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## **The Necessity of Considering Folk Ethics in Moral Philosophy\***

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### **Abstract**

*Contemporary ethics and moral philosophy need a kind of revision due to their negligence in human moral capacities, ordinary life, and humans' expectations of ethics. The assumptions and presuppositions of ethics result in their current unsatisfactory status. In this paper, we first explore and criticize those presuppositions. Then, instead of introducing ideal presuppositions of ethics, we introduce folk ethics and its components in order to show that contemporary ethics and moral philosophy should always begin with folk ethics. The most important advantage of folk ethics is its realistic foundation, which in turn will produce better results.*

**Keywords:** folk ethics – moral philosophy – moral capacities – virtue ethics – consequentialism

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## **Introduction**

Throughout the history of philosophy, some philosophers have changed mainstream philosophy, such as Immanuel Kant. Kant's Copernican revolution brought about a widespread change in epistemology, which effects are observable in contemporary philosophy. The basic foundation of that revolution was that for knowledge acquisition, the mental structure of the thinker comes prior to the external facts. In other words, in analyzing knowledge, we must first start from the subject or agent of knowledge and then explore the external world. Kant showed that philosophers have been misled by analyzing knowledge and establishing its rules from the wrong point. This revolution brought epistemology into a new fruitful period. It seems that contemporary moral philosophy, such as 18<sup>th</sup> century epistemology, needs a kind of Copernican revolution, but vice versa. We should remember that the "Copernican revolution" is only a metaphor, because this kind of Copernican revolution is in fact anti-Kantian, anti-utilitarian, and even anti-Copernican. Contrary to Kant, in moral philosophy, we need external facts come prior to theoretical speculation.

What is the main characteristic of this revolution? As we said before, Kant changed the epistemological starting point. Now, by deliberation of moral philosophy, we can assert that we need the ethical revolution. Explaining this change, along with its advantages, form the central part of this paper. Because of its rational and philosophical roots throughout the history of philosophy, moral philosophy has been based on assumptions and presuppositions, some of which are my issue in this paper. We defend this revolution by returning to folk ethics and showing its main characteristics. Since it determines our limitations and boundaries, it is essential to know folk ethics and take it as a starting point of every moral theorizing. Our concern in this paper is the practical aim of changing ethical subjects for the better i.e., improving their moral standards and not the theoretical aim of construing a system of ethical principles and of justifying that system

In the first step, we consider certain presuppositions of current moral philosophy, which seem to be in contradiction to folk ethics. Due to this contradiction, the effectiveness of current moral philosophy is minimal. In the folk ethics, as objective phenomena, it is difficult tracing such presuppositions.

## **The presuppositions of current moral philosophy**

### ***The purpose of ethics***

It seems that moral philosophers implicitly assume a noble moral purpose for man. They portray a prior ideal moral being and expect ordinary people to behave according to that ideal picture. Although it is obvious in Kant's moral philosophy, we may also recognize such approaches in other moral philosophers who speculate on moral philosophy. Although Kant rejects this normative and prophetic duty as his purpose, his moral system implicitly has such an end. It seems that not only is this judgment true in the case of Kant, but also it is partly true in the case of other mainstream approach, i.e., consequentialism; though the later one has some similarities with folk ethics.

**Disregard for people's expectations of morality**

Why in the realm of moral philosophy is the common morality among people of little importance? Why do moral philosophers pay little attention to ordinary life and its moral aspects? And why do they never take serious the questions: how do people interact with each other, and how are their moral boundaries drawn? In the absence of such an approach, it seems that moral philosophy has been converted into something like a religion, which expects an absolute obedience and submission, regardless of the people who are obliged to perform its duties. Some philosophers have pointed to similarities between moral philosophy and religion. (See Flanagan et al., 2007: 2). Of course, religions generally observe peoples abilities in their injunctions.

Are there any moral philosophers who ask about people's expectations of ethics? Of course, moral philosophers take social problems seriously (for example, we know that Kant was so concerned with the end of the French Revolution), but in their moral philosophy, their beginning point is neither individuals nor their real lives.

