The health of the spirit

This is an expanded version of a piece, which I started years ago, on ethics. Many people have said a lot on the subject, of course. Here I present my answers to the questions of ethics, which I use to make choices for my life. My approach is heavily influenced by Ayn Rand but differs from hers on significant points.

Connecting the "is" and the "ought"

There is, many philosophers say, no necessary connection between the "is" and the "ought." A little thought will show how obviously false this is, at least for some oughts. The body needs food to function. Therefore you ought to eat. Doctors can treat illnesses that would otherwise kill you or do great harm. Therefore you ought to see a doctor if you're seriously sick.

Even the most stubborn philosopher wouldn't refuse to do these things; otherwise they would become dead philosophers. But they'd tell us those aren't real "oughts." An "ought" ought to be delivered by a booming voice out of the sky. It should make demands on us without giving any reasons. In these terms, they're right. They've defined these "oughts" in a way that has no connection to reality.

But that's the problem. They aren't just looking in a dark room for a black cat; they've defined "cat" to exclude anything you can feel or weigh. If we look at another approach to ethics, to the question of what we ought to do, we may find that the connection to reality is obvious.

Benjamin Franklin, in his autobiography, gives an example of this approach:

> I grew convinc'd that *Truth, Sincerity, & Integrity* in Dealings between Man & Man, were of the utmost Importance to the Felicity of Life, ... Revelation had indeed no weight with me as such; but I entertain'd an Opinion, that tho' certain Actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by it, or good *because* it commanded them; yet probably these Actions might be forbidden *because* they were bad for us, or commanded *because* they were beneficial to us, in their own Natures, all the Circumstances of things considered.

The analogy to physical health is a fruitful one. Just as medicine and hygiene point the way to the body's health, ethics, once rescued from divine commands and categorical imperatives, points the way to the health of the person as a thinking, choosing being. I'd say "health of the mind," but that term has been appropriated for a different purpose. "Health of the spirit" also needs some explaining, since it suggests a religious framework, but it's the best way to put the analogy that I can think of. (However, I won't say "spiritual health." There are limits.) If we drop the need for an analogous expression, the right term is "happiness." The word "happiness" is often used to mean a transient emotional state, but in the philosophical sense it's an ongoing state of well-being.

I should emphasize that the spirit and the body aren't two disjoint entities. Spirit is an aspect of a person, not a separable thing. Take away the spirit from the body and you have a corpse. Take away the body from the spirit and you have nothing.

The name Aristotle gave this state of well-being was eudaimonia. However, his idea tended toward a life of leisure and contemplation, often neglecting the value of creativity and productivity. While I acknowledge a strong debt to Aristotle, my idea of the health of the spirit is different from his.

To understand health of the spirit (or happiness) as I'm using it here, we have to tackle the anti-egoistic bias in most modern philosophy. In a nutshell, this bias says, "If it's good for you, if it makes you happy, it carries

no moral credit." It's no wonder that the people who hold this premise can't find a connection between an is and an ought. This kind of "ought" has no connection to anything except the demands people make on you.

Any non-egoistic ethical system is inherently a con job. It demands that you do things, not because you'll benefit in any way from them, but because someone else will. Why is this a reason? Ultimately, the people who tell you this have to admit there's no reason. You're just "supposed" to do it. This doesn't mean you have to be the direct beneficiary of everything you do; it means that for anything to be a value you act on, it has to be a value *to you*. Your actions have to advance something you care about, or you don't have a reason to do them.

Any valid ethical statement is an "if-then" statement. If you do certain things, certain consequences will follow. You're free to do them or not, regardless; if you had no choice, there would be no ethical issue. You can choose a self-destructive path. The most that ethics can do is warn you and others who are affected by your choices.

