MORALITY FOR HUMANS

Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science

MARK JOHNSON

Copyrighted Material

Morality for Humans

Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science

MARK JOHNSON

The University of Chicago Press   Chicago and London

Copyrighted material

MARK JOHNSON is the Philip H. Knight Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oregon. He is the author of several books, including *The Meaning of the Body*; *The Body in the Mind*; and *Moral Imagination*; and coauthor, with George Lakoff, of *Metaphors We Live By* and *Philosophy in the Flesh*.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
© 2014 by The University of Chicago
All rights reserved. Published 2014.
Printed in the United States of America

23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14   1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-11340-1 (cloth)
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-11354-8 (e-book)

DOI: 10.7208/chicago/9780226113548.001.0001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Johnson, Mark, 1949– author.
Morality for humans: ethical understanding from the perspective of cognitive science / Mark Johnson.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-226-11340-1 (cloth: alk. paper)—
ISBN 978-0-226-11354-8 (e-book) 1. Ethics. 2. Cognitive science—Moral and ethical aspects. I. Title.
BJ45.5.J64 2014
171'.7—dc23   2013025456

♾ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Copyrighted material

Contents

Preface ix

Introduction: The Need for Ethical Naturalism 1

1 Moral Problem-Solving as an Empirical Inquiry 28

2 Where Are Our Values Bred?—Sources of Moral Norms 48

3 Intuitive Processes of Moral Cognition 73

4 Moral Deliberation as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling 89

5 The Nature of "Reasonable" Moral Deliberation 112

6 There Is No Moral Faculty 137

7 Moral Fundamentalism Is Immoral 163

8 The Making of a Moral Self 192

Acknowledgments 223

Notes 225 *References 239* *Index 249*

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

Preface

In *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), Viktor Frankl chronicles three years of the most despicable degradation and nearly unbearable suffering that he personally experienced and witnessed in concentration camps such as Auschwitz and Dachau. Frankl is justly famous for his attempts to explain to those of us who probably cannot ever comprehend the magnitude of the evil just what it was like to suffer through those horrors. But even more importantly, Frankl attempts to help us understand how people could endure such torture by holding on to their sense of meaning in life, even when there seemed to be absolutely no reason to sustain hope.

In a section where he discusses the psychology of the camp guards, Frankl asks how human beings could possibly inflict such terrible suffering on other humans, but he also acknowledges that, in the midst of all this daily cruelty, there were camp officials who were relatively kind and caring. After the liberation of a certain camp, he reports that it was discovered that the camp commander had actually paid out of his own pocket for medicines for his prisoners, and that he apparently "never once lifted his hand against any of us." The senior warden in that same camp, on the other hand, took sadistic pleasure in beating the prisoners whenever he could. Frankl concludes:

> From all this we may learn that there are two races of men in this world, but only these two—the "race" of the decent man and the "race" of the indecent man. Both are found everywhere; they penetrate into all groups of society. . . . Life in a concentration camp tore open the

Copyrighted material

> human soul and exposed its depths. Is it surprising that in those depths we again found only human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil? The rift dividing good from evil, which goes through all human beings, reaches into the lowest depths and becomes apparent even on the bottom of the abyss which is laid open by the concentration camp. (1946/2006, 137–38)

Frankl's simple taxonomy thus recognizes but two types of humans—the decent and the indecent. How can we distinguish the one from the other? Oftentimes, it is pretty clear who falls into which type, though there will always be borderline cases. If you read Frankl's account of life in the camps, you will see that to be decent means caring for other people, respecting them, helping them when they are most in need, and generally treating them as people who, like you, suffer, require physical and psychological nurturance, need love, and seek meaning in their lives.

No matter how we circumscribe the realm of decent behavior, there is no avoiding the fact that not all cultures will draw the lines in precisely the same way; therefore, the most we can hope for are some very general ideals of human comportment. Frankl explains, for example, that in the camps being decent would not require that you sacrifice your life for another person, but it certainly would require that you not intentionally harm them to get something for yourself, such as a piece of bread. There is understandably a great deal of gray area on the borderline between decency and indecency, and we cannot eradicate this ambiguity, either via the commandments of a holy God or the laws of universal moral reason. There can be no deductive inference from the concept of decency to a uniquely specified set of prescribed and proscribed moral behaviors.

It is not my primary concern in this book to defend Frankl's taxonomy of the decent versus the indecent. Rather, what I want to focus on is whether, in order to mark off moral right from wrong, we need to posit some transcendent source of absolute moral values or principles. Many people are utterly convinced that if it should turn out that there are no sources of absolute moral values and principles, then there would be no principled, intelligent way to distinguish the decent from the indecent, the right from the wrong, the good from the bad. I think this view is profoundly mistaken. I am going to argue that human beings do not have, and never had, access to any such absolute principles. I will support my argument with evidence from research on human cognition, appraisal, and deliberation. I will then argue that the absence of any such absolutes is no obstacle to our ability to intelligently sort the moral from the immoral. Decency, or any alleged moral value or standard, can be tied entirely to human needs, values, and cultural arrangements, without any

Copyrighted material

reliance on notions such as the eternal, the transcendent, or the supernatural.

