

## **The Axioms of Ethics: A Personal Approach**

### **By Chelsea Howes**

***"Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it," says C.S. Lewis.***

***"I dare say," says Immanuel Kant, "that two things fill me with such wonder, the starry sky above and the moral law within."***

#### Introduction

The most soul searching, divisive, and consequential questions are those of morality. The answers to moral questions have so many implications that answering in concrete terms is often avoided at all costs. Almost all the conflict that is present today is a result of some moral disagreement. In striving to be a productive member of society, I must attempt to be a moral person. But what is it mean to be a moral person? Moreover, why should I try to be good? Many answer these questions with the mention of divine power and expectations. For the purpose of this paper, I will leave out as much as possible the discussion of any such higher power. So without mention of religion, why are most people driven to be good?

Answers might include the idea of a social contract. As members of society, we have an unspoken agreement to abide by certain codes. I can walk down the street and feel fairly confident that I will not be attacked. Others may be driven by a need for self-respect, as well as the respect of others. And what is it for a person to be moral? Some philosophers believe that "for a person to have a morality is for her to have intrinsic (not self-interested) aversions to her acting in certain types of way, to have a disposition to feel guilty if she knows she has acted contrariwise and to disapprove of others if she thinks they have; and to think all these attitudes are justified in an appropriate way." (1)

In this paper, I am going to explore my own personal moral axioms as they are today. I

am not a complete moral relativist or universalist. My morals have been shaped by both schools of thought, as well as my experiences. In an effort to better understand what I believe and the codes that I act under, I have created axioms for my moral beliefs. Others who have similar thoughts can relate to what I have to say as well as gain a new perspective. A look at what fundamentally drives a person can be helpful. This is meant as a guideline for how I act, and others may find reasons behind their actions here that they have never thought of before.

In no way is this paper meant to be the ultimate in ethical thinking. I am not trying to force my ethical code on anyone or to prove that I am 'more ethical' than the next guy. This is simply my take on how I can be the most moral person I can possibly be. I will try my best to explicate my thoughts. Unfortunately, any discussion of ethics is inherently ambiguous. The greatest weakness of this axiomatic system is that it is purely based on my experiences, knowledge, and feelings. The empirical evidence that my axioms work, or hold true, is limited to either my conclusion that a certain action creates the most happiness or does not lead to conflict. The following is a discussion of my ethical axioms and where they came from.

### Undefined Terms

In any axiomatic system, there are a number of undefined terms. The system is built upon these terms. They can not be given concrete definitions within my system of ethics. The following undefined terms will be used.

- Good
- Bad
- Right
- Wrong

- I (or any other pronoun)

### Definitions:

Ethics: A set of moral values

Morals: A way of determining good, right and just

### Fundamental Axioms

The following axioms are the building blocks for the ethical system under which I function. They are not based on a specific ethical theory or derived from any individual experience. These axioms are the most applicable to other people.

F.A. 1: I am not perfect.

It is the implications of this axiom that distinguishes the ethical axiomatic system from other systems. In most all axiomatic systems, the axioms must occur all of the time in order to be called true. Due to free will, the ethical axioms do not have to be true all of the time. I am not automatically forced into a decision by the axioms, rather I can choose what action I take. While I make a concerted effort to follow the ethical axioms laid out here, I can not make all the right decisions, or decisions that result in good, at all times. If perfect can be described as the ultimate combination of good and right, and this is not obtainable by me, then I am not perfect. For this reason, many of the axioms contain the word 'must'. This is to reinstate the fact that I can only try to follow these axioms. The axioms laid out in this paper in many senses are not actually axioms, but rather guidelines that I try to follow. It is the nature of ethical guidelines to not hold true all of the time. For the purpose of both this paper and the exploration of my ethical beliefs, they will be called axioms.

F.A. 2: I make my own decisions.

This axiom simply means that there is not something outside myself forcing me to act a certain way. This is not related to fate or destiny. Instead, it is describe my free will. I am consciously making my own decisions, whether they have already been predetermined or not.

F.A. 3: Cultures, societies, and individuals are different.

*Corollary:* There are moral disagreements.

This axiom is self-evident. There are many cultures and societies throughout the world that operate under different ethical axiomatic systems. This leads to moral disagreements. Therefore, I should expect others that I interact with to disagree with my moral decisions.

F.A. 4: My decisions have an effect.

Every decision that I make has either an effect on me, an effect on my surroundings, or both. With any choice I make, there will be repercussions that follow.

### Universalist Axioms

In the most simplest view of moral philosophy, there are two camps. (See Figure 1) These are the universalists and the relativists. This section will discuss the universalist theory and other theories that stem off of it, the pitfalls of universalism, and how it has effected my own axioms.

Universalism is the basic belief that there are fundamental moral codes that are right for everyone, everywhere. Richard B. Brandt asks “For which moral commitments for everyone in society (the core) or for special groups would all (or nearly all) people agree in wanting (or wanting if their wants were carefully appraised) for a society in which they expected to spend a lifetime, previous moral commitment aside, if they were factually informed and considered the matter?” (1) People who are universalists also believe that morals are independent and not created by humans. There are many other ethical theories derived from universalism. Perhaps the

most well known and recognized is utilitarianism. This contends that the greatest good for the greatest number should be strived for.

