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1.6 Types of ethical inquiry

There are **three** main types of inquiry in ethics.

Normative (or moral) theory

Normative theory is concerned with identifying what it is that we ought morally to do. We often think of this as the "main point" of ethics: figuring out how human beings ought to behave in various situations.

There are two main positions taken in answer to this question:

1. Consequentialism: The rightness or wrongness of an action depends on the goodness or the badness of the **results** it brings about.
The most popular version of consequentialism is **utilitarianism**: "Do what brings about the best result **for everyone concerned**."

2. Deontology: We should do our **duty** as required by **moral laws** or rules.
Unlike consequentialism, deontology is backward-looking rather than forward-looking. It focuses on the **violation** of moral laws, and has a retrospective concern with **punishment** for the violator of laws.

Moral psychology

Moral psychology explores the relationship between ethics and **human nature**. It frequently takes the form of the question: *Are human beings capable of morality?*

Dominant strands in the West answer: "***No***." (Or at least: "***Only with much difficulty***.")

1. The Christian doctrine of **original sin** says, "No, because human beings are born sinners and thus have a tendency toward **evil**. Moral goodness is possible only with the grace of God."

2. The theory of **psychological egoism** says: "No, because human beings are born selfish. They are not necessarily evil, but they act with **self-interest** in mind, not moral rightness."

The West thus tends to be **pessimistic** about human nature; **the Chinese thinkers** tend to be, as we will see, **much more optimistic**.

Metaethics

The "metaphysics of ethics".

Here we ask questions like:
Is ethics real? Is ethics knowable? Provable? Does it have an objective existence? Or is it just all a sham?

Answers to these sorts of questions tend to fall into **three** categories:

The '0' category: "Ethics is just an illusion; it has no objective existence." In epistemology, this gets expressed in terms of skepticism about moral knowledge: "Ethics may be real, but it cannot be known."

The '1' category: "Yes, ethics is real, knowable, and there is only one true ethical reality." This view is usually called **moral realism** or in epistemology **moral cognitivism**.

The '2+' category: This is often called **relativism** or **pluralism** in ethics. It holds that morality is real, that in fact there is more than one morality, and the truth of any given morality is relative to something.

In this course, we will mostly leave normative theory aside, and instead focus mainly on **metaethics**, with some attention to **moral psychology**.