There is nothing in our processes of moral deliberation that requires anything mysterious, esoteric, or transcendent to justify our moral appraisals. Our notions of moral decency, which concern the kinds of persons we ought to strive to become and how we ought to treat others, are entirely *human* notions, rooted in human nature, human needs, human thought, human social interaction, and human desires for a meaningful and fulfilled life. We can articulate a psychologically and philosophically adequate account of moral cognition and values that makes it possible to justify our moral appraisals, such as giving reasons why it would be wrong to treat innocent people in certain ways and why it would be good of you to show care and consideration for their basic bodily and psychological well-being. I will argue that all we ever had when it comes to questions of moral justification is our modest ability to give our best reasons and to show what life could be like if it were to realize certain ideals of character and behavior. This was never a matter of ultimate justification, claims to moral certainty, or reliance on supposedly trans-human foundations of moral knowledge. We are stuck with being finite, fallible human creatures who have to navigate our morally problematic landscape under the guidance of our very limited imaginative intelligence.

An important dimension of my argument in this book will consist in showing that what I call *moral fundamentalism*—the positing of absolute moral values, principles, or facts—is cognitively indefensible, because it is dramatically out of touch with contemporary mind science. Even worse, moral fundamentalism is immoral, I shall argue, because it cuts off the very processes of intelligent moral inquiry that we most need if we hope to face our pressing ethical concerns. Moral fundamentalism is the very worst possible strategy for anyone who hopes to deal intelligently with their moral problems.

However, in addition to criticizing claims to moral certainty and absolute principles, I need to give a positive and constructive account of what the process of moral deliberation looks like from the perspective of the cognitive sciences. I will argue that good moral deliberation is a form of problem-solving, in which we imaginatively project possible courses of action available to us, in order to determine which imagined course best resolves our actual moral problem. This kind of situated, imaginative moral inquiry does not need absolute foundations, which is a good thing, since humans never really had, and cannot ever have, access to the absolute. Moral deliberation at its best is a process of reconstructing our experience in a way that resolves the morally problematic situation that is currently

Copyrighted material

confronting us. Such a process involves the only reasonable notion of transcendence available to humans—namely, the ability to move beyond our current habits of thought and action to creatively remake some aspect of ourselves and our world. There is nothing about such a process that takes us out of our skins, as if we were somehow little gods capable of generating moral absolutes. Instead, imaginative moral deliberation is embedded, embodied, and enacted within our changing, malleable experience. All of this transformative activity is entirely human in every respect, without any trace of supernatural grounding or reliance on alleged capacities of pure reason or will. The morality that results is thus a "morality (fit) for humans."

Copyrighted material

Introduction: The Need for Ethical Naturalism

Many people believe that the only way to avoid a vicious, dog-eat-dog moral relativism is to affirm eternal and universal moral values and principles, values whose source must lie in something that transcends the finiteness and vicissitudes of human existence. I was nurtured and educated in just such a transcendent, absolutist view, but over the years, and with much emotional and intellectual turmoil, I lost my conviction in the moral fundamentalism that underlies this perspective. The more I studied the nature of human concepts, understanding, and reasoning, the more I came to recognize profound problems with the picture of experience, thought, and value presupposed by views of morality as transcendentally grounded. My engagement with cognitive science research on human meaning, conceptualization, and reasoning led me to the realization that our values, including our ethical standards and ideals, emerge from our embodied, interpersonal, culturally situated habitation of *our* world, and not from some transcendent realm.

Surprisingly, this realization did not lead me to moral relativism, but rather to a conception of moral standards as relatively stable, but always provisional and corrigible, norms. Moreover, it brought me to an understanding that the key to intelligent moral inquiry is an imaginative process of moral deliberation by which our experience is reconstructed to achieve growth of meaning and enriched possibilities for human flourishing. I came to regard this as a psychologically realistic *morality for humans*, by which I

Copyrighted material

mean a morality appropriate for actual human beings, with their limited and fallible cognitive and emotional capacities.

Toward an Ethics Naturalized

In this book, I attempt to articulate a naturalistic approach to values and moral deliberation that seems to me compatible with the account of embodied, situated meaning and understanding that has emerged in the cognitive sciences over the past three decades. I will situate my position in relation to some of the more influential contemporary accounts of moral psychology, such as the views of Robert Hinde (2002), Antonio Damasio (2003), Marc Hauser (2006), Owen Flanagan (2007), Patricia Churchland (2011), Philip Kitcher (2011), and Jonathan Haidt (2012). Such an approach requires a radical rethinking of some of our most deeply entrenched views about moral judgment and deliberation. In particular, it requires us to abandon the idea of some allegedly "pure" practical emotion-free reason, along with the correlative idea of unconditional moral principles. It thus rejects any form of moral absolutism or moral fundamentalism as being incompatible with how human beings actually understand and reason.

My alternative to these misguided absolutisms is a conception of moral deliberation as a form of imaginative problem-solving. In addition to recent experimental research that identifies two different processes of moral cognition—one consisting of nonconscious, fast, affect-laden, intuitive appraisals, and the other a conscious, slow, reflective, principled after-the-fact justificatory form of reasoning—I argue that there is also an important place for reflective, critical, and imaginative moral deliberation. This third process of moral cognition is emotionally driven but yet subject to assessments of reasonableness. I will describe and explain this third process in light of recent developments in the cognitive sciences. My goal is to articulate an understanding of moral cognition that is fit for human beings as we know them, not as we might wish them to be when we are under the mesmerizing spell of a quest for an illusory moral certainty. A moral philosophy fit for humans will regard persons as embodied, culturally embedded, highly complex organisms that are capable of an imaginative process of moral problem-solving. The view that emerges from this naturalistic perspective is anti-absolutist and fallibilist, yet it can provide us with guidance about what kinds of persons we should strive to become and what kinds of world we should seek to realize.