Health and happiness

The analogy of happiness to physical health is fruitful in other ways. Physical health is about the whole body, not just each part in isolation. It's a long-term issue, not just a matter of how you feel at the moment. There are people who say that egoism is just a matter of immediate gratification, but try looking at health in that way. Try claiming that a powerful drug which gives you a high for the next hour is good for your health, even though it'll take a heavy toll on you afterward and will cost more each time you use it. Or try claiming that stuffing yourself like a glutton is healthful behavior. What's generally called "selfish" behavior, the kind that rewards nothing but immediate wishes, is just as far from happiness.

Ayn Rand's fictional works help to make the distinction clear. In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark turns down opportunities for lots of money. He accepts living as an ordinary laborer for a while, rather than do things which are contrary to what he most values. In *Atlas Shrugged*, the strikers give up wealth and jobs which they love in order to secure their freedom. It's the villains who are after money and power as ends in themselves.

The distinction between real and fake self-interest needs to be stressed. When people go after power over others, they believe they're acting in their own interest and they're often called selfish. Most such people end up as the dregs of society. It's true that some get rich that way and some of them keep getting away with it. They may enjoy what they do in addition to getting material rewards. With a suitable moral framework built up for them (e.g., the divine right of kings), they may even feel approval of their own actions. But the tendency of absolute rulers and gangster bosses to sink into mindless hedonism is a clue that they find little of value in life.

Physical health is largely the result of good habits: learning to eat well, to get exercise, to avoid sources of disease. Likewise, happiness grows out of appropriate habits of character. We aren't Prisoner's Dilemma players for whom each act of betrayal or cooperation is discrete and unrelated to what we are as people. We learn by habit to make certain kinds of choices. We can change our habits, but this takes time.

Rand listed three primary values and three corresponding virtues. The values are reason, purpose, and self-esteem, and the virtues are rationality, productiveness, and pride. These virtues are habits formed over a long period. Someone who's spent his life engaging in muddled thinking, avoidance of effort, and self-contempt may suddenly realize the need to change, but it will take a long period of effort to learn new habits.

Much of what's conventionally called "selfish" behavior has nothing to do with self-interest, but only with the gratification of immediate desires. Some claim that such gratification is the only possible meaning of self-interest. This is like claiming that consuming whatever tastes best is the definition of healthful eating.

Actions which are deemed "selfish" include ones aimed at acquiring power over others, having lots of wealth, and physical pleasure. To many people, the height of happiness is being an emperor sitting on a throne of jewels, with a harem ready to call on at any time and executioners ready to kill anyone who seems annoying.

The number of powerful rulers who have died violent deaths or ended their lives in prison should be a clue that this life isn't as good as it seems. Power, by its nature, involves fighting with others who want it just as much. It's hard to hold on to. Aside from the question of whether power brings happiness, there's the fact that only a few of those who seek it get it.

Wealth? It's a good thing, if you earn it and know what to do with it. But when it becomes an end in itself, it's pointless. The people who are obsessed with acquisition are generally trying to impress others. Imagine having a gold mine on a desert island and no way to reach anyone else; what would be the point? Wealth is good when it provides the needs and comforts of life, and when it's a measure of accomplishment and a means to further accomplishments, but that's not the view of those who just want to take it.

Physical pleasure is a good thing too, but it's not that hard to come by a reasonable level of it. When it becomes a primary goal of life, and when someone is constantly trying to come up with new and strange pleasures, that's a sign of running away from something. Hedonism is appropriate for animals that aren’t capable of conceptual thought, not for humans.

Long-term thinking

There is an important difference between the health of the body and that of the spirit. Physical health is a matter of concrete issues: How well-maintained and functional is each part of your body, in itself and in relationship to your whole body? But happiness is a matter of our thoughts, values, and goals being well-maintained and free from injurious factors. How we experience ourselves is an end in itself, not just a means to keeping the heart beating and the lungs pumping. The heartbeat and breathing are the means.

