A framework for comparing ethical theories

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What is ethics all about?

Ethics concerns principles for human relations and, by extension, human relations with other sentient animals.

What distinguishes ethical principles from other principles of human relations? ***Ethical principles are the most general principles, pertaining to the most general features of human relations, thereby subsuming all other principles of human relations as specialized topics.*** For example, the principle not to murder pertains to the feature of life itself, and all other principles for human relations are subordinate this principle.

Due to the continuous nature of reality, we will not be able to discretely distinguish the category of ethical principles — the most general principles — from each of the many specialized topics of relations. Rather, the former will shade into the latter. For example, are principles of courtesy ethical principles? They lie in a mid area between serious concerns, like murder and stealing, and non-serious concerns, like greeting someone with *good morning* vs. *hi*. As another example, how about advertising? Advertising seeks to promote advantages of a given product and may seek to promote disadvantages of a competing product. In serving this purpose, advertising can shade from dispassionate objective information to associations with emotionally positive and negative scenarios to degrees of exaggeration to explicit lies. Thus, advertising shades from concerns of a purely practical nature, such as how to present information clearly, to concerns of serious ethical import, such as honesty vs. lying.

What is the confusion all about?

The topic of ethics is confused by approaches that fail to properly understand ethics in terms of goal-directed behavior. The problem arises when the concepts of *morality* and *good* are discussed as if they do not pertain to other goals but, instead, have meaning in themselves: an act is simply moral/good or immoral/evil without respect to a designated goal. In fact, in the absence of a designated goal, no meaning can be given to the concepts of moral and good. As a result of this fallacy, claims have been made that ethical principles are meaningless or are purely subjective. Once we realize that ethical principles pertain to goal-directed behavior, then we seek to identify the underlying goals that give meaning to the concepts of morality and good. Hence, in order to identify the most general moral principles, we must identify the most general goals of human life. I identify two such goals: *the goal to survive* and *the goal to achieve meaning*.

Once we have identified such goals, then ethical principles can be developed for best realizing the goals, and any ethical principle can be evaluated as to its efficacy in achieving the goals. I believe that this understanding of ethics accurately characterizes the overall history of ethics in civilization, namely, that ethical principles have been developed in order to achieve the goals of survival and meaning. Of course, there will be local variations of this theme, including the creation of ethical principles to serve the current rulers without regard to violating the most general principles of human relations.

In this light, a number of debates are rendered moot. For example, of logical necessity, ethics is subsumed by **moral realism** because ethics pertains to principles for human relations and principles for human relations pertain to goal-directed behavior. Ethical principles can, accordingly, be evaluated as to their efficacy in achieving the most general goals of human behavior, such as enhancing survival and achieving meaning. **Moral relativism** is true in the sense that ethical principles are necessarily relative to the goals that they seek to achieve. However, **moral relativism** is false in the sense that ethical principles are arbitrary, as if the goals of human life are arbitrary. The most general goals of human life are universal, and reason can be competently applied to identify these goals and to discern how best to achieve them. Complementing these insights, claims that ethical principles are **meaningless** or are **purely subjective** are false, assuming that the principles are properly developed. The principles are properly developed if they are expressed in terms of goals that they serve and if a sound rationale is established for how these goals serve to achieve the most general, universal goals of human life.

How can we compare ethical theories?

What categories can we use to compare ethical theories? I think that the following two dimensions are helpful for placing ethical theories in historical context:

♦ **Origin of ethical principles:** Human origin vs. superhuman origin

♦ **Purpose of ethical principles:** Human purpose vs. superhuman purpose

		Origin	
		Human	**Superhuman**
Purpose	**Human**	Humanism	Platonism
	Superhuman	Eastern religion	Western religion

As for origin, an ethical theory may attribute the origin of ethical principles to humans or to something superior to humans to which humans are subject, such as a realm of platonic forms or God.

As for purpose, the human purpose of ethical principles is to enhance human life, while a superhuman purpose is to serve something superior to humans and their earthly life, such as attaining a desirable afterlife or honoring God.

Let's begin by considering the entry *Western religion*, shown in the lower right quadrant of the table.

Archeologists have determined that religion is as old as humanity so that, as a matter of course, religion became more organized as humanity became more organized. Accordingly, the creation of what we think of as organized religion correlates with the creation of cities. This occurred in the millennia following the last ice age, which ended about 12000-8000 BCE — dating estimates vary. In Asia, cities developed into city-states in the 3000s BCE along the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley and along the Indus River Valley.

Early organized religion did not promote ethical principles so much as rituals for pleasing the gods. The reason for these rituals was to ensure the goodwill of the gods and thereby ensure the propitious behavior of nature. However, during the *Axial Age* of the Eurasian civilizations, *800-200 BCE*, religion underwent a profound transformation in becoming individualized and ethicized. Under this transformation, in a cosmic perspective, a person was no longer merely a nameless member of a community. Instead, each person now had a personal ultimate destiny — their destiny after death — which they were responsible for determining through ethical thoughts, words, and acts.