Copyrighted material

My approach to moral cognition is naturalistic. Abraham Edel gives a good summary of what is involved in a naturalistic approach to ethics of the sort I will be developing:

> Ethical Naturalism, or naturalistic ethics, regards morality as a phenomenon in the natural world to be understood through the many ways we study nature. Its general attitude is this-worldly, not otherworldly or non-worldly: morality functions to further human survival, maintain community, and regulate relations to keep them effective; it can improve as well as support institutions, give scope to human capacities, and shape ideals as directions of activity in goal-seeking. Where naturalistic ethics has an explicit metaphysics, it shares with materialism a regard for matter and its ways as a resource, a limitation, a determinant, but it traditionally rejects reductionism or dualistic assumptions that qualities of consciousness are outside the natural world. (2001, 1217)

I should say a word, at the outset, about how I understand the term "naturalistic." Common parlance sometimes mistakenly draws a sharp ontological distinction between *natural* events and processes, on the one hand, and *cultural* institutions and practices, on the other. The former are thought to be governed by causal necessity and therefore are studied by the methods of the natural sciences, whereas the latter are regarded as matters of human freedom and meaning, and therefore require special non-causal, interpretive methods of investigation.

On the view I will be developing, there is no basis for drawing a radical dualistic distinction between nature and culture, as though each person had a "natural" (bodily, physical) self and a distinct and different "cultural" (social, moral) self that somehow have to coexist and interrelate. Culture is not a superficial veneer of shared meanings, values, and practices that are merely layered on top of some supposedly purely material organic being. Our nature as biological organisms is intricately intertwined with our cultural being, which, in turn, cannot be realized without biological creatures to enact it. It is thus part of our human nature that we live, move, and realize our being as at once both biological and cultural creatures. There are occasions when we find it useful to focus primarily on our biological characteristics, and there are plenty of reliable and productive methods for exploring the biological aspects of our existence (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology). At other times, we are more interested in how our cultural values, practices, and institutions shape who we are and how we think and behave, and there are equally rich traditions of inquiry for exploring our cultural dimensions (e.g., social psychology, cognitive neuroscience,

Copyrighted material

sociology, anthropology, economics, philosophy, history). In short, we need *all* of these methods and modes of explanation, if we want an adequate understanding of our nature as moral creatures.

One of the chief challenges for any naturalistic account of morality is to preserve the complex biological-cultural matrix of relations that make us who we are, and to avoid the temptation of reductionist analysis that treats the biological as ontologically separable from the cultural and as capable of telling the whole story without reference to culture. That said, there are aspects of our biological organism that have little or nothing to do with the fact that we engage others in communities of meaning, value, and practice, just as there are aspects of our cultural engagement that have little or no direct dependence on our physiological makeup.

Consequently, in what follows, "natural" is not intended as a contrast term with "cultural," but rather as a contrast with "supernatural." The only forms of explanation I am rejecting outright are those that posit a realm of transcendent values alleged to exist beyond the world of our embodied, interpersonal, and cultural interactions. My primary reason for rejecting supernatural accounts is, as I will argue, that they do not *explain* anything. Instead, they are merely assertions of a faith in the reality of a transcendent world that is supposed to govern every aspect of our natural world and our lives, but of which we can have no description, no knowledge, and no explanation.

I have no illusions about convincing those who insist on moral absolutes and moral certainty grounded in a supernatural reality, but I shall argue that the human mind simply does not have access to moral absolutes in any cognitively or practically useful sense. I will argue that, in spite of our commonsense belief in absolute foundations of value, we were never, in the history of humankind, in possession of any absolute moral standards, and that we have been deluded in thinking otherwise. In fact, the moral fundamentalist belief in moral absolutes is a recipe for moral obtuseness and avoidance of genuine moral inquiry, and it is therefore an enemy of morality.

Obviously, the view I develop here is not going to be a morality of strict rules, clear decision procedures, unambiguous definitions, or hierarchically ranked moral goods. Nonetheless, it will be able to supply the possibility of genuine moral understanding and psychologically realistic moral guidance. It will provide this guidance by setting out an account of what intelligent moral deliberation looks like. As we will see, one of the most difficult temptations we have to overcome in moral philosophy is our desire for a moral theory that guides us by giving us ultimate moral values, principles, or catalogues of virtues. I will argue, instead, that what

Copyrighted material

we should expect from a moral theory is a psychologically realistic account of intelligent moral inquiry.[1]

A Little Tale of Moral Confusion

I want to begin with a moral adventure story. It is autobiographical and somewhat personal, but I hope that some of the ethical issues I encountered, and some of the questions about the nature of our moral values and practices I found myself struggling with, are questions that need to be addressed in any appropriately critical reflection on the nature of human moral understanding. My personal route to the rejection of moral fundamentalism had, and continues to have, two basic aspects: (1) profound existential doubts about the adequacy of my culturally inherited absolutist moral framework and (2) arguments based on scientific research into the nature of human cognition, judgment, and motivation.