We experience the world not just as a series of events, but as a whole which we understand through entities and ideas. We shape it, as much as we can, in accordance with our ideas and values. To have a healthy spirit, we must hold values which are conducive to its health, and that means committing to certain ways of thinking. The question is how to think and what values to hold. Valuing only the body’s continuing existence collapses in on itself. It turns the heartbeat and breathing into a goal instead of a means. Valuing only physical sensations of pleasure reduces a person to an animal, and a nonfunctional one at that. Without long-term thinking, we can't even get our food and keep ourselves warm.

To hold values in the realm of thought, we have to hold principles. If we just do whatever is expedient at the moment, our live have no continuity, just a series of passing wishes. What we need, because of the kind of living beings we are, is an ongoing vision of what life should be like and how we should live it, knowing it won't always be like that. When people make a bad choice, they can't just turn around and change it. They need to accept the consequences, whether by continuing to follow it or by accepting the cost in their lives of tearing out so much.

Eyal Mozes, in his article "Life as the Standard of Value," put it this way:

> The existential role of principles to survival applies in the long run, and might not be negated by an isolated violation of the principle. In contrast, the role of principles in maintaining self-esteem is immediate, and depends on total consistency in following the principle. Once a person has formed his principles, and has fully understood their role in promoting his long-range survival, any violation of them will not only negate their contribution to maintaining his self-esteem, but will reverse it; these same principles will now lead him to evaluate his own actions —- and, consequently, his own person —- as unworthy. If the violation of the principle is isolated, and

> minor, then the damage to his self-esteem will be reversible; but his ability to act and achieve his goals will be impaired, at least in the short run, and he will have to spend significant time and energy on restoring his self-esteem. More commonly, he will protect his sense of self-esteem by evading his principles and rationalizing his action, thus making it likely that the violation of the principle will become habitual.

If people choose bad principles — ones which are irrational and self-destructive — then they face those costs if they act against them. The truer they are to harmful principles, the greater the cost they bear. This is a large part of the reason why many people think that being moral is a burden rather than a benefit. A person who believes that God's word, as delivered by the Bible, is the highest guide to conduct, will pay a higher cost for it if he really believes and lives by it than someone who picks and chooses commandments at convenience. In these cases, violation of the principle has to become habitual, as a way of survival. It's a bad compromise, but the best many people can do.

If people with bad principles can uproot them in favor of better ones, that's to their good, but it's a hard path which most people can't manage, or at best take a long time to accomplish. The habits they've developed to survive with bad principles make them unable to believe it's possible to follow any set of principles without fudging. (This is why you can't give people reasons for a radically different way of thinking, no matter how compelling they are, and expect them to convert on the spot.)

But if the principles you live by are conducive to life and happiness, living consistently by them is necessary to avoid harmful consequences. Doing this lets you live, to the extent circumstances allow, in the kind of world you would most like to live in — a world where people act reasonably, justly, and benevolently. To do this, you offer reason, justice, and benevolence to others, expecting the like in return. If you clearly aren't getting it in return from some people, you cut your losses and not invest further benevolence in them. If it's a matter of casual contact, you don't spend much time worrying about it. If it's someone you have to deal with regularly, you consider the possibility that the hostility is the result of some error (maybe even yours) and try to resolve the issue or work around it. If it continues and is plainly intentional, then you either avoid contact or try to minimize the ways you can be harmed. If it's serious, objective damage, you may need to seek recourse.

Moral evaluation of others

The primary concern of ethics is how to choose from the available alternatives. There is another important question it covers, which people often forget is distinct from the first: how to evaluate the actions of others. Doing that involves considerations beyond the first question. On the one hand, you don’t have as much knowledge of others as you do of yourself, and their mistakes affect themselves more than you. It would be inappropriate to dictate their lives with as much detail as you make choices for yourself. Except with people you’re close to, your main concern is their effect on others (including you), not on their own lives.

