

# My Virtue-Existentialist Ethics

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September 20, 2020

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# Major Influences

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre tries to explain another element of what is missing in modern life through his use of the concept of a *practice*. He illustrates this with the example of a person wishing to teach a disinterested child how to play chess.

The teaching process may begin with the teacher offering the child candy to play and enough additional candy if the child wins to motivate the child to play. It might be assumed that this is sufficient to motivate the child to learn to play chess well, but as MacIntyre notes, it is sufficient only to motivate the child to learn to win – which may mean cheating if the opportunity arises. However, over time, the child may come to appreciate the unique combination of skills and abilities that chess calls on, and may learn to enjoy exercising and developing those skills and abilities. At this point, the child will be interested in learning to play chess well for its own sake. Cheating to win will, from this point on, be a form of losing, not winning, because the child will be denying themselves the true rewards of chess playing, which are internal to the game. The child will also, it should be noted, enjoy playing chess; there is pleasure associated with developing one's skills and abilities that cannot come if one cheats in order to win.

MacIntyre concludes that there are two kinds of goods attached to the practice of chess-playing and to practices in general. One kind, external goods, are goods attached to the practice “by the accidents of social circumstance” – in his example, the candy given to the child, but in the real world typically money, power, and fame (*After Virtue* 188). These can be achieved in any number of ways. Internal goods are the goods that can only be achieved by participating in the practice itself. If you want the benefits to be gained by playing chess, you will have to play chess. And in pursuing them while playing chess, you gain other goods as well – you will get an education in the virtues. The two kinds of goods differ as well in that external goods end up as someone's property, and the more one person has of any of them the less there is for anyone else (money, power, and fame are often of this nature). Internal goods are competed for as well, “but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice” (*After Virtue* 190-191). A well played chess game benefits both the winner and loser, and the community as a whole can learn from

the play of the game and develop their own skills and talents by learning from it.

MacIntyre believes that politics should be a practice with internal goods, but as it is now it only leads to external goods. Some win, others lose; there is no good achieved that is good for the whole community; cheating and exploitation are frequent, and this damages the community as a whole.

– Political Philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre – Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

One alternative is a prefigurative or practical anarchism, based on a social account of the virtues (based on a revision of MacIntyre's virtue theory). This identifies goods as being inherent to social practices, which have their own rules, which are negotiable and alter over time. It stresses the immanent values of particular practices rather than on the externally decided (consequentialist) values that will accrue.

Thus, those tactics which are consistent with anarchism are those that are rewarding in their own terms rather than on the basis of external benefits alone. The different approaches to political-social organisation provide an illustration, in which Leninism exemplifies the instrumental approach, whilst a case from contemporary anarchism provides a contrast. Leninism concentrates on the external goods of the disciplined party, its success is primarily judged on its efficiency in reaching the desired goal of revolution. However, a different non-consequentialist approach to political organisation is to view political structures as the manifestation of internal goods, such as enhancing wisdom and the embodiment of social relationships that disperse social power. Standards are generated by, and help to form, anti-hierarchical social practices. For instance the norms required for secretly subverting corporate advertising or state propaganda are not identical to those required to maintain an inclusive, multi-functional social centre. Whilst different, the norms of both are open, to those entering these practices, they are open to critical dialogue and can alter over time.

Each anarchist practice produces their own standards, which overlap with others. The norms by which a successful social centre is run, will be different to, but bear some similarities with an inclusive, participatory website or periodical. Thus the standards for the goods, the types of social relationship that constitute (and are constituted by) non- or anti-hierarchical practice are observable and assessable within a domain – and between adjacent domains. So that the relatively stable, and common, norms of bravery (opposing dominating power), solidarity (reciprocal assistance between those in a subjugated position) and wisdom (coming to understand the structures of oppression and the means by which 'other values' can be

created) are identifiable within anarchist practices, but are not necessarily universal. Similar practices involving subtly different actors will generate distinctive other goods (or bads).

Like the Stirnerite subject, there is no universal agent of change, but one in constant flux, resisting, challenging or fleeing the changing dominating powers within a given context. Within these radical practices, it produces its own immanent values. Because social practices are not distinct but overlap there are possibilities for links of solidarity across the different domains between different agents, although there is no universal agent who participates in all practices. A narrative of anti-hierarchical liberation, might provide a link between different practices, and provide routes for new social practices (and new agents to develop). The contestation of hierarchy, however, does not represent a new universal value. There are contexts in which goods are immanently developed but a challenge to structures that maintain inequalities of power is not generated – for instance, children playing in a sandbox. Thus, the rejection of hierarchy is not a universal guide to action, though, given the persistence of economic structures and institutions that enforce and legitimise these inequalities of power, it is highly likely that the contestation of hierarchy will remain a core anarchist value.