I was born and raised in the Midwest of the United States of America—indeed, in Kansas, which contains the geodesic center of the country and which prides itself on being the *true* "Heartland" of America.[2] Our midwestern values—being, we supposed, God's values—were fit to be everyone's values, or so we thought. My parents raised me to be a good Lutheran and, they fervently hoped, a good Republican. I failed them on both counts. These "failings" were eventually an opportunity for me to rethink my whole conception of what it means to be human, along with my views about the origin of human moral values.

Good Lutherans—the kind of folks Garrison Keillor both celebrates and affectionately makes fun of on his *Prairie Home Companion* weekly radio program—are at least nominally committed to the following view of human nature: (1) Humans were created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and holy God, on whom they are utterly dependent. (2) Every human is born fallen (originally sinful) and cannot save himself or herself without the grace of God. No one can *earn* salvation by any deeds they might accomplish. Everything is a matter of faith and the inward purity of a good will. (3) Humans are created with the moral obligation to realize God's purposes for our lives (and for his creation), by following his commandments and seeking to purify and discipline our will to do what is morally right. (4) Consequently, a moral life is construed as a journey of purification and self-discipline, in order to realize divine purposes. (5) Probably the best that a fallen, fallible human creature is capable of is to seek out the moral standards given by God (as revealed in holy scripture and made incarnate in the actions of Jesus), and then do one's best to live humbly

Copyrighted material

and faithfully by those standards. Any individual person was bound to make some mistakes, but purity of heart and good intentions could go a long way toward making up for your inability to realize the highest good ordained by God.

Although my particular upbringing happened to be Lutheran, I want to suggest that its core assumption is one it shares with any number of culturally different moral systems. This grounding assumption is that humans are fallible creatures whose highest purpose ought to be to cultivate a strong moral character that manifests certain moral values and lives in accordance with certain absolutely binding moral principles. If you set aside, for the moment, the peculiar metaphysics of Christian notions of sin, redemption, heaven, and hell, you might find that there is much to recommend the general ethical orientation just described. Basically, what is required is for us to treat ourselves and others with proper respect (however that gets defined) and to care for the well-being of your soul and that of others. Be loving. Help others in need. Be steadfast. Maintain your integrity. Do not be arrogant or haughty. Realize that the world does not revolve around you. Live to help make the world more nurturing, more kind, and more harmonious. This is an attractive set of moral ideals, a perspective shared by many moral traditions throughout history and across different cultures, regardless of whether or not they are grounded in a theological perspective.

This Heartland picture of religiously grounded morality served to engender in me a strong sense of moral earnestness and obligation. Humans were supposed to recognize their unique place in creation and to understand how it gave them profound moral responsibilities toward themselves and others. By virtue of our distinctive rationality, we alone among the animals were possessed of free will, which imposed on us the moral responsibility to treat all humans with the respect due them in virtue of their intrinsic freedom and dignity. No doubt, this upbringing explains why in college and graduate school I was immediately attracted to Kantian moral theory, which was basically a rationalized version of Judeo-Christian conceptions of universally binding moral commandments. Kant rejected what he regarded as the heteronomous character of most theological ethics, since it placed us under constraints given by an *other* (namely, by God). He replaced the heteronomy of God-given moral commandments with the idea of positive freedom as autonomy (i.e., the giving of moral law by ourselves to ourselves, as an activity of practical reason). Only such self-legislation, he argued, could constitute genuine human freedom. Despite this important difference concerning the ulti-

Copyrighted material

mate source of moral legislation, however, Kant nevertheless retained a central component of Judeo-Christian ethics, namely, the grounding of morality on unconditional moral laws. In this sense, Kantian rational morality becomes a "de-theologized" version of traditional Christian moral law theory, insofar as divine reason is replaced in Kant's theory by universal reason. Consequently, even though there are significant differences between the heteronomy of divine commandments and the autonomy of universal reason, both views assume the transcendent source of moral values and principles. Hence, for someone (like me) struggling with the problematic ontological assumptions of Christian theologically based moral systems, Kant's vision of autonomously derived, and universally applicable, moral laws offered a welcome alternative.

Unfortunately, there were problems with this absolutist worldview that would not go away. Even as a naïve teenager, with very unsophisticated powers of critical reflection, I immediately discerned some fairly major difficulties with the conception of moral guidance offered both by the religious tradition I had been brought up in and also by the Kantian non-theological alternative version I was still entertaining. These were not highfalutin metaphysical problems (though I would later recognize some of those too), but straightforward issues about how one was supposed to determine which acts and ways of living were right and which were wrong.

The first big problem concerned whether either my religious moral tradition, or its Kantian surrogate, could give guidance to address the range of actual moral concerns any teenager would routinely encounter. Back then, in high school and college, I had hoped that my religious perspective would give me answers to the profound existential questions that any halfway reflective person would end up asking. These were the standard "meaning of life" questions about our existential condition: Is there a God? If there is, what difference should this make for how I live? Or, if there is no God, then what difference should this make for how I live? What is love, and how can I learn to love (and, selfishly, to find love, to be loved)? Why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing with my life? Who am I, anyway? In short, what's this whole human drama all about?