**Folk ethics and the disregard for it**

People in ordinary life make moral judgments and classify people based on moral aspects without any knowledge about ethics and moral philosophy. I call it folk ethics. Before considering accurately what folk ethics is, it is important to note that current moral philosophy, similar to religion, aim to promote a certain level of morality in society, thus they have nothing to do with folk ethics. The starting point of moral philosophy is philosophical assumptions which are usually a priori. Even, this is true in the case of utilitarianism, for Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill justify hedonism on the basis of philosophical assumptions. In the other words, they take for the granted that people are hedonist, without any field study. Besides that, this central presupposition that humans are moral beings is not evident, but should be established by empirical methods.

Thus, it seems that to observe folk ethics requires that moral philosophers take only those presuppositions which correspond to what ordinary people believe concerning morality. In short, the moral philosopher should first give ear to ordinary people's moral speeches, discussions and judgments.

**The unique explanation**

The major schools of moral philosophy usually exaggerate one aspect of morality and presuppose that moral judgments are possible only by one criterion. For example, it is a common belief between moral philosophers that deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics are not consistent and only one approach is the case in the normative ethics. But it may be found by experience that in the ordinary life a mixture of criteria is allowed.

It seems that these presuppositions are wrong with contemporary academic ethical discussions. The right starting point is to leave them for a while and start with exploring what folk considers as morality, that is, folk

ethics. Of course there are exceptions to the prevalent approach: virtue ethics of Rosalind Hursthouse, Christine Swanton, Linda Zagzebski, and the rule-consequentialism and moral contractualism defended in Derek Parfit and Derek Phillips. But it seems that they are not ready to start with folk ethics. Generally there is a gap between academic ethical discussions and everyday life and such discussions confined to academic boundaries. What is the main instructor of moral beliefs for people? Moral philosophers or other instructors, such as custom, mass media, and family?

### **Folk ethics and its components?**

The term “folk ethics” is not very common in ethics terminology, but by concentrating on folk epistemology or folk psychology, it will be possible to develop and understand some points in folk ethics. Alvin Goldman points to Wilfrid Sellars’ definition of folk psychology as one in which “mental states could be viewed as theoretical states of a commonsense psychological theory” (Goldman, 2006: 7). According to Goldman, folk psychology is a conceptual framework which ordinary people use in the predication of both their own and other’s behaviors and mental states. What Mike Martin defines as ordinary ethics is close to folk ethics. He says that ordinary ethics is the set of standards which people use in their ordinary lives (Martin, 1981: 631). Thus, we can say that folk ethics consists of rules, methods and criteria which people apply in their moral judgments, both in the morality of agents and actions.

On the other hand, as we said, moral philosophy has ignored folk ethics. In fact, according to its ideal presupposition, moral philosophy wants to move beyond folk ethics to construct a new moral system for people. In other words, the very goal of moral philosophy is to move from an existent unfavorable situation to a non-existent favorable situation. But there, we face an important question: Is it possible to pass beyond folk ethics before understanding what is it?

We attempt to show that the answer of this question is “no”. Folk ethics, like language, historically has been created according to the needs and abilities of people and societies, and therefore, it contains a great deal of delicacy and complexity. Therefore, every moral system should observe human moral needs and capacities; however, famous moral theories rarely have such characteristics. In order to comprehend folk ethics, we can start from human moral capacities.

### **Human moral capacities**

Suppose, from a moral point of view, someone’s behaviors are generally judged as immoral. However, we find him somehow to be reliable, and we continue to interact with him. This case provides us with an important question: why do we keep this relationship even though we know he behaves immorally in some cases? The answer is not so complicated: we have no other choice! Society consists of such persons. Individuals do not obey moral rules absolutely, but rather by degrees. Therefore, in attributing the term “moral” to individuals, we consider this fact, which is the most

important element of folk ethics. During this time, we find out that human moral capacities and abilities are limited. However, this important discovery is almost absent in moral philosophy. Freud and modern psychology showed that human moral capacity is less than what philosophers generally think.