– Anarchism; Ethics & Meta-Ethics by Benjamin Franks

# Purpose & Meaning

We are born with biological drives and grow up being taught environmental drives we have to grapple with and make sense of.

All attachment or grasping necessarily entails risk of suffering, sometimes very low level suffering mixed in with greater happiness, which is necessary for meaning, but potentially distressing suffering none the less.

We can't quantify for the individual what level of suffering it is right that they owe themselves to muddle through to achieve some level of happiness later on.

We can only say if a persons reason for ending one's own life, is to desire to make a meaningful decision, in the face of 'unfair' meaninglessness, the sum of one's existence only becomes more absurd. So, actual suicide or philosophical suicide – in the form of on some level choosing to be piously ignorant to what life entails – being viewed as meaningful, is simply an attempt to deny that meaninglessness or no one stable meaning is the foundation to all life.

So, in terms of the internal value to the practice of learning why we are here, we can say grappling with these biologically and environmentally bestowed drives is a goal in which achieving some headway, brings us happy flourishing.

# Moral Luck & Folk Psychological Concepts

The evolution of our material capabilities created values, the ability for things to matter to us.

Everyone has different views as to what percentage of study in the hard sciences vs. soft sciences is the most productive balance for gaining new insights into human behaviour short term and long term. I lean heavily towards if we want to come to a fruitful understanding of what matters to us, our perspectives as agents in the world, we need to look to social science and the very complicated holistic social framework we build up through perceiving what others are thinking and modifying our actions accordingly.

That's not to say study into ways to alleviate mental conditions like arachnophobia can't be improved by learning about how natural selection affected our genes. Simply that the character traits that provide us the most meaning in our interconnected world, is not whether someone has a personality trait that can be connected back to their lower primate ancestors, but how that person seeks to deal with the capabilities they're dealt.

For example, if a person were to win the lottery tomorrow, the character traits they had forged throughout their life would be being put to the test on a massive ethical quandary in such a way that the main character traits that person would be known for is at this social level of description of do they have the ware with all to navigate that road well.

# What Constitutes Right And Wrong?

Because human beings are complex, their flourishing takes complex forms: we can flourish intellectually – hence, the “intellectual virtues” (both practical and theoretical); we can flourish as builders and makers and artists – hence, the “virtues of craft” – and we can flourish in terms of our non-technical, social and civic activities – hence, the “moral” virtues.<sup>1</sup>

Now, if you’re a consequentialist, you can simply relate to this philosophy as through pursuing your own happy flourishing, either the goals are related to other people or it’s more easily achieved by helping others, so we have an obligation to be altruistic and achieve a global calculus of happy flourishing.

But, I would simply appeal to what is good for any one person being more complicated than an external calculation of ends:<sup>2</sup>

Virtues and therefore morality can only make sense in the context of a practice: they require a shared end, shared rules, and shared standards of evaluation. The virtues also define the relationships among those who share a practice: “...the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like it or not, we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices” (*After Virtue* 191). We must have the virtues if we are to have healthy practices and healthy communities.

So, if how a person was raised to understand virtue is primarily respecting the shared rule that the dignity of a person must not be violated then, in so far as practicing that virtue is meaningful to that person, it will bring that person happy flourishing.<sup>3</sup>

It goes beyond the contractarian view in its starting point, a basic wonder at living beings, and a wish for their flourishing and for a world in which creatures of many types flourish. It goes beyond the intuitive starting point of utilitarianism because it takes an interest not just in pleasure and pain

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<sup>1</sup> Course Notes – G.E.M Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy”

<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre: Political Philosophy | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<sup>3</sup> Beyond Compassion and Humanity; Justice for Non-human Animals by Martha Nussbaum



[and interests], but in complex forms of life. It wants to see each thing flourish as the sort of thing it is. . .[and] that the dignity of living organisms not be violated.

# Scaffolding

There are many guide sticks we can use, like narratives of character virtue exemplars who each are near perfect exhibitions of what it means to hold character virtues like wisdom, courage or compassion.