While you’re evaluating people’s actions, they evaluate yours. Both are necessary. Jesus said in Matthew Chapter 7, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged,” which is absurd. People have to judge others if they want to avoid being victimized and mistreated. His next sentence makes more sense: “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” This is the principle of consistency. Whatever standard you apply to others applies to you as well.

The principle of consistency can be put the other way around: Whatever you allow to yourself, you have to allow to others. If you give yourself a license to beat others up, you can expect them to try to turn the tables on you. You can be stricter with yourself than with others, since you know yourself better and take the consequences, but being stricter with others than with yourself makes you a hypocrite in their eyes.

A possible objection to this is that human societies have generally been hierarchical. There are people with

more power and privilege, often with a ruler or tyrant at the top, and others who are expected to obey and render service. These societies are often stable, sometimes lasting for hundreds or thousands of years. They rely on moral asymmetry: “I can do things to you which you may not do to me.” Even in democratic societies, people in government and law enforcement can do things to people which others can’t. Does this mean that there can be one set of principles for judging “me” and another for “you”?

The answer is that an inconsistency which happens a lot is still an inconsistency. People can enter into asymmetric agreements for mutual benefit, such as “You do work, and I pay you.” In such cases, both parties are acting on the same principles. But when it becomes “You serve me because you’re you and I’m me,” it has no foundation beyond the ability to impose one’s will on others. The underlying principle is that of superior force.

Most people lose under such a system. Even the rulers enjoy only a relative advantage; tyrannical empires tend to stagnate, and the rulers may well enjoy a lower standard of living than they would in a freer society. All I can say is that it’s a deficiency of well-being which humans have often been inclined to. It’s like bad health habits (such as consuming too many calories) that keep cropping up, no matter how much harm they do. Tyrants train their subjects to accept them and even to love them.

Oppressive rulers generally live in a precarious position, with others looking to push them off their thrones. More important, power as a primary goal isn’t conducive to the health of the spirit, even for those who have it. To reach it, you have to stab other people’s backs while watching yours. If you’re just handed power, as in a hereditary monarchy, it depends on what you do with it. A king who exercises absolute power in a benevolent way doesn’t exemplify the best kind of government, but I can believe such a king could be happy. One who uses the throne to grab ever-increasing power and wealth, though, is constantly at war with his subjects and has to be wary of his lieutenants. For what? What is the personal benefit of keeping people in bondage?

Survival at any cost?

Does the goal of the health of the spirit imply seeking to survive above all else and always minimizing risks? The analogy to physical health suggests that it might. For any individual, actions which lead to a longer life are considered more healthful than those that lead to dying sooner. Sometimes this goes to absurd lengths, such as keeping a vegetative body alive when there’s no hope of regaining consciousness.

But the right-to-die movement has challenged this idea in physical health, and the question is even more complicated for the health of the spirit. If the health of either goes negative and can’t recover, maintaining it may be a mistake. Just to be clear, these situations are rare. I’m definitely not suggesting anyone should commit suicide over a bad stretch in life.

But there’s an important difference in ethical values. They’re long-term values. Being unwilling to take any risks to defend them leads a person to a gradual process of surrender. A long life spent escaping all risks isn’t a better one than one spent upholding one’s values at some risk. The latter may be shorter, but it might not be. Either way, it’s a more satisfying life.

For example, let’s say you’re in a minority group which the people in your vicinity often mistreat. You can be constantly subservient and apologetic, trying not to give people any excuse to hurt you. Or you can stand up for your dignity, possibly exposing yourself to physical attacks. The first strategy might let you live longer, but the second leads to a life which is more worth living.

This doesn’t mean being reckless. If you were a Jew in Nazi Germany, the only prudent thing would be to hide. But even there, you’d find ways to preserve whatever values you could privately, even at some risk. Physical survival with nothing to value has no point.

There are cases where you must take a risk because it's your job and you agreed to do it. If you voluntarily accept a certain level of risk as a firefighter, a health care worker, or even a race car driver, then you have to do it. Accepting a role that involves risk and then refusing to take it is a breach of honesty with yourself and others. That kind of life is a fraud.