As we will argue, the rules of folk ethics are so utilitarian and functionalist that they therefore are more based on human moral abilities and capacities rather than ideal moral ends. Nowadays, according to psychological findings, we know that human moral capacities are more restricted than in comparison to what Socrates, Aristotle and Kant maintained. The picture of an ideal moral man was portrayed by these philosophers prior to their enactment of moral rules based on that picture. To look at ethics from a new perspective, it is essential to know human moral capacities and limitations; this will be possible only through empirical investigations.

### **Fuzzy aspect of morality**

Suppose that you want to buy a bottle of milk from a seller in the supermarket. Clearly you trust him; she is implicitly supposed to be truthful and honest. In this case you do not research any more. However, when you want to buy an expensive house, the seller's honesty becomes more important. As another example, suppose you want to marry her! In this case, you carefully examine her honesty and morality. Thus, by increasing the importance of the cases, you examine the morality of people more carefully. We do so, because we know that people behave according to moral rules in degrees. Likewise, our moral judgments, too, are hierarchical.

How did this form of moral judgment become prevalent in society? How do we learn to judge people and their behaviors? How do we adopt to the prevailing complicated moral rules? Going back to your childhood, you may remember your dualistic and inflexible moral judgments. From a child's perspective, if a person only does one immoral act, that is enough to consider the actor immoral. For every child, there are only two kinds of people: good or bad. As the child grows older, this dualistic viewpoint transforms into a more fuzzy perspective. Here, fuzzy perspective means the hierarchical aspect of moral judgments in folk ethics. In ordinary life our moral judgments are confined not to good or bad, right and wrong; but we have many degrees of them.

The mechanism of such transformation is quite complicated and mainly belongs to psychology. Suffice it to say, such transformation is inevitable, and folk ethics demands it. What should moral philosophy learn from the fuzzy aspect of folk ethics? This point implies the social aspect of ethics. That is why from a functionalist point of view, folk ethics appeared in order to regulate social interactions in human society. I take this as the essential function of ethics. Some moral philosophers and psychologists insist on this function, too (see: Karlsson, 2012). Therefore, the fuzzy aspect of folk ethics improves its function in society.

So far, it has become apparent that folk ethics is a realistic one, because it does not exclude the limitations of human morality. We know that nature

rarely creates a moral hero. The efficacy of folk ethics results from its realistic aspect. From a psychological perspective, the less our moral expectation from people, the more possible and probable their moral behavior is. In other words, if we introduce strict moral rules, the probability that people would follow them will decrease. In the moral test taken by current moral theories, no one can pass, because the test is too difficult and ignorant of human moral capacities and abilities. In folk ethics, people hope to observe moral rules, because those rules are not so strong. If you know that you can never behave in accordance with some moral system or theory, your will and motivation will decrease. For example, knowing that if you lie only one or two times you will go to hell or be called an immoral person, it will be difficult to encourage morality. From a utilitarian perspective, I think that this aspect of folk ethics totally increases both people's and, in turn, society's moral level.

### **Flexibility**

Folk ethics, due to its flexibility, leads man, irrelevant to his degree of virtue, to be a moral person. Suppose Jack is a trustful, honest, dutiful and patriotic person, but somehow proud and arrogant; according to folk ethics, he is still a moral person. If people know that, by possessing many virtues yet lacking others they are still considered to be in the moral people camp, they will observe morality more than people who believe that in all circumstances they are imperfect and failed. This is also considered a utilitarian explanation. Let us take an example of two individuals who use offensive language. In the case of my home's mason, this level of immorality is not a big deal; however, this same immorality in the case of my son's teacher is a thorny issue. This indicates that some virtues and vices are proportional to their context of moral judgment. Thus, the list of virtues and vices is dependent on the situation in which it occurs.