One way I predict this philosophy will be best assimilated by the most amount of people is in scaffolding up one's ethical biases from the individual, to the community to internationally. So acknowledging how each social layer will ask of the individual a different role.<sup>1</sup>

## The Individual

So, starting with conceptualising the individual in near solitude, living very rurally, we can say that by the way this person has chosen to live and so in turn how they would like to interact with other people is with a respect for the fact that what matters to this person is a bias for consequential ends like negative liberties (the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints) before any shared principle or means of acting.

Now scaling that up to every individual in the world, we can acknowledge we all have a bit of that person in us, and so depending on what age a person lives through, for example how much peace there is in the world, we can say increasing negative liberties like not having to be conscripted into war is an ethical good to work towards as a society. Similarly almost universally good actions throughout time like the negative liberty to happen to be gay and want to kiss your boyfriend in public or Emma Goldman's sentiment 'it's not my revolution unless I can fail at dancing to it's rhythm'.<sup>2,3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fairly similar to this would be threshold deontology, explained further here: Normative Ethics: Rights, Consequentialism, Deontology. My virtue ethical system would bias consequential actions when consequences are the least severe, then turn into a bias for deontology at a certain threshold, then back to consequentialism at another threshold, so I assume it'd look fairly similar to the graph Avi made but more of a zig zag.

<sup>2</sup> To be incredibly pedantic, absurd hypotheticals are always lurking in the background to warn against universals like what if kissing your boyfriend in public started world war 3 before the left was ready and ended with a 1000 year Reich, would it still be justified then? But bar fringe absurdly unlikely hypotheticals.

<sup>3</sup> I know the more well known slogan is "if I can't dance to it, it's not my revolution", though Emma never said it, it's a sentiment attributed to a longer text she wrote, which I plan to write a post on next. As well as how "failing to dance to it" is more accurate and how compassionate comedy for our own failings is something we need to rekindle on the left and spread internationally.

## The Community

Next we can think of the ethical practices of a community and how an individual's negative liberty puts a healthy limit on what kind of communitarian principles we develop. For example, we can imagine the principle that what it means to be a good member of the community is working till we drop to maximize the wellbeing of future generations. This neither works in practice because of people's need to balance work with leisure in order to have a healthy head space to create and do great work, nor in theory, because people desire to hold onto their negative liberties.

So we may not have Kantian obligations which are truths of reason, but for certain there is the intuitional:<sup>4</sup>

I very much like WD Ross's theory of prima facie duties. Where any felt obligation is a prima facie duty, however it can be overridden depending on the circumstances by another one, however that does not mean that the original obligation disappears, it simply means that it's defeasible and it usually continues to operate in the background.

So if I have an obligation to meet you for lunch and on the way to driving to meet you I go past a car accident and I have to decide whether to save the person inside or meet you for lunch, I'm going to say that the duty to save the person in the car is overriding, but I'm still going to try to make it up to you, I'm going to apologize, I may buy you the lunch next time as a way of making it up to you which shows that the initial obligation still operates in the background even though it was overridden.

## One's Position Internationally

Finally, when conceptualizing one's place in a larger social fabric than the responsibilities you desire to take on in the communities you're apart of, we can think to our place internationally and in time. Here I think when encouraging people to respect your individual liberties and communitarian principles fails, we can again be biased towards end goals in our ethics and be Machiavellian in service to the individual and community where the risk of doing nothing would lead to greater harm.

So at it's most severe, needing to fight a war to defeat fascism where civilians will get caught in the crossfire, or at it's least severe, we can think of 'the culture war', where you feel you've put in your two cents of duty with your friends and nothings changing, so you play the jester in order to encourage them to accept you for who

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Kaufman On Intuitionism and Folk Psychology

you are or not to accept you at all, all in an effort to create deeper connections which builds stronger communities:<sup>5</sup>

It can be annoying or hurtful when others presume they know everything about you. But rather than assert their wrongness and make them defensive, you can acknowledge it as a common human failing and find creative ways to hold a mirror up to what life experiences they've had that lead them to jump to those conclusions.

One way is a kind of playful authenticity, telling a lie about a lie, to get back closer to the truth. So don't outright challenge the idea, but don't live up to it either, in fact live down to it. Playfully undermine the idea by failing to live up to the glamour of what it would mean to be that person, then find a way of revealing that it was a misunderstanding all along, so they needn't worry about it applying to you.