If you've been tricked into accepting risks you didn't know of, or if the risk is senseless and doesn't lead to any good result, that's a different matter. The value in an agreement is some good it aims to achieve. If it achieves nothing and the risk is significant, there's no obligation to be stupid. If you get hired for a job and discover you're expected to defraud customers or torture prisoners, going along would be tantamount to diving into a sewer, even apart from the risk.

Sam Harris's theories

If you've read Sam Harris's *The Moral Landscape*, you'll note some similarities between his approach and mine. I didn't derive anything from that book, which I hadn't read before I wrote the bulk of this essay. On some points I strongly disagree with him. He starts out making basically the same point I have made:

> Once we see that a concern for well-being (defined as deeply and as inclusively as possible) is the only intelligible basis for morality and values, we will see that there *must* be a science of morality, whether or not we ever succeed in developing it.

The last qualification is unnecessary. We don't know everything there is to know, but we certainly know (as he shows in many examples) that some actions are beneficial and others self-destructive.

He goes wrong in saying that the "interchangeability of perspective" is a norm of morality. More precisely, he uses this idea in two different meanings. He is correct that the same *principles* must apply to everyone. That's the principle of consistency, which I mentioned earlier. However, in pursuing your goals, you aren't interchangeable with other people. It makes a difference, for example, whether you get paid for your work or someone else collects the payment for your efforts.

He rejects that difference:

> Most of us spend some time over the course of our lives deciding how (or whether) to respond to the fact that other people on earth needlessly starve to death. Most of us also spend some time deciding which delightful foods we want to consume at home and in our favorite restaurants. Which of these projects absorbs more of your time and material resources on a daily basis? If you are like most people in the developed world, such a comparison will not recommend you for sainthood.

It's telling that Harris reverts to religious terminology here. A couple of paragraphs later, he applies the same standard to himself:

> "I have no doubt that I am less good than I could be. Which is to say, I am not living in a way that truly maximizes the well-being of others."

Why doesn't he live that way? He draws some comparisons to the difficulty of quitting smoking and other bad habits. But giving up smoking is hard because things will get worse before they get better. Giving up half one's time and resources to reducing world poverty would leave him permanently worse off. It's easy to suspect he doesn't do it because he knows it would reduce his well-being.

The "interchangeability of perspective" principle is unworkable and self-destructive. We are each individual living beings, and we have to concern ourselves principally with our own lives. To do otherwise disconnects

cause from effect. In a world built on this principle, people's actions would have little bearing on their material well-being. On the mental level, it would leave people feeling they're simultaneously servants to others and claimants on them. That's not a recipe for feeling in harmony with the universe.

I was glad to see Harris finding the same starting point I did, and many of his examples are good, but I'm afraid he went badly off-track. It's not that we should each be concerned *only* with our own welfare, but we all have to start there. We can place a very high value on the people around us, but that value comes from their connection to us.

We can experience strong feelings of sympathy for complete strangers as a result of an abstract principle; for example, I feel indignation at the way China is treating Hong Kong in 2021. But I'm not planning to go there and fight for the city's freedom. I wouldn't be effective if I tried. But if someone I love experienced similar treatment, I'd go to great lengths to fight the outrage.

Religious ethics

I should include a few words about religion-based ethics. The idea here is that what is right and wrong is determined by God. For this discussion, let's assume that there is a God giving commandments and we know what they are. That's already problematic, considering how many religions claim to give the true word of God, but let's assume we know one of them is right.