To the east, in India, intellectual writers conceived of the goal of escaping an endless cycle of death and rebirth, and these ideas were expressed in the varieties of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other derivative religions.

To the west, in Persia, Zoroaster is attributed with espousing a cosmic battle between good and evil, which he per-sonified as God vs. Satan — to use our modern terms. In this scenario, a person determines their destiny after death by siding with either God or Satan during their life on earth. To side with God, a person will obey ethical prin-ciples given by God, as well as observe prescribed rituals of worship.

These themes of Zoroastrianism were assimilated by Pharisaic Judaism in the centuries before Christ, and from there they were adopted by the Apostle Paul, a Pharisee of the time of Christ who founded a Judaic sect based on a particular interpretation of the life, teaching, death, and alleged resurrection of Jesus. In time, this sect became the religion of Christianity. Islam, in turn, adapted its basic themes from Judaism and Christianity.

Following the teaching of Zoroaster, the dominant theme of ethics in western religion is that ethical principles are given by God and serve the purpose of honoring God, as shown by the entry in the lower right quadrant of the table. A variation of this view is that ethical principles not only serve to honor God, but also serve to enhance human life. However, I don't show this variation in the table since it's not the dominant theme. Just the same, from a historical point of view, it seems clear that the origin of the ethical principles of western religion lies in the goal of

enhancing human life and that the reason their origin is attributed to God is to attempt to maximize the motivation to follow the principles.

The entry **Eastern religion**, shown in the lower left quadrant of the table, is exemplified by Buddhism because its original ethical principles were created by a man, Siddhartha Gautama, for the purpose of solving the problem of eastern religion, namely, escaping the death-rebirth cycle. In fact, Gautama may not have originally been concerned with what happens after death, but as Buddhism developed into a religion, Gautama's teaching was interpreted in this way. There are, no doubt, versions of eastern religion that appeal to some form of superhuman revelation and, hence, fall into the lower right quadrant, but I'm not attempting to present a survey of such religions. In fact, Mahayana Buddhism, which developed about the time of Christ, incorporates themes that are highly similar to Christian themes, in which the Buddha — the enlightened one — plays a role similar to that of the Christ — the anointed one.

The entry **Platonism** is shown in the upper right quadrant of the table because platonism attributes the origin of concepts to independently existing ideal forms. Probably the most prevalent instance of platonism today is the belief that mathematical concepts exist independently of human minds, but Plato's notion of ideal form applies to any concept that can be well-defined in the ideal sense. By the way, the classical Greek enlightenment, along with the teaching of Confucius in China, are secular realizations of the Axial Age themes.

The entry **Humanism**, in the upper left quadrant of the table, refers to ethical theories that are strictly human oriented, appealing to no superhuman origin or purpose. Note that in this context the term *humanism* does not refer to atheism, though it subsumes non-platonic forms of atheism.

My theory of ethics provides an example of a humanistic theory of ethics. I refer to my theory as BPT, naming it after my theory of knowledge, namely, *the Best Predictor Theory of Knowledge*. Under BPT, we have the following parallel concepts.

♦ **Knowledge.** Knowledge is given by the simplest, most accurate model for predicting our observations.

♦ **Skill.** Skill is given by the simplest, most accurate means for achieving our observations.

♦ **Skill.** Skill is given by the simplest, most accurate means for achieving our goals.

♦ **Wisdom.** Wisdom is given by the simplest, most accurate model for achieving our goals.

In these definitions, *model* refers to an axiomatic, deductive system, as in mathematics; *simplest* refers to the simplicity of the set of axioms; and *observation* refers to an arbitrary portion of our experience in which we are interested. Note that experience encompasses all forms of experience, including perception, thoughts, imagination, and emotion. Also note that simplicity is maximized subject to maximizing accuracy. Finally, note that *skill* is defined in two equivalent ways to illuminate the respective parallel meanings. From the foregoing definitions, it follows that wisdom is the knowledge part of skill and that knowledge is skill in predicting observations.

Under BPT, in developing ethical principles we strive to maximize skill in achieving the most general goals of human existence, in particular, ensuring survival and achieving meaning. Platonism is eliminated by the simplicity criterion since a model without a realm of ideal forms can predict all of our observations; nothing more is needed than to assume that concepts are created by human minds in their pursuit of knowledge. The idea that God established ethical principles is also eliminated by the simplicity criterion, complemented by a study of the history of religion and civilization. The idea that ethical principles serve to achieve a particular destiny after death is countered by appropriate arguments that I don't wish to present here.