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<sup>5</sup> A Love Letter To Failing Upward

# Socialist Entailments

Due to the unfair distribution of power in society in the hands of very few, the good any one person can strive to achieve is immense, because one can imagine wielding the kind of power those at the top currently have to do good. But this power is unattainable to many.

So, like how a figure like Bernie Sanders could have harnessed the position of presidency to do lots of good, how he did educate the masses on the positives of socialised government institutions and, if he'd gotten into power, mobilise a grassroots movement to demonstrate and strike to push through bills.

But, most importantly power can be a mirage. It's the carrot dangled in front just beyond our reach. We need to create opportunities for ourselves, to achieve great acts of good on our own, like the personal heroism of people flying to Syria to fight Islamic Fascism or organising edible gardens in low-income neighbourhoods.

As well, even though we may cherish those opportunities to do great deeds today, counter-intuitively, the goal should be to move to a world where grand feats of good deeds aren't necessary or possible. So that more people get a chance to strive to do good.

So a move to devolve government power to a multi-party system through preferential voting, to... Some local government positions being elected by sortition, to... The majority of society being so content with worker-co-ops and syndicalist unions that we transition from representative democracy to direct democracy. So, a chamber of ministers to federated spokes councils.

# Legal Animal Rights Entailments

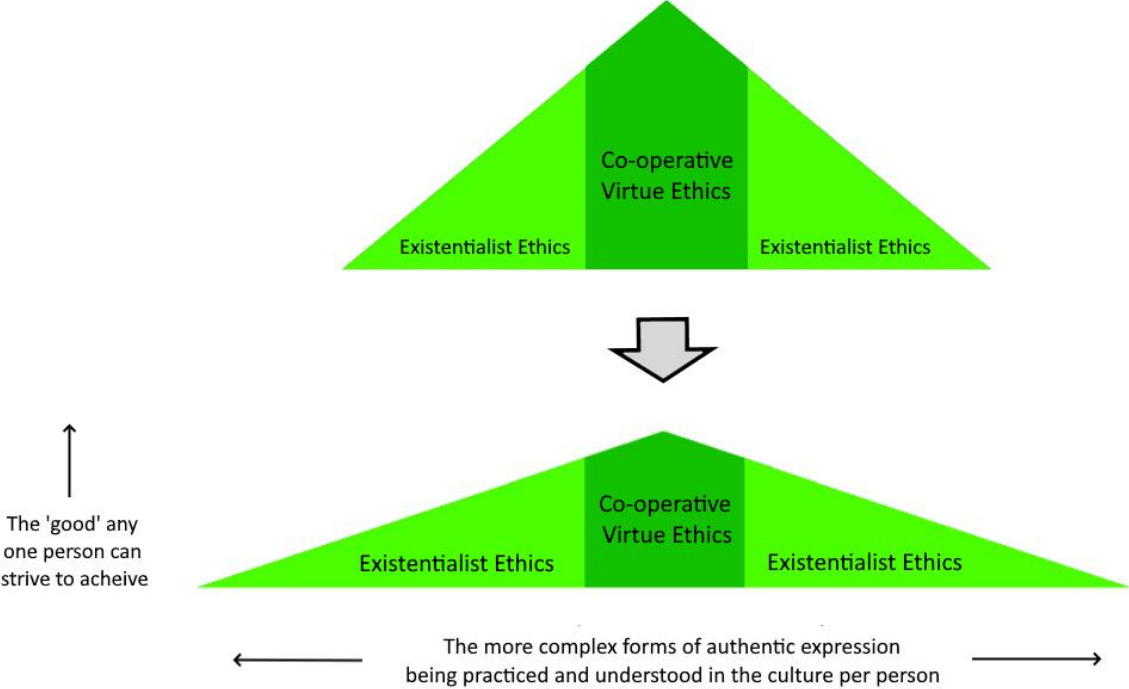
If the wonder that we experience in viewing wild animals is not 'how similar to us they are', but their 'real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value' and one sufficient reason we grant this freedom at least to a basic extent to other people is we have a desire to achieve what we find valuable then; the fact non-human animals experience this desire too means we ought extend these freedoms to non-human animals.

So, a holistic world-view of not wanting to reduce both the quality and quantity of positive experiences humans can have with animals, as well as animals with other animals for low-order pleasures such as taste/texture.