One version of this is that you'll be rewarded in Heaven if you do as God says and be punished in Hell if you don't. But this isn't ethics, it's just motivation by reward and punishment. It's like living in a surveillance state where the authorities know everything you do and assign you a social credit score. If there's a God who tells you what to do, if you can figure out what He wants, and if you think you'll be rewarded or punished accordingly — and those are all huge ifs — then it makes sense not to get Him mad at you. But this doesn't establish whether His wishes are good or bad. If He tells you to murder the entire population of a city, right down to the children, then you have to decide whether to risk His wrath by not doing it. (According to the Book of Joshua, He did exactly that on multiple occasions.)

A variation on this is that whatever He wants is right because He made every detail of the universe, so it's His toy to play with however he likes. If He wants to torture us for all eternity, it's OK because He made us in the first place. The only ethical concern this raises is the implications of trying to placate an all-powerful, sadistic monster. If you obey, you give in to madness. If you resist, you burn in Hell. Ethics can't give any answers in such a nightmare situation.

Fortunately, there's no evidence that the creator of the universe, if there is one, is obsessed with our thoughts and actions and wants to control them with bribes and threats. There's no evidence that any holy book expresses God's true will. Enough on this subject.

The "little voice" theory

Just for completeness, I decided to look up the idea that a little voice in our heads tells us what's right. I've never taken it seriously. Doing what voices in your head tell you is schizophrenia, not ethics. But a Web search suggests that it's a surprisingly common notion. The examples I've found are incoherent variations on irrationalism. The idea is "Thinking will lead you astray; act on your emotions."

Decisions based only on emotions are never good ones, even if they lead by chance to the right actions. Often they lead to anger and violence or fear and surrender. The "little voice" is often the voice of traditional prejudices, especially the prejudices of one's parents.

There's no need to refute this notion in detail, but it's common enough that it needed mentioning.

The evolutionary theory of ethics

Some people try to counter ethics by commandment with ethics by evolution. An article on the website of the Center for Humans and Nature, "The Evolution of Ethics," discusses this idea. It distinguishes between to questions:

> Is the *capacity for ethics*—the proclivity to judge human actions as either right or wrong—determined by the biological nature of human beings? And are the systems or *codes of ethical norms* accepted by human beings biologically determined?

The first question easily gets an affirmative answer. If we didn't have a capacity for ethics, the issue wouldn't arise. The evidence so far indicates that we're the only species that can consider ethics abstractly. Other species can be helpful or hostile, cooperative or strictly independent, but there's no evidence that chimps or dolphins can ponder ethical systems and consider them valid or invalid.

But the idea that particular ethical ideas are the result of biological evolution can't be defended. We have inclinations which result from evolutionary selection. People who routinely rob and murder their neighbors become outcasts and don't reproduce. However, we can't equate an evolved inclination with a moral principle.

Professor Michael Klenk takes a more cautious approach in his "Evolution and Ethics":

> We have seen that there are evolutionary explanations for why it would, e.g., seem to us that stealing is usually wrong. But it's possible that we could think that stealing is wrong, even if it is not, i.e., even if that belief is not made true by a moral fact. Evolution could cause us to hold useful beliefs that are not true.

But what are these beliefs? We come up against the basic question again of what it means for actions to be right or wrong. What I'd say is that evolution gives us the capacity for responses that give strength to ethical judgments. We feel pride or guilt at our own actions and admiration or disapproval of what others do. But these emotions aren't the basis of ethical values in themselves. Sometimes our ethical judgments conflict with them.

Suppose, for example, that you learn that a member of your family is a murderer. You struggle with yourself about whether to report her to the police. You finally decide that you have to, and you make the phone call while feeling tremendous guilt about it. This guilt could be considered evolutionary in origin. We've evolved to protect our family members against outsiders. Such feelings of obligation helped our ancestors to survive and reproduce. But whether putting family first is invariably the ethically right action is a different question. Feelings and even what we call "conscience" aren't necessarily reliable ethical guides.

Many of us are inclined to treat outsiders with suspicion and hostility and to follow a leader into war with an outside group. This is the tribalist response. In a primitive society, it often helped groups of people to survive against hostile groups. Perhaps because of evolution, people often feel an obligation to serve.