In addition to these grand issues about the nature of reality and our human quest for meaningful lives, there were very concrete and specific moral concerns. For example, there was the profound and pressing question of the "three zones."[3] You know what I am talking about. Zone 1 was from the neck up. Zone 2 went from the shoulders down to the

Copyrighted material

navel. And then there was zone 3—a zone about which young people showed remarkable ignorance, moral uncertainty, and a nearly manic obsession. Good Heartland Christians were not even supposed to think about, much less talk about, zone 3, which meant that it therefore occupied a large portion of the average teenager's interest. The chief problem concerned what you were (morally) allowed to do in those three zones. This was back in the mid-1960s, before the "Summer of Love" in 1968, at a time when the zones were pretty serious business. It is easy to forget how uptight about sexuality we were back then—women wore girdles, people weren't supposed to talk about sex, *Roe v. Wade* had not yet been enacted and so abortion was illegal, and *Playboy* and the lingerie and undergarment sections of the Sears Roebuck catalogue were prime sources of young men's sexual (mis)understandings and fantasies.

Pretty much everyone thought you could kiss all you wanted—go all out in zone 1, although even then there were often qualms about kissing versus "French" kissing. Some people thought zone 2 was more iffy. But why, I wondered. What's the moral difference between copping a good feel (zone 2 action) and kissing someone (zone 1 action) with one of those kisses that went on for who knows how long and steamed up the car windows and left you with a sore tongue the next morning? What supposedly made "petting" worse than kissing? After all, wasn't kissing just a form of petting anyway, only done with the mouth instead of one's hands? And why was "heavy" petting worse than "light" petting? Supposedly it was because as you went from "light" to "heavy," it brought you closer to the mysterious and forbidden zone 3! You were starting up top with the face, lips, and mouth, and then proceeding *downward* toward the place where you could really get into trouble.[4]

I would later come to understand that our entire conception of the ethics of human sexuality—and of our morality in general—rested on a pervasive and unquestioned dualistic metaphysics of the mind-body split. I had learned, mostly from my pastor's sermons and his catechism class, that humans were split creatures, with a mind/soul and a body. The soul—your true inwardness and moral center—was supposedly your highest, most essential self, as well as the seat of your God-given freedom. It was the source of your distinctive rational capacities and the locus of your free will. Consequently, it was your moral center and the source of conscience. In contrast, the body was a problem to be overcome by a purified, disciplined moral will. The body was the source of feelings, emotions, desires, and "the temptations of the flesh" to which we poor humans were subject. To be "good" was to rise above one's bodily, animal nature in order to realize one's true calling as rational soul. The ideal was

Copyrighted material

to be "pure" of spirit and to do your best to retain this purity in a very soiled world.

The point I want to emphasize is that, when it came down to it, nothing in the theological account of morality that I have just sketched really provided any illumination regarding the very pressing concerns I had about matters sexual. One could dredge up strange Old Testament prohibitions against such mysterious forbidden acts as being with a woman who was "unclean" (whatever *that* meant), or sodomy (whatever *that* meant), but if you wanted some good guidance on the ethics of petting, you were not going to find it in the scriptures.

Kant's moral philosophy, which claimed to specify our basic moral obligations via a system of rationally derived imperatives,[5] did not fare much better. Kant has plenty to say about sex, but it is notoriously difficult to justify any of what he says as coming directly from some allegedly pure practical reason. His pronouncements are those of a typical northern European Christian male of his time and place (eighteenth-century Königsburg), and they do not really seem to be the dictates of an allegedly pure practical reason possessed by all rational creatures. For example, as a good German Protestant of his day, Kant claimed that one should not masturbate (which he called "wanton self-abuse"), one should not use another person for sexual gratification "like a lemon to be sucked dry and cast away," and one should not have sex outside marriage. The only way to legitimize sex, according to Kant, was within the context of monogamous marriage. He "reasoned" that in sex you give yourself away to the other as an object to be used by them (which is morally impermissible), and only through marriage could you win yourself back, when they give themselves to you in return![6] In other words, the only way to keep yourself from being reduced to a mere sexual object was to buy yourself back through the marriage contract—you give yourself to them and they give yourself back to you by giving themselves to you. However much these and his other conservative views fit some traditional conceptions of the nature and purpose of human sexuality, they are certainly not issuances of some allegedly universal "pure" practical reason.

In short, at the practical level of day-to-day ethical engagement, neither Judeo-Christian nor Kantian moral law theory provided any serious argument-supported moral guidance other than of the most abstract and vague sort. On occasions when a theory pretended to offer more specific imperatives, I began to notice that there was much *confident assertion* and *little or no compelling argument.* To make matters worse, it seemed to me that none of the other major candidates for systematic moral guidance (e.g., egoism, stoicism, utilitarianism) fared any better when it came to

Copyrighted material

specific moral guidance. Something was rotten in the state of morals, and it was stinking up everything pretty badly, while everyone pretended that our moral understanding was all roses, if only we could smell them.

What was a morally responsible person to do? Neither the Hebrew and Christian scriptures nor Kant's system of morality as set out in his *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) and his collected *Lectures on Ethics* (1930) could provide even the possibility of a complete systematic response to every actual or conceivable moral problem. Looking for scriptural guidance could never solve your problem, because there could never be full specificity about every conceivable sexual act (or any other types of act, for that matter), and, furthermore, there could never be any algorithm for the proper interpretation of alleged moral commandments.