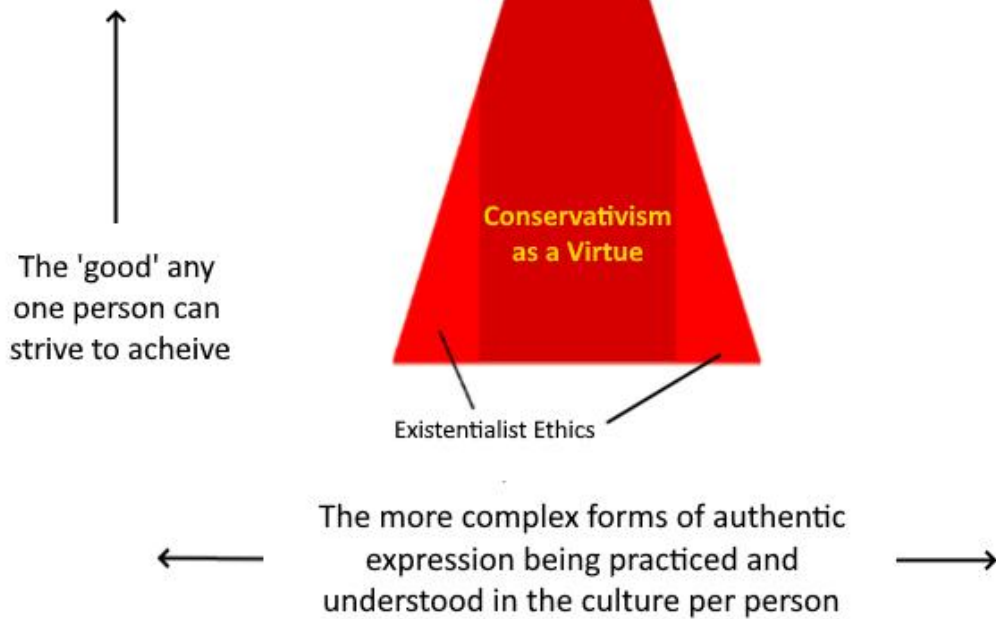
# In Summary

Any really good end goal we can achieve, would be good in virtue of it being a practice that's replicable on a mass scale, easily understood through shared rules & ends, and gives meaning and pleasure to the individual for the practice's internal value.

Therefore, what's most important is devolving power to a larger body of people to be able to create these practices and set an example for others:



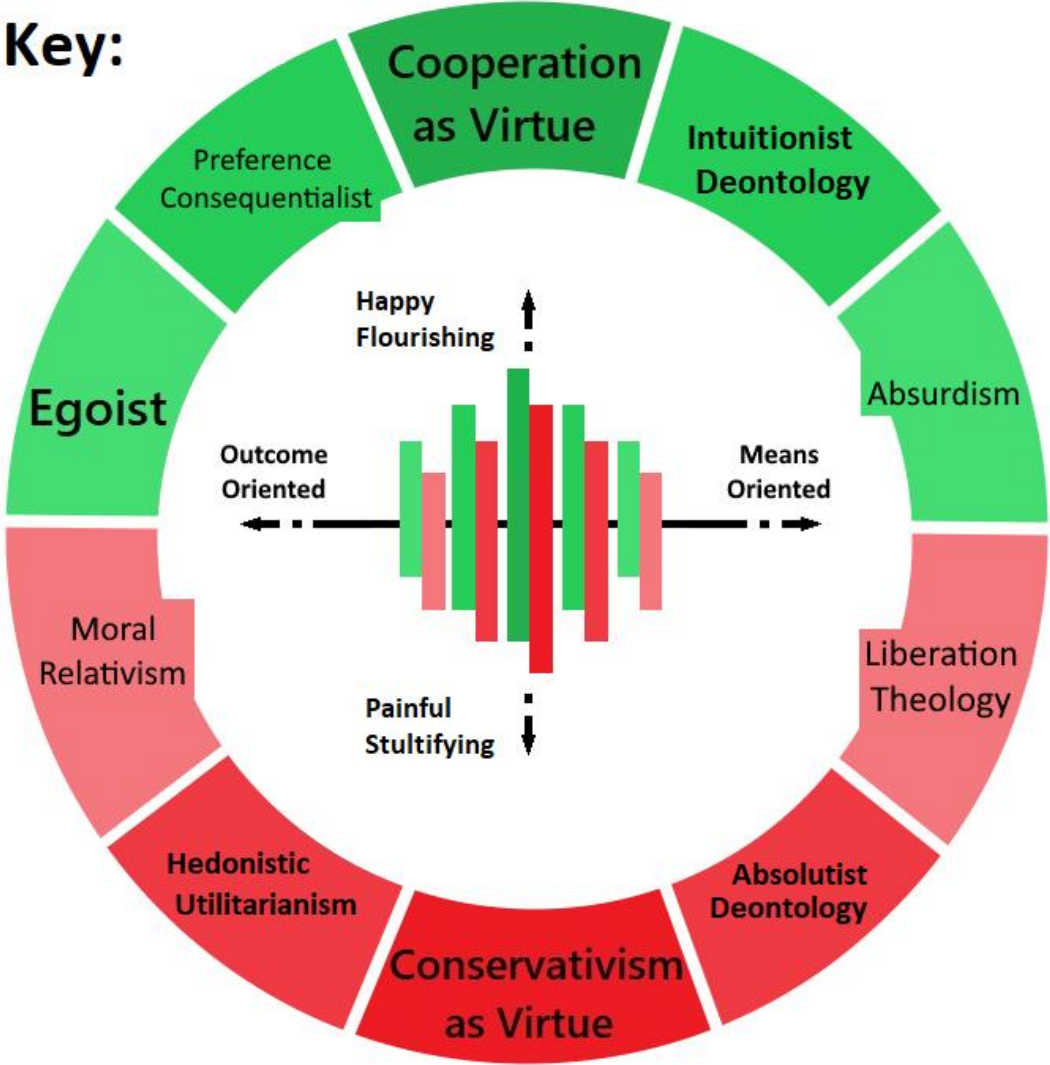
Though the governance model needs to be built up slowly enough to match expertise, so as not to falter with people pushing for ideals before having adequately put them to the test. As well, so as not to cause a whiplash effect, where people desire a reactionary politics of conformity, under more rigid hierarchy of just the few:





# Final Thoughts

Here's a rough diagram for how I relate to various ethical schools of thought:



And here are some of the ideas it attempts to show:

**Why some red bars can reach higher than some green bars:** People can identify with conservatism as a virtue philosophy and happen to be a virtue exemplar for devolving power to those without it. Like Malcolm X denouncing drug taking, to keep minority communities strong, in response to the flooding of the streets with drugs by the CIA to fund the Contras in Nicaragua. Though I would still say co-operation as a virtue provides a more stable foundation for building up institutions with social virtue.

**Why some green bars can reach lower than some red bars:** Someone can hold the same ideals of co-operative virtue ethics, but through a mistaken practice of over zealously trying to force through their perspective can fail to achieve their goals and fail to win over others to the merits of their ideas, resulting in a painful stultifying.

**Why the shorter bars on the graph:** Through a careful consideration of required means and desired outcomes, we can find happy flourishing in a character trait that biases one side of the equation over the other (being more means or outcome oriented). So long as we are aware that we're simply fulfilling something meaningful to us and that it won't be a character trait that a majority in society can or need replicate. But it must be done with the knowledge that we're not directly hampering others pursuit of happy flourishing either.

**Why the sum of all the green bars add up to an equilateral triangle:** The highest amount of happy flourishing we can consistently achieve in society will be a practice that's replicable and highly aware of the existential grounding that informs which direction a society desires to move in. So, a practice that doesn't attempt to factor in peoples desire to autonomously search for their own egoist goals and absurdist means would be a practice that is not as easily replicable and so would not produce the highest amount of happy flourishing in society (a smaller equilateral triangle that doesn't rise as high for not being as wide).

# Further Reading

## Egoist

The Politics of Postanarchism by Saul Newman (Preview) (Buy)

However, can we assume that the possibilities of human freedom lie rooted in the natural order, as a secret waiting to be discovered, as a flower waiting to blossom, to use Bookchin's metaphor? Can we assume that there is a rational unfolding of possibilities, driven by a certain historical and social logic? This would seem to fall into the trap of essentialism, whereby there is a rational essence or being at the foundation of society whose truth we must perceive. There is an implicit positivism here, in which political and social phenomena are seen as conditioned by natural principles and scientifically observable conditions. Here I think one should reject this view of a social order founded on deep rational principles. In the words of Stirner, 'The essence of the world, so attractive and splendid, is for him who looks to the bottom of it – emptiness.' In other words, rather than there being a rational objectivity at the foundation of society, an immanent wholeness embodying the potential for human freedom, there is a certain void or emptiness, one that produces radical contingency and indeterminacy rather than scientific objectivity. This idea has been elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe, who eschew the idea of society as a rationally intelligible totality, and instead see it as a field of antagonisms which function as its discursive limit. In other words, what gives society its definitional limit at the same time subverts it as a coherent, whole identity. Therefore, they argue, 'Society never manages fully to be society, because everything in it is penetrated by its limits, which prevent it from constituting itself as an objective reality.' Antagonism should not be thought of here in the sense of the Hobbesian state of nature, as a war of everyman against everyman, but rather as a kind of rupturing or displacement of social identities that prevents the closure of society as a coherent identity.