Is there any basis for regarding cooperation as an ethical value but tribalism as not? Only if we have some prior standard of what's ethical and what isn't. But this means that evolution isn't a source of moral values. It's likely to promote values which are conducive to life and happiness more often than ones that lead to death and misery, since anti-survival traits tend to get eliminated.

But we can't conclude that an evolutionary trait must be ethically good, any more than we can conclude that

a vestigial organ promotes our physical well-being. What was valuable for most of human history, i.e., the Stone Age, isn't necessarily valuable today. Evolutionary theory may explain why ethical principles have such a strong hold on us, but it doesn't help us to reach ethical conclusions.

The cultural theory of ethics

After knocking down ethical theories based on authority and intuition, many will proclaim that ethics is the product of cultures. But this has all the failings of the other theories, and it's worse in that it's seriously inconsistent.

Cultures have had widely different values and prohibitions. If we take them as ethically valid for that culture, then an equally wide range of ethical systems are all simultaneously true. In Alabama in 1850, slavery was "right" and abolitionism was "wrong." In England at the same time, slavery was wrong. In America in 1900, it was right (under some circumstances) to punch a person who insulted you. Today it's not. Today in some countries, it's right to make women wear extremely concealing garments, while doing that is wrong in other countries.

Michael Shermer presents the cultural theory in *Why People Believe Weird Things*:

> Morals do not exist in nature and thus cannot be discovered. In nature there are only actions — physical actions, biological actions, human actions. Humans act to increase their happiness, however they personally define it. Their actions become moral or immoral only when someone else judges them as such. Thus, morality is strictly a human creation, subject to all sorts of cultural influences and social constructions, just as other human creations are. ...
>
> Male ownership of females, for example, was once thought to be immoral and is now thought to be moral. The change happened not because we have discovered that this is immoral but because our society (thanks primarily to the efforts of women) has realized that women should have rights and opportunities denied to them when they are in bondage to males.

This implies that right and wrong in ethics have no meaning other than the standards of a culture. But Shermer isn't consistent. He talks about "realizing" that women "should" have rights. What is there to realize, if "should" means only what a culture prefers?

The problem starts with his statement that "actions become moral or immoral only when someone else judges them." This centers ethics not in making choices but in evaluating other people's choices. Nothing good can come of that approach. We need to judge the actions of others for the sake of our well-being, but that's less important than choosing and evaluating our own actions. If someone tells you that what you're doing is wrong, the final judgment has to be yours. Otherwise you're just a pawn.

By the cultural theory of ethics, anyone who challenges current norms is in the wrong. If you lived in Germany in 1938, defending Jews would be wrong. If you're in some fundamentalist Muslim countries today, opposing compulsory burkas is wrong. "Just following orders" is right. "Good" and "conformist" are synonyms.

Cultural norms have no necessary connection to ethical principles. The cultural theory is really a variation of the divine-voice theory, with society substituting for God. It's a result of not breaking free from the "thou shalt" view of ethics.

The issue of evil

Some people take pleasure in hurting others and acquiring power over them. I've encountered some of them. Do they constitute a counterexample to the principles I've discussed?

In most cases, I think they'd be happier if they changed to living honest, productive lives. Most people who adopt destructive lifestyles sink into them a step at a time rather than being born sadists. But let's suppose some people can't find any closer approximation to happiness than delight at the pain of their victims. If that's true, then they can't find the health of their spirit in self-awareness, honesty, productivity, or benevolence. They're evil at the core.

That doesn't mean I have to approve of them. A wild animal might find satisfaction and sustenance in killing and eating people, but I still have to protect myself if it gets close to me. If it wanders into town and endangers my neighbors, I should warn them. If it's necessary to use force to stop such an animal, or such a person, from injuring others, then that's the right thing to do.