Consider the problem of the specificity of moral principles. It is not enough for us to know that we ought to love and respect others and ourselves. We also want to know what this means in terms of the important details of our relations with others. We want to know whether it is okay to masturbate, okay to engage in petting to our heart's content, and okay to have sex outside marriage. Is there any place in the Old or New Testament where it says: "Don't engage in petting?" Is there any place where sexual intercourse before marriage is forbidden? The answer is far from clear. Those who believe that premarital sex is immoral will cite passages such as Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 7:2, 6:13, 6:18; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Ephesians 5:3; Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 13:4; Jude 7; and many others. However, these and other prohibitions against "sexual immorality" give no definition of that term, and it is often suggested by the context that the prohibition in question pertains primarily to adultery and various alleged (but seldom enumerated) sexual "perversions." However, even if there were to be such a scripture, the key question is not really whether there is a passage specifically prohibiting or permitting petting (or sex outside marriage), but, rather, how one was supposed to know what constituted "petting" and what "sex outside marriage" meant.[7] That is to say, how is one supposed to translate pristine moral laws of broad scope into the particular practices of a messy everyday life? Which considerations were relevant to making a correct application of such a rule to the particular cases in hand? Is petting a zone 1, zone 2, or zone 3 affair, and *why* would it be thought to be proscribed for any of these three zones? Is it all right to put your hands on the face and neck of someone you are kissing, but not anywhere else below their neck? Why? And where?

Moreover, what justification could there be for prohibiting certain kinds of intimate relations, short of harming one's partner physically or emotionally? If any kind of sexual prohibition is not just an absolute

Copyrighted material

command of God (or the dictate of some other absolute moral authority), then it requires a justification, and that necessitates some justificatory framework that presupposes an entire moral worldview. However, we would then need a justification for our preferred moral framework, including justifications for its account of human nature, will, agency, emotions, action structure, and so forth. Arguments about justificatory frameworks of this sort were, as I recall, the topics of much heated late-night debate in my college dorm, focused on questions like "What is the allegedly 'natural' end or purpose of sex?" "What kinds of evidence were supposed to determine the 'naturalness' of a practice?" "Why should 'naturalness' even count as a moral value in the first place?" and "Are there any other relevant considerations besides natural teleology?"

As a young man, I thought all of this ambiguity and confusion was probably due only to my personal failings as a moral thinker. I suspected that it was just *my* confusion and *my* inability to think in the right way, the way that would lift the veil of ignorance and reveal to me with blinding clarity the binding moral laws that told me what was permitted and what was prohibited, and exactly under what conditions. However, I soon came to realize that the same types of issues then plaguing me were not just *my* confusions, but instead represented deep philosophical issues that any conscientious and reflective person would have to address concerning the nature of morality itself.

When I pressed others to justify their moral claims, regardless of the basis (theological, rational, cultural, or scientific) they cited for their views, it did not take much careful observation to see that nobody else really had the answers either. I began to notice a common recurring pattern. Whenever someone espoused alleged moral truths with great outward confidence, they typically had almost no idea how to justify their view in a non-circular way.[8] Proclaiming absolute moral truths and manifesting an apparently unshakable confidence in those truths did not equate with actually having any plausible justification, or even any serious understanding of the views they so vociferously espoused. "The Bible tells us so" or "This is what God commands of us" (even if we could agree about what that biblical passage means) is not a rational defense, but only a faithful affirmation of the authority and clarity of a text that itself requires interpretation by fallible human beings. Determining what any set of holy scriptures entails turns out to be a nightmarish hermeneutical process of constructing plausible interpretations of key terms and phrases that are often dramatically underspecified in the text and that may have arisen in a historical or cultural context very different from our own current situation.

Copyrighted material

Sex was a big enough problem, but things got worse for me when it came to the Vietnam War. In *Moral Imagination* (1993), I have already described my personal dilemma concerning the war. The basic issue was what in the world was a conscientious person supposed to do about participation in that war? I felt like Sergeant York, who believed in his heart "Thou shalt not kill" and yet felt the conflicting duty to serve his country, which was at war. Like Sergeant York, you might quote scripture to justify serving your country in the armed forces, rendering unto Caesar what is due to Caesar, and unto God what is due to God (Matthew 22:21). Or you might also be moved in the contrary direction by the gospel narrative of Jesus, who reputedly said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say unto you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38–39). Then there was "Love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Could you love your fellow man and go to war with them and kill them? Was there *one right answer* here?

I remember thinking, even as an adolescent, how very convenient it was in the film version of *Sergeant York* that when the young York (played by Gary Cooper) went up on the mountain to pray for God's guidance, a wind came up to blow open his Bible to the page that contained the "render unto Caesar" passage. That divine event apparently answered the question for Gary Cooper's York, but it still left *me* unsure. Sure, I thought, render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's, but what is due to Caesar and what to God? How did *that* passage solve anything? On what grounds do we answer the question of *what* is due *to whom*?