This school of thought has many strengths. It provides a clear cut method for determining right from wrong. In a mathematical sense, the equation might look something like Figure 2 in the Appendix. According to Richard B. Brandt, a modern ethicist, the utilitarians “ frames his thesis so as to conform with enlightened intuitions which are clear, but his thesis, being general, has implications for all cases, including those about which his intuitions are not clear” (7). This is to say that the guidelines set up for particular situations can be applied to general ones. The goal of this theory, the thing that is most desirable, is to maximize happiness. Everything else that is desirable is a means to achieve that end.

Other theories that come from universalism are the deontological and consequentialist views. The prefix deon- is taken from the Greek word meaning duty. This basically revolves around the thought that we have a duty, or responsibility, to others. If we follow our duty, we are acting morally. It also focuses more on the behavior and actions than on the consequences. Duties must be created objectively and without exception. A consequentialist views the decision making process in terms of the consequences of an action. This end result is expressed in a utilitarian view, or as common good created.

There are few questions to be asked of a universalist. Where did these universals come from? Many would say that they come from a higher being. There are those that would argue that there are no morals without a God. Surely, those who do not believe in God can still make acceptable moral decisions and declare themselves moral. Another problem with the universalist school of thought resides in the utilitarian camp. In doing the calculations necessary to maximize the greatest good, many innocent people can be left out. It is also hard to say that every individual's

happiness is equal. For example, in making a decision, would you be willing to sacrifice a loved one for the welfare of two distant strangers? If you were to decide to go out to dinner, wouldn't the money be better spent saving lives in Ethiopia (4)? These are among the flaws of the universalist ethical theory.

The following axioms are adapted from the universalist school of ethical thinking and adapted into my ethical system. Incorporations from other schools of ethical thinking derived from universalism are also included here.

U A. 1: There are fundamental human rights and social responsibilities.

This is directly taken from the universalist school of thought. Almost all philosophers recognize some sort of moral rights that all humans are entitled to. Most of these come in two categories. Special rights against others who have a special relationship (i.e. the creditor's right to collect from a debtor) and more general rights, perhaps against other individuals or the government (7). Among these that I recognize are dignity respect and equality. As a part of society, we have a responsibility to both a local and global community. This includes treatment of the earth as well as our physical surroundings.

U. A. 2: I must do unto others as I would have them do unto me.

The Golden Rule, or any variation of it, has always been used in ethical discussion. There are many ethical rules that come out of this. Almost all philosophers have acknowledged the importance of this axiom, or some form of it.

U. A. 3: Consequentialist Axiom: I must take the consequences of my actions into consideration as a part of the decision making process.

U. A. 4 Deontological Axiom: I have a responsibility to the other living beings and to the physical environment around me.

*Corollary:* I can not act solely for myself.

As a functioning member of society, I can not ignore those around me. Because the choices I make effect others, they must be considered in my decision making. All members of a society have to be held accountable to each other. In order to be a productive part of society, I must respect and acknowledge others outside of myself. In order to do this, I believe that I have the duty of respecting the axioms that I have laid out here as well as respecting the fundamental human rights. (U. A. 1)

U. A. 5 Kant's Categorical Imperative: Act only on that maxim whereby thou can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

A discussion of ethics would not be complete without some mention of Immanuel Kant. Kant believes that we are motivated by good will. What he means by good will is that "a good will...is an intention to act in accordance with moral law, and moral law is what it is no matter what anything else is. To act out of a good will is, then, to do X because it is right to do X and for no other reason" (2). Kant believed that we should follow our sense of duty in a situation. His imperative is a test that can be used to determine right from wrong. To do the opposite of the imperative is to invite a contradiction of sorts, meaning not a logical contradiction but rather something that is self-defeating.

### Relativist Axioms (R.A.)

Ethical relativists believe that there are no universal ethics or guidelines. Instead, ethical standards rely on social norms. Depending on which culture you are in, the rules change. For example, in Spain, abortion is seen as very unethical. In Japan, however, abortion is often used as a form of birth control. In the eyes of a ethical relativist, abortion is wrong in Spain but okay in

Japan. It goes beyond this. Ethical relativists are really saying that abortion in Spain is immoral because the Spanish believe it to be so. Cultures differ in that “each culture is a more or less elaborate working-out of the potentialities of the segment it has chosen. In so far as a civilization is well integrated and consistent within itself, it will tend to carry farther and farther, according to its nature, its initial impulse toward a particular type of action”. (3)

Other relativists consider not just cultural but individual relativity. One person might think that something different is right than the next person. But thinking that something is right and it actually being right are two completely different things. Thus, individual relativism is severely limited. The axioms within relativism can be proven rationally, although all rational people may not be able to prove them using the same justifications. They also can only be criticized within the specific culture itself. For example, Japan can not criticize Spain’s ethical axioms.