Now, we should explore more accurately how human beings make their moral judgments in their real lives? I think that there must be a mechanism for moral judgment in ordinary life which people follow. Alvin Goldman's virtue epistemology has inspired me in drawing this mechanism (Goldman, 1992: 156-161).

### **Adjusting virtue ethics and consequentialism**

In order to show that adjusting different normative theories in folk ethics is not impossible, we can consider the following hypostatical outline. But it is not unlikely other factors, such as emotivism, subjectivism, etc., contribute in folk ethics. Its validity is dependent to empirical studies about the folk ethics. Contrary to this hypothesis, Jesse Prinz suggests that according to his empirical studies, relativist sentimentalism is the case.(Prinz, 1995)

However, It has been said that virtue ethics "may, initially, be identified as the one that emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to the approach which emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or that which emphasizes the consequences of actions (consequentialism)" (Hursthouse, 2016). But I think that any moral theory, if considered alone, is incomplete;

we should assemble and combine theories, as we have in epistemology. William Alston showed that each of the current epistemic theories, if considered alone, is insufficient. However, altogether, a combination of one or more epistemic theories can explain any different situation (See: Alston, 2005). It seems that folk ethics is based on various criteria. From this perspective, even Kant's strict moral system is relevant to folk ethics, although to a lesser extent than utilitarianism and virtue ethics.

In the most recent two centuries, in normative ethics, the main controversy was between Kant's deontological theory and consequentialism. In recent decades, again virtue ethics is taken into consideration. It seems that folk ethics, which, I think, is the combination of virtue ethics and consequentialism, is in contrast with Kant's deontology. People judge according to a virtues and vices list – a list based on good and bad consequences that leads to titles, which are categorized as virtues and vices. But, in folk ethics virtue ethics is dominant, because people judge actions on the basis of an agent's status and context in which they are. An agent's status is a part of moral judgment. Consequentialism enters in the construction of virtue lists. But if you ask me “why virtue ethics is preferable?”, I only can say although this is my hypothesis and its validity is unknown, in moral philosophy theories inspired virtue ethics are close to folk ethics rather than other theories.

People dependent on their social context, natural factors, heritage and the like, have a list of moral virtues and vices. The list of virtues includes veracity, loyalty, humility, etc. And in the list of vices, we find lying, betrayal, arrogance, etc. Clearly, the contents of such lists, which are obtained by utilitarian criteria, are different from one person and culture to another. It means that efficacy and the good consequences of some virtue in a specific culture places it in that list. Keep in mind that what people do is not in complete accordance with those lists, but to some degree. Also, folk ethics implicitly presupposes that all the virtues and vices do not belong to one person, but, more or less, to everyone. This is another basic component in folk ethics. Aristotle thought that a complete set of virtues are the requirements of happiness. Despite Aristotle's realistic vision on ethics, his theory is too strict and idealistic. We know that no one is perfect nor a moral hero or moral saint, but almost everyone is imperfect; therefore, we have a partial list of virtues. Thus, for example, we obviously put the people who in 80% of cases are truthful in the group of morals. Of course, 80% is not a fixed percentage, but it rather depends on the context of moral judgment. It is necessary to confirm that the consequentialist criterion is not the exclusive way to determine virtues and vices, but is the principal one. It may be other factors to determine them.

Thus our hypothesis is that virtue ethics and consequentialism are adjustable. If you find this claim rubbish, we have four reasons for this. First, some scholars suggest that in Aristotle's virtue ethics, inspired Protagoras, the list of virtues reflects the current virtues of Athen. Those virtues had positive social consequences. Second, if it was possible adjusting virtue ethics and consequentialism in epistemology, as Goldman did, that would

not be impossible to do it in moral philosophy. Third, some scientific researches in neurosciences confirm moral virtues root in their social consequences. (For example, Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). Forth, As David Hume argued, virtues, such as honour friends, finally reduced to pleasure and pain, that is, good consequences: “The very essence of virtue, according to this hypothesis, is to produce pleasure. The virtue and vice must be part of our character in order to excite pride or humility.” (Hume, 2003: 211)

### **The outline of folk ethics**

From these visions we can formulate folk ethics as this:

Subject S is seen as a moral agent when he does act A in context C (or, Subject S in context C does the correct action A and is therefore praiseworthy), if:

S’s action A is proportional to C.