Intrigued by the pacifist teachings of Jesus, I was moved to read Tolstoy's impassioned theologically based argument for pacifism in *The Kingdom of God Is within You*, which Gandhi reported as having a profound effect on his own view of nonviolent resistance to evil. However, I got a completely different perspective when I talked with my pastor about the morality of war. He assured me that sometimes horrible things had to be done to realize the ultimate good. He illustrated this with his own personal story about his son, who was a pilot in the U.S. Air Force and was ordered to bomb churches in North Vietnam in which the enemy had sought refuge. Well, maybe, I thought, but on the basis of what theological or ethical principle was it okay to bomb churches? Many pacifists argued that some actions were simply radically incompatible with certain ends, values, and moral obligations. For example, you cannot express

Copyrighted material

God's love, or even Kantian respect for humanity, by practicing violence on others.[9]

Perhaps you will write off these troubles as the confused musings of a callow youth, which, no doubt, they were. There is no question that at that time I was a typical teenager—naïve, parochial in my experience and vision, and mightily confused about love, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, I submit that the kinds of problems I was facing were not just my own personal, idiosyncratic demons, but rather represent basic issues attending *any* moral doctrine or theory that pretends to give ethical guidance by means of unconditional principles, laws, commandments, or standards of value.

For me, it was not until I was in graduate school in the early 1970s that I began to get a glimpse of the true depth of the problems I found circulating in the moral philosophies, both theological and secular, of the day. Back then, it had not yet dawned on me that the solution could not consist in some minor tinkering and refurbishing of inherited views, but instead required a radical reconceiving of the nature of moral cognition and even the point and purpose of moral theory in general.

Given my Lutheran upbringing, with its conception of God as moral lawgiver, it should be no surprise that, as I have already mentioned, when I went off to the University of Kansas in the late 1960s, I gravitated early on toward Kantian moral theory that posited the existence of universally and unconditionally binding moral laws. It seemed right to me that the only way to avoid ethical relativism was a commitment to universal moral laws, or at least universal moral values (e.g., respect), derivable from pure practical reason, and binding on all rational creatures. However, I was already a lapsing Kantian who had emerging doubts about the existence of the kinds of ultimate foundations Kant claimed for his views of knowledge and values. When I then entered graduate school at the University of Chicago, I, like nearly everyone else in philosophy at the time, became enamored of Rawls's quasi-Kantian theory of justice and its implications for the nature of moral theory. If it can be said that Kant attempted to *de-theologize* Judeo-Christian ethics, then Rawls attempted to *de-transcendentalize* Kant, removing Kant's claims of absolute foundations in pure practical reason, while yet keeping most of the rest of Kant's moral vision.[10] So, for a while, I lived on Rawls's Kant-lite diet, which amounted to fundamental rational principles of justice (and concomitantly, I believed, of morality) without any absolute foundation on which to ground them. This is what I mean in saying that Rawls de-transcendentalized Kant by removing what Kant had called "pure

Copyrighted material

practical reason" as a source of moral laws. However, the damage to moral absolutism was done, and I could never go back to any form of moral fundamentalism. Rawls taught us to question foundational, fundamentalist, and absolutist views of moral values, and he taught us that we must not take our moral intuitions as unquestionable. Once those arguments became clear to me, I was utterly convinced—especially after reading Thomas Kuhn, W. V. O. Quine, a number of philosophers of science, John Dewey, and (sometime later) empirical research in cognitive science—that the human quest for certainty, for transcendent foundations, and for pure, non-empirical sources of truth and value was incapable of success, given the limitations of human understanding. Moreover, this was not merely a failed project, but, even worse, adherence to its conception of morality does harm by leading us away from a more humanly appropriate naturalistic conception that is better suited for our lives.

In light of all this, I had to ask myself: "Where does morality come from, if there are no absolute, supernatural, non-empirical foundations for it?" The answer, obviously, is that we must look for natural sources of morality. I will try to work out in subsequent chapters a fairly comprehensive naturalistic ethics orientation. As I conceive it, ethical naturalism starts with the assumption that human moral agents are human animals whose values emerge in ongoing interactions with their physical, interpersonal, and cultural environments. Our values do not come from a noumenal world. Our values are not the dictates of a pure practical reason, because there is no such thing. Perhaps most shockingly, ethical naturalism sees ethical reasoning as a form of problem-solving, and so as not being different in kind from other kinds of hypothetical reasoning and problem-solving that constitute the fabric of our daily lives. Moral deliberation is a process for transforming a morally problematic situation in a way that harmonizes competing ends and commitments.

The obvious problem for any such naturalistic, non-absolutist conception of morality is how to avoid the kind of moral relativism that sees right and wrong, good and bad as entirely a construction of cultural systems. Relativism of this sort entails that there is no point in trying to find a transcendent critical standpoint for assessing the merits of a particular moral system or tradition, since there is no external comprehensive viewpoint from which to judge a particular tradition. Although experimental research on mind, thought, and values leads me to reject any form of foundationalism, I will argue that some criticism of moral ideals and principles is possible, because we are not just prisoners of our inherited moral frameworks. Moreover, it is possible to speak of a particular deliberative process as more or less reasonable than some alternative process,

Copyrighted material

even though we have no God's-eye perspective. Reasonableness will not be a matter of correspondence with some allegedly preexisting universal rationality, but rather will amount to determining how well a certain deliberative process contributes to actually harmonizing previously competing ends and values, resolving tensions, and promoting cooperative, constructive human activities. There is no way of avoiding a plurality of reasonable moral systems and practices, so we should instead focus our attention on how a situated and fallible critical perspective would allow us to engage in reasonable moral appraisal. Like Nussbaum (2000), Hinde (2002), Flanagan (2007), Churchland (2011), McCauley (2011), and many others, I believe that it is possible to say some general things about human nature, without falling into a rigid essentialism. A modest notion of human nature can involve claims about human motivation, sensory-motor capacities, cognitive processes, emotions, needs, social skills, cultural values, and much more. Upon such a minimal conception of human nature, one can give a general account of human well-being and of the best form of moral deliberation for creatures like us. My project is therefore not limited to merely describing values, institutions, and practices, but includes a critical normative dimension.

