

# SELECTED READINGS IN WESTERN ETHICS

曲红梅 [奥] 杰哈德·泽哈 (Gerhard Zecha) 编著



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## Preface

This book addresses a new way of understanding the history of western ethics, by offering comparative or conflicting ideas on morality from different philosophers in different times. Usually, textbooks on the traditions in Ethics are edited in a way of chronicling. But we express the development of moral philosophy in a new way, which aims at problems that most moral philosophers focus on and how they solve them. In this sense, we put for instance the selection from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and that of McIntyre's *After Virtue* together due to their pursuit of a community for all the members of the society. With such an organization of the texts, the readers can understand a tradition in ethics in a clear and detailed way.

I began to teach the junior students of philosophy department at Jilin University in the spring of 2008. And the title of my course was *Selected Readings in Western Ethics*. From then on, I had an idea of designing a textbook tailored to my students. It was in the June of the same year, I met Prof. Gerhard Zecha, a visiting philosopher from Salzburg University. He organized a seminar of western moral philosophy for my students and I helped him to make it possible as an assistant. During this seminar, we reached a consensus of editing the textbook together. It took us more than five years to finish this book, during which many emails were sent and replied on the framework, the contents, the reading guidance, and the questions of the book.

As to the final result, Prof. Zecha finished the introduction, Chapter 1, 4, 6 and 7. I also appreciate him for his contribution on golden rule in Chapter 8. I did the work on Chapter 2, 3, 5 and 8. And also I compiled all the materials into the book. We should also thanks Dr. Victor Seow, a current PhD candidate of Harvard University and a future faculty member at Connell University, who gave decisive advice to us on some chapters. We are grateful for the generous support of our students who read this book before its publication. Their feedback makes it better than the original one.

This book still has many weaknesses. Any errors remain the responsibility of the editors, especially me.

Qu Hongmei  
Changchun, May, 2014

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# INTRODUCTION

## (1) Gerhard Zecha: *Western Ethics : The Search for Life and Moral Goodness*

The word “ethics” comes from Greek language “*ethós*” meaning “custom, tradition, way of life (to serve, protect and further life)”; the word “morals” comes from the Latin language “*mos*” or its plural form “*mores*” meaning “customs, traditions and methods to support, cultivate and protect life”. In modern times, the term “ethics” is often understood as *moral philosophy* or “thinking about moral concepts” (like ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘virtue’ or ‘vice’, ‘habit’ or ‘sin’ etc.) or “thinking about moral theories and doctrines”. The term “morals” is often used to refer to concrete behavior of human individuals either of particular actions or rules of behavior. The adjectives “ethical” and “moral” are used interchangeably in the literature of practical reasoning.

Ethics or Moral Philosophy is necessarily connected with values and norms.

Today it has become a common view that the vast area of ethics can be subdivided into the following branches:

1. Meta-Ethics; The study of the language and arguments used in ethics. It does not say how we should use moral words but rather describes different views about the meaning and methods of ethical argumentation.

2. Normative Ethics; The study of rules, norms, commandments, obligations and prohibitions of acts and systems of acts. Theories of normative ethics are supposed to state how we should or should not act with acceptable reasons in a rational context. Most ethical systems presuppose one or several values-if not value systems-that are supposed to build the bridge between the world of facts and a reality-to-be-done.

3. Applied Ethics; In modern times, moral questions and ethical uncertainty in both public and private life have become so urgent that they are given particular attention by moral thinkers.

4. Descriptive Ethics; The study of values and codes of values in a purely

descriptive manner as used in sociology, but also the theory of education, psychology, political sciences and many other branches of the humanities and the sciences.

In the following selection of texts on ethics, we will touch each of these disciplines yet keep in mind that the by far most important part today is *Normative Ethics*. For each of these units, we select classical examples of famous theories with short introductory notes and suggestions to further discussions.