S in context C commonly, but not necessarily always, does act A.

Act A is involved in a virtue list accepted by S’s society or community.

Act A has certain benefits or good consequences for S’s society or community.

An action’s proportionality to context C means that to do act A is comparable with S’s status and capacities and also her society’s expectations. For example, the help of a very poor person to others, or his participation in some charity events, would not be considered as a virtue we expect him. However, in the case of a rich person, the same thing would be acceptable and thus a virtue. Suppose a careless man increases his discipline by 10%; obviously he is admirable. However, if an already well-disciplined person decreases his discipline by 10%, he deserves to be blamed.

This is only a hypostatical outline of folk ethics and not a rule to be followed by every one in every circumstance. Further empirical studies are required to test its validity and reliability. Also, we should not consider it as a rule followed by people explicitly, but it only portrays the general mechanism for folk ethics and therefore it is not an example of construing a system of ethical principles and of justifying that system.

### **Folk ethics and naturalized ethics**

Naturalized epistemology has broadened our horizons and propounded new discussions in epistemology. Naturalized ethics, too, could help us to capture better understanding of the nature of folk ethics, as long as it investigates moral aspects of everyday life by scientific methods. It should be noted that my interpretation of Copernican revolution does not correspond with Bynum’s naturalistic approach, although there are some similarities between them (Bynum, n.d) He basically tends to a scientific interpretation of ethics, the same as Jesse Prinz’s approach to naturalizing metaethics. He takes methodological naturalism to find out which type of metaethical theory is confirmed by psychology and empirical study (Prinz, 1995; Prinz, 2007). This is also true in the case of Zimmerman’s work (Zimmerman, 1980: 638-640). Although this problem is not our central concern, it is still very important if we want to discover the mechanism of folk ethics. Thus,



although in this paper ethics naturalization is not our concern, to know the nature of folk ethics requires scientific methods.

We do not suggest a peremptory submission to folk ethics. Instead, we would like to emphasize folk ethics as a starting point of moral philosophy and rely on science for some basic questions about human moral capacities and the mechanism(s) of folk ethics. At the same time, folk ethics should be studied as an empirical subject matter for psychologists. Moral philosophy is a field of study which has the least connection with science. But it seems that this should be changed.

### **From folk ethics to moral philosophy**

Folk ethics, as an objective phenomenon, has an important function in human social life. Moral philosophers, due to their ideal ends, attempt to repair and reform folk ethics by replacing it with a new rational moral system. I think this is a very fundamental mistake. As history testifies, folk ethics has very deep roots in human culture, and the desire to reform it is debatable. Therefore, it is necessary to change basic presuppositions and ends of moral philosophy. It must study folk ethics with the help of social sciences and moral psychology in order to find moral mechanisms. Finding moral and social mechanisms results in the promotion of society's moral status. Moral philosophers must remember that it would be much better to have a society composed of people who totally observe folk ethics, than a society composed of a minority who observes very strong moral rules and a majority who has no respect to formal moral rules because of their strong demands. Suffice to say that the possibility and efficacy of minimalistic morality is generally greater and better than extremist morality. But this is an important question whether folk ethics is a minimalistic one or not.

Of course, some moral philosophers implicitly use certain elements of folk ethics. For instance, when MacIntire maintains that the unity of virtues is invalid and for being happy it is not necessary to have all virtues (MacIntire, 2007), I think he adopts a realistic point of view concerning ethics, which is an essential element in folk ethics. Or, Rorty's criticism of Meta ethical systems, which insists on their neglect of ordinary life, is not irrelevant to our discussion (Rorty, 1999: 112).