Science, Perception, and Reality by Wilfrid Sellars (Preview) (Buy)

It's Just a Feeling: The Philosophy of Desirism by Joel Marks (Buy)

Demoralizing Moralism the Futility of Fetishized Values by Jason McQuinn (Download)

## Moral Relativism

Melville J. Herskovits and the Racial Politics of Knowledge (Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology) by Jerry Gershenhorn (Buy)

Is a prescriptive position adopted initially by many anthropologists reacting against the ethnocentrism characteristic of the colonial era. Melville Herskovits, for instance, affirms that "... in practice, the philosophy of relativism is a philosophy of tolerance" (*Cultural Relativism*, p. 31).

## Preference Consequentialism

Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality by Douglas W. Portmore (Buy)

Nonzero: History, Evolution & Human Cooperation: The Logic of Human Destiny by Robert Wright (Buy)

## Hedonistic Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism by John Stuart Mill (Buy)

## Co-operative Virtue Ethics

Anarchism and Moral Philosophy by Benjamin Franks (Essay) (Buy)

Freedom and Democracy in an Imperial Context: Dialogues with James Tully by Robert Nichols and Jakeet Singh (Thesis) (Buy)

Stoic virtue ethics by Matthew Sharpe (Essay)

Consequentialism and Deontology in Hegel's Philosophy of Right by Dean Moyer (Essay)

Feral Children and Clever Animals; Reflections on Human Nature (Download)

Our common way of thinking about the difference between physical and behavioral science, described in Chapter 3, is that the goal of the first is to eliminate variance, while the second accepts variance as the essential characteristic of the subject worthy of study. The physical sciences seek to eliminate variation because variation confounds accuracy of prediction. The behavioral sciences should accept variation as the essential aspect of living beings, and thereby strive to measure variance as a technique of describing the nature of life itself. We often confuse the legitimacy of these

different goals, thereby leading us to the conclusion, for example, that the physical sciences are more “scientific” than the behavioral because they strive for accuracy and prediction. Some appear to think that a measure of the applicability of science is accuracy of prediction, but variance, too, is a legitimate interest of the scientific method. Science is a unique method, a method independent of what it studies. Measures of variance can be just as reliable as formulas that strive to eliminate or reduce variance. As always, the meaningful issue is what one wants to know, what one wants to accomplish through the application of the methods of science.

Let us put to rest the notion that there can be no science of living beings or that scientific procedures somehow diminish and degrade the awesomeness of life. The chief characteristic of life forms, as opposed to physical objects, is variation. It is variation that permits evolution, for without variation, there is nothing for natural selection to select. The study of variation may be done in two ways: by study of the unique or by study of the general. In this book, we have examined examples of both, although study of the unique case dominates, to be sure; but what Thorndike, Haggerty, and Hamilton contributed is the importance of general variation. Both ways must be investigated because we cannot know what is unique without knowing what is general. Behavioral science, therefore, proceeds on two fronts: the study of the unusual and the study of the variation characteristic of groups.

## **Conservative Virtue Ethics**

After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory by Alasdair MacIntyre (Review)

## **Intuitionist Deontology**

Nichomachean Ethics by Aristotle & W. D. Ross (Buy)

Daniel Kaufman On Intuitionism and Folk Psychology (Video)

Of the Standard of Taste by David Hume (1909) (Essay)

## **Absolutist Deontology**

The Sources of Normativity by Christine M. Korsgaard (Chapter) (Buy)

## **Absurdism**

[Anti-Oedipus by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari \(Buy\)](#)

[Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007 by Nick Land \(Buy\)](#)

[Tiqqun 1: Conscious Organ of The Imaginary Party by Tiqqun \(Buy\)](#)

## **Liberation Theology**

[The Selfless Mind; Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism by Peter Harvey \(Download\) \(Review\)](#)

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My Virtue-Existentialist Ethics  
September 20, 2020

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