### 1. META-ETHICS

*Chapter One* : Moral Language and Arguments

### 2. NORMATIVE ETHICS

*Chapter Two* : The Good Life

*Chapter Three* : Virtue Ethics

*Chapter Four* : Christian Ethics

*Chapter Five* : Deontological Ethics

*Chapter Six* : Utilitarian Ethics

*Chapter Seven* : Natural Rights Ethics

### 3. APPLIED ETHICS

*Chapter Eight* : Morality in Real Life Situations

**(2) Gerhard Zecha: *Ethical Relativism: A Discussion of Arguments pro and con***

#### The common view of ethical relativism

Some time ago, one of my students answered the question “What is morality?” by stating, “Morality is in the eyes of the beholder, really”. This is an almost classical description of what most students today believe, what they have been taught and they are convinced of what they live by. It is not much



different from the well-known statement of Protagoras, “Man is the measure of all things”. Protagoras, the Father of Relativism, denied the role of the (Greek) gods in determining what is morally right or wrong, but insisted that “man”—either mankind, society or human individual—is the judge of what is to be done. This was not only a challenge to Plato who tried to refute the many-folded branches of relativism, but it also inspired other thinkers to strengthen the relativistic view in ethics, later on also in meta-ethics. Today, among so different suggestions to defend ethical or moral relativism in what appears to many an “acceptable form” I simply assume one widely accepted version of ethical relativism that has been formulated—among many scientific authors—by the anthropologist and ethnologist Ruth Benedict: “The concept of the normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good. It is that which society has approved. A normal action is one which falls well within the limits of expected behavior for a particular society”<sup>①</sup>. This is usually called “cultural relativism” or also “moderate relativism”. The above mentioned variety of moral relativism, “Morality is in the eyes of the beholder, really” expresses a more extreme version that can be called “ethical individualism or ethical egotism”. In this case, an act  $x$  is considered morally good if  $x$  is approved by a single person. So, the term “moral or ethical relativism” covers a wide range of viewpoints and formulations that all have in common that the ethical quality of an act is determined by concepts, rules or standards of one human person or of a group of people (society, culture). I would like to assert that nowadays in the so-called Western or “advanced” societies, a kind of ethical thinking is accepted that is clearly relativistic in this sense and established as “governing morality” by social groups, by the media, by political parties and economical tendencies, to mention only a few.

Of course, philosophers and scientists who advocate one or the other kind of ethical relativism do not just assert it, but also offer arguments that support relativistic ethics. I want to list now eight different arguments that are supposed to strengthen this point of view or are at least used to defend it in order to critically discuss them in the following paragraph.

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<sup>①</sup> Ruth Benedict, “A Defense of Moral Relativism”, in *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Reading in Ethics* (ed. by Sommers C & Sommers F, Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 166.

## **I . Argument for changing ethics via historical développement**

Historians and many social scientists argue; cultural phenomena like traditions, techniques, values, beliefs and convictions emerge in the course of history. History itself is to be seen as a process that determines inherently every aspect of human existence and reality, including—especially—its values. The basic principle of this view is continuity: Our world is dynamic and therefore continually changing. Moral values are *relative* because they fluctuate with the rise and fall of cultures. Thus, values, norms and standards can be judged as valid only relative to a certain historical context that implies the denial of universally valid criteria for human behavior.

### ***Against the Argument from historical development***

It is true that learned rules help us to regulate and direct our actions according to our will and responsibility. Yet independent of historical contexts and development, human nature should be the source of our value decisions. A prosperous and harmonious life in a well functioning society requests the conception of an unchanging system of moral standards and value decisions.

## **II . Argument for relative ethics from the diversity of cultures**

Since different societies approve of different moral practices, life styles, views and legal systems, it is *de facto* impossible ever to have or to aim at a universally valid morality. For example, in one society, abortion is legalized, in another society it is prohibited as immoral. Here polygamy is officially practiced, there it is strictly forbidden, etc. With such a gross diversity at hand, universal moral values cannot be found.

### ***Against the Argument from the diversity of cultures***

It is true that we can find different traditions and legal norms in various cultures. Nevertheless it is also true that certain *basic values* can be discovered in every culture. They are basic because they are the substance of every society. If rejected or disregarded then culture comes to an end. Oxford philosopher John Finnis has collected through surveying the literature. His findings can be summarized: If such substantial or life-essential values—human life, stabilized and limited sexual relations, truth and learning, cooperation, the common good,

mutual obligations and justice, friendship, property, play, respect for the elderly people, and rituals for the relationship with a supra-human being—are *not taught* and *not followed by word and action*, no culture can survive<sup>①</sup>. These normative elements are the basic values for the moral life in our society. Today, scientific research compiled several hundreds of human universals that reveal an astonishing variety of typically human traits.<sup>②</sup>

### III. Argument for relative ethics based on the views of a majority

In the political area, everyone has the same right and every vote counts as equal. Therefore, many people think the majority also determines what is morally right and what is morally wrong. This political opinion-forming principle has been transferred into the moral realm and everyone seems to accept it without problems. Thus, there is no alternative to democratic decision making in moral matters. “The Ten Commandments of the Bible would be okay”, one student of mine declared recently, “if we could establish a world consensus about them”. And he continued: “We all know such a global agreement doesn’t seem to be possible at the moment. That’s too bad for the Commandments; they are true for people who believe in them, but not for people who don’t share that belief. This clearly shows how relative moral rules are.”