As many philosophers outlined, moral philosophy, due to its conservative aspect, hardly accepts this revolution. But sooner or later, at least naturalistic approach will impose its will. It is time for moral philosophy to begin from the everyday life of human beings. As a pattern, we can point to some epistemologists who comprehend the importance of everyday life as the beginning point. Among them, Linda Zagzebski is the most famous. She reminds us that knowledge and cognition are not separable from everyday life (Zagzebski, 2009: 131-152). I think some artists have a better understanding of folk ethics. The Godfather, as a classic film, illustrates the mechanism of folk ethics very well.

### **Some objections**

Imagine a society that justifies discrimination against a minority – say for reasons of economy and social cohesion of the majority. Such discriminatory acts imply good consequences for the major part of the agent’s society to the detriment of the minority. Would the author accept this consequence? If so, then he or she is simply defending a version of consequentialism. If not, then he or she should specify why not – which indicates that more work is needed for defending or refining this definition. I have three answers to this objection. First, it has nothing to do with my claim. That counter example enters in the next clarifications. Our claim in this paper is preliminary. Second, if it was in folk ethics some kind of consequentialism, it would not be surprising. But, as it was shown, my claim is that folk ethics is not confined to consequentialism and other insights enter. Third, in the new approach to moral philosophy, which I call Copernican revolution, it is not permissible to assert counter examples before finding the nature of folk ethics through empirical studies.

Also, it may be said that can we really talk about folk-ethics: are there not always different sorts of folk ethics at the same time, according to the kinds of folk under consideration (in function of their different status, oppositions, etc.)? I think this objection implies to relativistic aspect of folk ethics. Here, too, we need empirical studies in order to determine whether there is a folk ethics or different sorts of folk ethics.

As another objection, it may be said that folk ethics, as we formulated, is far from accuracy. We say that folk ethics basically provides no direct measure or rule. But after gaining a deep insight into folk ethics, it would not be unlikely that the moral philosophy based on it expert rules. Here, what happens later and how moral philosopher inserts his expertise insights into folk psychology and ethic, is not my concern. Again, as we said, this is only an outline of folk ethics and further investigations are required to more clarifications.

It is likely that in folk ethics we find many contradictions. If so, the counter examples would not be good means in the hand of moral philosopher to reject folk ethics. I think if we gain a deep insight into folk ethics, then our appeal to counter examples will be ineffective, because, the dream of constituting a completely coherent moral system is an illusion. This research shows that to moderate the ideal of “to set (folk) ethics right” by philosophical investigations is inevitable.

### **Conclusions**

In short, folk ethics shows us our starting point in moral speculation as well as its boundaries and limitations. Thus, we suggest that these points should be noted in moral philosophy.

Moral philosophy should not emphasize rules, for folk ethics is not rule-utilitarianism and tends to judge according to context. Therefore, what we formulated above as folk ethics is in contrast with the spirit of folk ethics. Its roots in virtue ethics prevent it from becoming a rule-utilitarianism. When Rorty, in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, says that there is no need for rules in

ethics, it seems that he expresses one aspect of folk ethics. Thus, moral philosophy should pay attention to contextualism. Moral philosophy should embrace this idea that no single theory can explain ordinary people's moral judgments. Therefore, the combination of consequentialism and virtue ethics seems to be most suitable. The presuppositions of current moral philosophy are the main obstacles to fundamental change in the realm of morality. Thus, we should not place emphasis on them. Moral philosophy requires the help of moral psychology. This is the naturalized aspect of the future's moral philosophy.

To sum up, the Copernican revolution, which we defend, consists of paying attention to those points in every philosophical speculation concerning morality. I think moral philosophy is wholly the production of those philosophers who worry about morality and therefore consider minimalistic ethics as a threat. I am not an advocate for folk ethics, but suggest that every speculation in the field of moral philosophy, in the first step must observe folk ethics and instead of presenting idealistic rules, it must adopt a realistic approach.

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