

# A Scientific Approach to Ethics

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# A Scientific Approach to Ethics

Developing Greater Respect for Ethics  
in Business and Society

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## PREFACE

From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects, and divided them into sects and schools, carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another. And after more than two thousand years the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject, than when the youth Socrates listened to the old Protagoras, and asserted (if Plato's dialogue be grounded on a real conversation) the theory of utilitarianism against the popular morality of the so-called sophist. (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chapter 1, paragraph 1)

These words of John Stuart Mill may be repeated today. The moral philosophy landscape is constituted by an even higher diversity of approaches and "the same contending banners" are fluttering over the battlefields. Sure, diversity and academic creativity are good, but real progress in any discipline is achieved when these two virtues are complemented with the discipline of the highest intellectual rigor aimed at comparing various approaches and choosing the most valid ones. In other words diversity and creativity should be combined with scientific method. Otherwise moral philosophy will continue to develop as literature or art. Of course, ethics as literature or art is a legitimate genre with its own entertaining or enlightening purposes, but what about ethics as a science?

This book grew out of deep dissatisfaction with methodological weakness in normative ethics which leads to uncertain conclusions and eventually a lack of respect from students and other people. Is it possible to change this situation? Can we apply to ethics the same scientific method which made productive and successful disciplines such as physics, biology, or economics?

I suggest that this is possible. We can render normative ethics as a science with clear definitions, strict logic, possibility of empirical verification, and accurate collection of empirical data. This scientific ethics may lead to clear falsifiable propositions which may win unanimous support from scholars and trust from society.

It is interesting that almost all elements of scientific ethics appeared in the writings of the major philosophers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (definition of good, rational choice, social contract, the role of knowledge and feelings, etc.) and, theoretically, normative ethics could develop into a science in the early twentieth century (e.g. as was the case with economics). However, this did not happen. This could be attributed to the influence of Moore, the linguistic turn, or the absence of several important tools like collective choice theory or veil of ignorance. In any case it seems to be a fundamental and sad mistake that normative ethics was not developed as a science in the twentieth century.

The purpose of this book is to prove that scientific ethics is possible. Although it may sound radical, it requires not a revolution but just a last step in assembling together the tools and concepts of various traditions according scientific standards. Moreover, this method will eventually lead to similar answers within these traditions, but these answers may now be claimed to be a proved scientific knowledge.

I do not claim that this book provides a complete resolution of all methodological issues. I want to prove only that we should accept scientific methods in normative ethics. The best variants to apply this method should be discussed further and may be different from what is suggested in this text.

The book is organized as follows: In Chap. 1 we talk about the lack of respect for moral philosophy in our society (and especially from students) and discuss the general methodological structure of ethics. In Chap. 2 we suggest a possible scientific approach to normative ethics based on individual rational choice (which serves as a foundation in other social sciences). In Chap. 3 we describe the new evolutionary model of man explaining the role of emotions, culture, and reason in rational choice,

which is important for normative ethics. In Chap. 4 we discuss the historical development of moral philosophy before the twentieth century and trace the evolution of its attitude to a scientific approach and the appearance of all theoretical elements which may be necessary in scientific ethics. Chapter 5 examines the position of Moore and meta-ethics which were so influential for moral philosophy in the twentieth century. In Chap. 6 we discuss the development of contractarianism and rational choice approaches which came the closest to a scientific approach to ethics. In Chap. 7 we discuss several other approaches (emotivism, intuitionism, prescriptivism, virtue ethics) and their scientific status.

This book does not claim to be a complete analysis of the relevant literature. The choice of some authors may even seem arbitrary. However, this is only a result of limitation of time and space. I focused mainly on books as a more mature philosophical position of their authors, but surely there are also hundreds of academic publications that might be also interesting to analyze from this perspective. This task requires a larger text and will be pursued in the future.

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