Many philosophers, even those who call themselves universalists, recognize what is called situation-sensitivity. There are exceptions to the rule. For example, “don’t lie” can be waived in certain circumstances. When the rigidity of universals is lifted, universalists start to wander into the relativist camp. In many cases, making simple maxims into full blown axioms without exceptions can be quite dangerous. A good way of thinking about exceptions is “everyone is always to obey the rule except when an impartial rational person can advocate that violating it be publicly allowed. Anyone who violates the rule when an impartial rational person could not advocate that such a violation may be publicly allowed may be punished.” (4)

A strong argument for ethical relativism is the shift in what is right and wrong throughout time. Universal ethical axioms must stand the test of time and culture, both of which relativists argue are never stagnant. They believe that morals have evolved throughout time and therefore



do not believe in a divine source of ethical code. Examples of changing ethics and attitudes can be seen everywhere. I certainly do not hold many of the same axioms as my grandmother. Instead, ethics are created by the society by way of norms and expectations. A society without these accepted guidelines, in which there is constant ethical debate would not function for very long.

Ethical relativism has faults that need to be considered. The fact that it does not allow for a God or other divine being can be troubling for many people. Relativism can be a little less credible when thought of in terms of a society that is not commonly seen as morally right. For example, the Nazis. According to an ethical relativist, a person within that group would be acting morally right if they followed what the Nazis believe and it would not be up to any external force to contest it. Most people would agree that the Nazis were not all that morally right. Another problem is consensus. How many people in a society must agree with a principle for it to be considered right? Is 75% enough? Many argue that there can still be universals even if cultures differ greatly. These are just a couple ways in which ethical relativism fails.

R. A. 1: I must consider perspective.

When considering the actions of others, I must first look at where they are coming from and what axioms they consider to be true. As mentioned in F. A. 3, everyone is different and have had different experiences. Another rational being may come to the conclusion using justifications that may not apply to me. I do not have to agree with another's decision, but looking at perspective can help me understand the decision. I might even decide to attempt to apply it to my own life.

R. A. 2: It is not up to me to create universal axioms.

As a part of a society, it is not up to me, the individual, to create the norms. I can be a part

of the consensus that creates the social norms, but I can not deem myself and my ethical axioms best fit for universal use.

### Thought Experiments: Something to Consider

Moral Obligation:

**Roger Smith, a quite competent swimmer, is out for a leisurely stroll. During the course of his walk he passes by a deserted pier from which a teenage boy who apparently cannot swim has fallen into the water. The boy is screaming for help. Smith recognizes that there is absolutely no danger to himself if he jumps in to save the boy; he could easily succeed if he tried. Nevertheless, he chooses to ignore the boy's cries. The water is cold and he is afraid of catching a cold -- he doesn't want to get his good clothes wet either. "Why should I inconvenience myself for this kid," Smith says to himself, and passes on. Does Smith have a moral obligation to save the boy? If so, should he have a legal obligation ["Good Samaritan" laws] as well? (5)**

**The Faults of Universalism:**

**You are an inmate in a concentration camp. A sadistic guard is about to hang your son who tried to escape and wants you to pull the chair from underneath him. He says that if you don't he will not only kill your son but some other innocent inmate as well. You don't have any doubt that he means what he says. What should you do?**

## Appendix:

Figure 1: Ethical Theories (6)

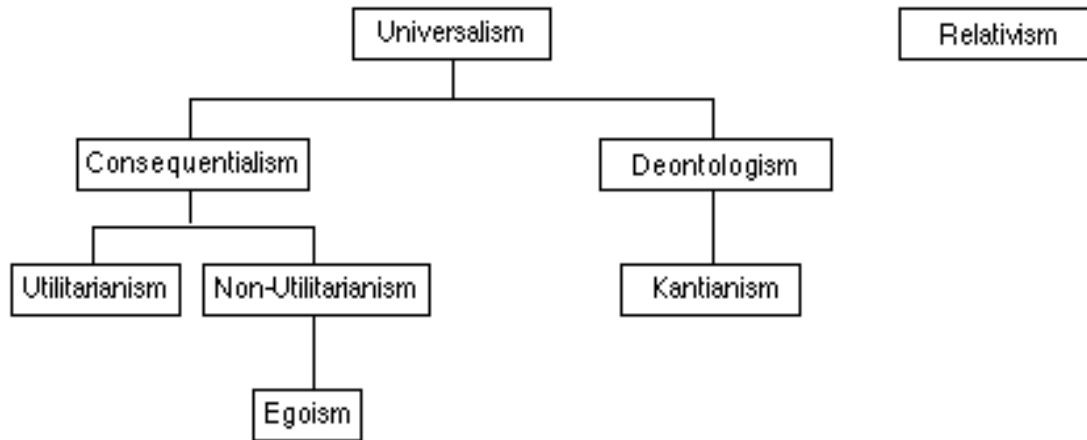


Figure 2: How Universalists Calculate

$$\Sigma w_i p_i$$

where  $w_i$  is the weight assigned each person and  $p_i$  is the measure of pleasure or happiness or goodness for each person. In classic utilitarianism, the weight for each person is equal and the  $p_i$  is the amount of pleasure, broadly defined. (4)

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