#### Against the Argument from majority

Against this form of *democratic relativism*, I want to point to the fact that in the world of learning and science, the voice of the majority has little weight. Scientific problems cannot be solved by taking polls or asking the majority of experts for their opinions. Sophisticated methodology and repeatable factual evidence guarantee new solutions, new answers and new results in the progress of scientific findings. I dare to say that even more important than scientific research is the way how people live and work together. Thus, the moral directives for the survival of the human race can be discovered in human nature. Once recognized, *these* norms have to be accepted and followed in individual lives as well as in the society as a whole. In this sense, the agreement of the majority is *not* the source

① See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 83-84.

② Daniel Brown, “Human Universals” (1991), reprinted as *Appendix* in Pinker (2002): <http://condor.depaul.edu/mfiddler/hyphen/humunivers.htm>.

of moral rules, but the willingness and consensus on natural rights of all people is necessary for a peaceful life.

#### **IV. Argument from the private character of moral values**

“In the modern world, morality is private”, the relativist insists. Since each citizen is responsible for his or her actions, people think this responsibility enables them to determine their own moral directions and values. “Morality is each person’s own business” is the motto. Supported by the belief there can be no universal moral law, every person has the right and the duty to make up their own morality. As long as this attitude does not infringe upon the rights of the fellow citizens, morality remains a private affair. Such a view clearly strengthens the relativistic view of moral values.

#### ***Against the Argument from the private character of moral values***

Every value decision and every moral action is “private”, i. e. , made by a particular person. That person is, therefore, also responsible for them. But this does not imply the validity and truth of the chosen norms or value statements. For a just society, the rights and duties, the values and norms have universal character and validity that means, they are a necessary component of the moral, social, political order of a society. Such an order should be the guiding life program for all members of the society. A perfect political system is not possible without a general system of moral values that serves as binding force for the functioning community.

#### **V. Argument from the impossibility of moral virtues**

“Even the moral virtues are relative and can be used to do evil,” argues the moral relativist. It is a fact often proven in the history of mankind that radical evil in this world could not become a reality or effective without a host of virtues like obedience, faithfulness, punctuality, discipline, attentiveness, diligence, a strong sense of order and duty. All of these attitudes or virtues can be misused and are being misused, which means, they can be used for any goal, including criminal intentions. This clearly proves they are relative.

**Against the Argument from the impossibility of moral virtues**

It is well known that the virtues, even the so-called *Cardinal Virtues* of prudence, justice, courage and temperance can be used for immoral goals. But in the perfect society, the original meaning of *Cardinal Virtues* must be remembered. The Latin word *cardo* means “door hinge”, i. e. , these virtues are hinges for a good and happy life. This, again, is the presupposed concept of life.

**VI. Argument from the impossibility of a highest value**

Traditionally, human life has been declared “sacred” or “holy” but actually it cannot be considered an undisputed moral value. Even if people accept the Fifth Commandment of the Bible, “You shall not kill”, there are many exceptions to this imperative that justify killing, sometimes even in large numbers. Take, for example, argues the relativist, (i) self-defense, (ii) capital punishment, (iii) killing as calculated and, hence, an accepted side-effect of technological progress, e. g. traffic, (iv) killing by order, e. g. soldiers in times of war, (v) killing by ‘social organization’ or rather ‘social disorganization’, e. g. thousands of people die from starvation every day caused by inadequate political and economical conditions. Thus, even human life is not *the* ultimate moral value—it changes from situation to situation. So is the value of life.

**Against the Argument from the impossibility of a highest value**

In many places today, human life is no longer considered sacred or holy. We know that this value has been doubted and even denied by many thinkers. It is in fact neglected or not taken seriously in many societies today. Yet it should be *the* overall value in philosophical ethics. The examples of the ethical relativist that seem to present evidence for the exchangeable value of life show actually the opposite. Self-defense, capital punishment and military action are all thought to preserve life of the community. Whether they are the best life-supporting instruments may be disputable, but they cannot be used to question life as the highest good. If both the life of the individual and the survival of the society are no longer considered the end-goal of our decisions and actions, ethics is no longer a guiding force. In our societies, however, life should be the supreme value in ethics.