Two Opposing Conceptions of Moral Value: Non-Naturalistic vs. Naturalistic Approaches

The narrative I have been recounting of my personal struggle to understand the sources and nature of moral guidance is, at its core, a tale of why I came to reject my early non-naturalist views for a more naturalistic perspective. In order to clarify what is at stake in the choice between these two opposed views, I want to focus in a bit more detail on what each of these two fundamental orientations entails.

Non-naturalistic theories locate the source of moral norms and principles in some reality that supposedly transcends the natural world. Those absolute values and principles are believed to be brought to experience, not derived from experience, to give us a basis for assessing the morality of particular actions, moral principles, traits of character, and institutions.

Naturalistic theories, in contrast, see moral values and standards as arising out of our experience in the natural world, which involves biological, interpersonal (social), and cultural dimensions. There is no "pure" *a priori* grounding for moral norms, so they have to emerge from our fundamental needs for survival, individual and group harmony, personal

Copyrighted material

and communal flourishing, and consummation of human meaning and purpose.

Non-Naturalistic Moral Theories

One useful way to understand what is at stake in the contest between non-naturalistic and naturalistic orientations can be fleshed out as a fundamental difference concerning the source and nature of moral guidance. In *Moral Imagination* (1993), I argued that non-naturalistic views are misguidedly obsessed with unconditional moral constraint and governance of our attitudes and behaviors. They therefore tend to take the form of what I called the "Moral Law folk theory of morality" (Johnson 1993, chap. 1). This is essentially the view that the primary purpose of a moral theory should be to provide governance for our actions by specifying rules for which acts are permissible, which are impermissible, and which are morally obligatory. Here, in brief, is that governance theory:

THE MORAL LAW FOLK THEORY

1. Humans have a split nature—a unique conjunction of a mental (or spiritual) dimension and a physical (bodily) dimension.
2. We are driven by our bodily needs and desires to seek satisfactions and pleasures. Because our passions and desires are not intrinsically rational, there arises in all humans a fundamental moral tension between our higher (rational) selves and our lower (bodily) selves.
3. The problem of morality arises only for beings like us who are possessed of a faculty of free will (which is part of our "higher" self), by virtue of which we override, when necessary, our bodily impulses and can control our actions and thus be held responsible for them.
4. Moral constraint comes from a set of universally binding, literal moral principles supplied by revelation, universal human reason, or some other transcendent (supernatural) source.
5. Morally right conduct is thus a matter of (a) discerning what some moral law or moral principle requires in a specific situation, and (b) having the strength of will to do what the moral principle requires, no matter what temptations or influences might make us disinclined to obey the law.

The real core of the Moral Law folk theory is the idea that morality is primarily a set of transcendently grounded universal moral principles or moral properties (values) as the only basis for a non-relativistic morality. Different versions of non-naturalism will identify the source of norma-

Copyrighted material

image not available

cal naturalism is finding a way to get normative force within the processes of our natural world, without predicating those norms as components of an independent, non-natural realm of values. In later chapters, I will outline many of the natural sources of our moral values and explore the extent to which empirical research can inform and support moral justification. I would only note here that this in no way precludes the need for moral reflection and deliberation, but rather it recognizes the central role of methods of empirical inquiry (especially scientific inquiry) in our processes of moral appraisal and our projection of ideals of moral behavior.

Ethical naturalists typically support their claims about the nature of moral cognition with evidence based on scientific research. Therefore, a word about the status of science is in order here, especially since I will later list some types of scientific evidence that would have a bearing on how we understand moral cognition and also engage in it. The first thing to emphasize is that results of scientific research do not in any way constitute foundational, unrevisable, or absolute knowledge (Kuhn 1970; Putnam 1981). Without rehearsing the many arguments emerging from decades of philosophical debate on the nature of scientific knowledge, I would simply note that the entire field known today as the philosophy of science took its start in the 1930s from attempts to find a foundational grounding for the empirical claims of mature sciences (by which is meant physics). Pretty much the whole history of the ongoing debates about the status of scientific knowledge consisted of ever-widening attacks on epistemic foundationalism of any sort. Once philosophers began to realize that data are theory-laden (i.e., that what counts as a phenomenon to be explained and what counts as relevant evidence are not given *a priori*, but rather depend on the conceptual system and assumptions underlying the particular theory being "tested"), then certain/absolute/presupposition-less/foundational knowledge goes by the board. Instead, we value a scientific theory for the breadth of its evidential support, for its simplicity, for its elegance, for its comprehensiveness, and for many other basic values we happen to regard as important and relevant given our particular context of inquiry. In other words, there is no value-neutral science or scientific perspective, nor is there any way to establish a particular value or set of values as absolutes that are supposedly relevant to any and every theoretical explanation (Rorty 1979, 1982).

The adequacy of any scientific theory or explanatory hypothesis depends on many factors, which cannot be rank-ordered in any absolute or context-independent fashion, and for which there exists no algorithm to specify how to apply the values in question. Moreover, as Bechtel (2009) has shown, most scientific theories that focus on cognition and human

Copyrighted material