyone can use deductive reasoning, or even read, at a PhD level. So any truly successful moral theory will have to gain its justification from concepts that do not require an extensive education to comprehend. I believe that this justifies an empirical grounding for moral theory.

As mentioned in section (iv.a), Kant believes that empirical moral theory is a breeding ground for elitism. He believes that empirical moral theories are inaccessible to the common people because they seem to require that good moral decisions be informed by lengthy investigation. Though it may be true that empirical moral theory requires a wealth of data—cases of moral decisions—these data are commonplace. Common people face moral situations every day; they are more than familiar with the data. In fact, it

seems like moral theorists, despite studying morality more closely than common people, have no greater wealth of empirical moral data available to them.

Grounding morality empirically seems far more approachable for laypeople. Empirical theories are constructed from the ground up. They take normal moral situations that we can easily imagine and construct rules designed to guide us towards the proper act in each situation. Moral empiricism seems far easier to understand than moral rationalism, especially when they are put in contrast.

This is the great irony of Kant. He, in a sense, sought to bring morality back to the common people, but almost nobody besides trained philosophers can understand what he is saying. The very concept of *a priori* truths is not one easily grasped by those unfamiliar with philosophy. For example, even the concept of the conditional logical operator (➔) puzzles many undergraduates that actually have the inclination to study logic. That people without college educations should be able to understand the intricate nature of Kant's (or other purely rational) moral theory and consider it as motivation to act in certain ways (especially in ways that they don't want to act) seems to be almost an absurd idea.

References to deduction, *a priori* concepts, and universalizability of maxims would likely fall on deaf ears to farmers and other people without the inclination and education to assess concepts in such a manner. Conversely, if we consider Smith's empirical philosophy's references to imagination, experiences, and actual social interactions, we can picture a farmer grasping empirically grounded theories far more readily.

Smith's theory is a great example for making this point. Kantian moral theory requires a lot of prior study to comprehend in its entirety. Smith's does not. It requires imagination and observation—things that everyday people can do just as well as moral theorists and other scholars. So, again, I assert that an empirical moral grounding is the best methodology for developing a moral philosophy that can most easily proliferate through all levels of society and actually make positive strides in the way we handle moral situations. It is the most pragmatic.

Let's return one final time to the opening analogy with the philosophy of science. The goal of scientific exploration surely determines its success. If all we want to gain from it is means of making our lives better and easier, it seems to have been a smashing success. If our intellectual curiosity of the true mechanistic laws that guide the universe is our goal, and useful inventions are a byproduct, then it seems we may never reach our goal. In moral theory, universal, rational, objective moral principles may be our ideal goal due to their applicability to any and all moral decisions, but they seem to be even more difficult to cognize and effectively explain than the astronomic ideas of dark matter and energy; if we can pin down what they are, it's unlikely that we'll be able to convince the masses of their real truth. In morality as in science, it seems that we must work with what we have in hopes of constructing mechanisms for real, positive change.

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