### **VII. Argument from meta-ethical non-cognitivism**

Skeptical thinkers claim that moral values cannot be observed, thus they are not real objects. Others turn the argument around and assert, "Just because values are no real objects, they cannot be observed." But the result is the same: All objects that we can sensually perceive possess a number of characteristics but none of these can be called 'the value of the object'. What, then, makes things valuable or a value? The skeptic answers, "An object is valuable only with respect to a value standard. This standard is not part of valued things, but rather is applied to them according to the choice of humans. Hence, values are not objectively given, they cannot be scientifically known but are dependent on the wishes and desires of people."

#### ***Against the Argument from meta-ethical non-cognitivism***

When "cognitivism" means "has truth value" and "non-cognitivism" means "has no truth value" then it can be shown that ethical sentences do have truth value as value statements. The fundamental standard in ethics is life itself, and whatever promotes life is a value, expressed in a value statement. "Life in a democracy is desirable" or "dishonesty is bad" are value statements because they are statements that *essentially* contain a value predicate such as "desirable" or "bad". Such statements can be empirically tested as can any other moral statements: "diligence is better than laziness", "reliability is better than unreliability" and "truthfulness is better than telling lies". In this context, "better" means "is more helpful and more life supporting for the community as well as for the individual who lives in this community". Therefore such value statements are clearly cognitive. Similarly, mixed or compound sentences, "If you want to stay healthy, you should eat natural food" or "If you want to get reliable information in science, you should double-check every thesis and its offered justification". Such sentences are valid or invalid. They can be controlled in relation to the causal connection they imply. Finally, moral norms, rules and directives are right or wrong according to the *preconceived notion* of all ethics: the overall value of life, the life of an individual as well as the life of a community. With respect to this supreme value, ethical sentences and value statements are cognitive.

### VIII. Argument from the fact-value dichotomy

From grade school age onwards, every pupil has been taught that science deals with facts that cannot be altered because they exist independently of human influence and development. Scientific facts can be described by natural laws, and natural laws cannot be changed, being beyond human reach. However, values are a matter of personal opinion, at the disposal of everyone—they are subjective, emerging from personal opinions. Value judgments and moral directives don't have any basis in reality, whereas facts and statements about facts are inter-subjectively testable, they reflect objective reality that is the object of science. Thus, you cannot justify moral norms scientifically; or in other words: from factual statements, moral rules cannot be derived.

#### *Against the Argument from the fact-value dichotomy*

Is-statements do not imply Ought-sentences. This well known problem of meta-ethics, also applied in the social sciences as well as in moral life, is plausible but it can be solved. It is true that logically, from a statement of fact that is true or false a normative sentence or rule that is correct or incorrect cannot be derived. This is the reason why many authors assert that rational and justifiable thinking would not be possible in moral, political and religious contexts. This is, however, not right. If we distinguish not only two categories of statements—descriptive and normative, but more appropriately three kinds of sentences: descriptive, normative and mixed sentences that are both descriptive and normative compound sentences, we can bridge the so-called Is-Ought gap. “You should not smoke” can be justified with the scientific grounded statement, “Heavy smoking causes lung cancer”. In such a case we are tacitly assuming two additional premises. Firstly, we all know the value-statement that lung cancer is evil because it destroys life. Secondly, we apply as a matter of course a formal principle that is value invariant and the fundamental principle of all normative reasoning, “What is good should be done, what is bad or evil should be avoided”<sup>①</sup>. This so-called bridge-principle is—according to St. Thomas—a self-evident truth. It allows justifying moral norms with empirical statements. The fact-value dichotomy is therefore not an irrational gap. Rather, moral and scientific

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<sup>①</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 28; Law and Political Theory (Cambridge; Blackfriars, 1966), S. Th. I, II, 94, 2.

reasoning follow the same logical and methodological rules.

### Key to Selections

Gerhard Zecha: "Utopias in Ethics. Common visions, scientific conceptions, meta-scientific assumptions", in: Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (ed.): *Studia Philosophiae Christianae*, Warsaw 2011, nr. 4, pp. 133-150.

### Questions

1. What is relativistic ethics?
2. Do you know a person, an institution or a community that proposes a relativistic position in morality?
3. Do you think it is right if moral questions are settled by majority?
4. Do you think that there are *highest moral values*? Which ones and why?
5. Do you think that moral values should be accepted and followed in all cultures and societies? Which ones and why?
6. What are important moral values to become a responsible member of the society?



# META-ETHICS