The existence of abnormal minds doesn't negate ethical principles. Apart from essentially evil people, there are unfortunates who can't understand anything but the immediate moment. The idea of consequences has no meaning to them. There is very little they can do on their own, either good or bad, and they need the help of others just to exist. The study of ethics can't mean anything to them. Fortunately, such a condition is rare. Ethics applies to beings that can take the long view and seek happiness. That's the large majority of us.

Far more common are people who are mentally lazy, who try to live by pretenses, who let other people tell them what to think and do, who value momentary satisfaction over persistent happiness. They get less from life than they could, by their own choice. They can always turn around and improve, if they want to.

The individual in society

One person usually can't do much to change the world. The attempt to reshape society to a moral ideal usually leads to frustration. A better approach is to seek out like-minded, rational, benevolent people while minimizing contact with irrational, hostile ones. It isn't possible to do this all the time, of course. We're all stuck much of the time with nasty people in positions of power. Taking them on frontally doesn't work, at least without a careful choice of battles and tactics. Trying to persuade people who don't want to be persuaded helps no one.

"Like-minded" in this context is more a matter of integrity than agreement on every issue. The people worth trusting and spending time with are those who earn your trust.

We can find ways to spend more time with people who are worthwhile and less with those who are unpleasant. We can try to set boundaries with the less pleasant ones, telling them what we won't accept. We can do this only within limits, but it's a more practical approach than fighting windmills.

What promotes the health of the spirit?

To recapitulate: Ethics as I understand it is the science of making choices that promote the health of the spirit, or to put it another way, to achieve long-term happiness. It's not about commandments, whether from God, society, or the Categorical Imperative. A valid ethical statement is a conditional, "if-then" statement. The connection between the "is" and the "ought" is that some choices increase happiness while others are harmful. Choose self-destruction and misery and you don't need ethics.

What thoughts and actions lead to having a healthy spirit? I've already talked about this some. Here are some

specific points which I consider important.

- **Self-awareness.** This has many aspects. Knowing your strengths and flaws is an essential part of it. Any pretense about what you're capable of or what mistakes you've made is harmful. You need to be aware not just of your persistent characteristics but also your current state. Hiding your thoughts from yourself causes damage. If you make good choices, self-awareness is a positive experience.

- **Honesty and rationality.** I put these two together as closely related aspects. Honesty begins with honesty to yourself. It requires recognizing what's true about yourself, others, and the world. Rationality is the tool by which you accomplish this. Once you choose to be honest with yourself, honesty with others follows naturally. You deal with the world as it is and recognize that pretending otherwise can't help you.

- **Holding and pursuing goals.** I've found from experience that if I don't have something to aim for, I need to find something, or I get bored and frustrated. Most people seem to be this way. This leaves room for many kinds of goals. Discovering scientific principles, learning a language, advancing in a career, and living a life of contemplation are legitimate goals. Some goals are destructive by their nature, though. Pursuing a goal which is basically external rather than personal is harmful in the long run. This includes being powerful or admired for its own sake, or winning the lottery. The pursuit should be something which gives satisfaction in itself, not just after it's successful.

- **Good will.** It's easier to live among others when you have a positive outlook toward them and gain satisfaction from their happiness. Treating other people as adversaries to defeat leads to a frustrating view of life.

The first three of these correspond fairly closely to Rand's triad of virtues: pride, rationality, and productivity respectively. I've added a fourth, largely because of David Kelley's discussions of the issue. It's what he calls benevolence. Rand wrote approvingly of the "benevolent sense of life" but didn't list benevolence as a virtue. Some of her followers have argued it shouldn't be listed as one. But I don't think it's possible to be happy without actively pursuing a positive outlook on the world. The good is more important than the bad.

I know that what I've said here goes against most of the Western philosophical tradition, yet it strikes me as plain sense. The problem is that people are stuck in the "thou shalt" framework. If you stop thinking about ethics that way, everything starts to make more sense.

Expanded from a 2011 essay
Last revised April 29, 2021