

Morality in the making

Seeing reality as a creative endeavor trumps dogmatism

By Brian Henning

In the opening years of the new millennium, long-simmering conflicts have exploded into a rolling boil of fear, hostility and violence. Dogmatism is on the rise as moral superiority and righteousness replace compromise and consensus-building.

Whether we are talking about the war on terror or the much-touted culture wars that define the American political landscape, there is a move away from tolerance and appreciation of diversity and toward the ever-more-strident formulation of absolutist positions.

As the psychologist and philosopher William James said more than a century ago, the problem is that we are in a world where “every one of hundreds of ideals has its special champion already provided in the shape of some genius expressly born to feel it and to fight to death in its behalf.”

The force of this point was made brutally clear by the events of Sept. 11. Given a world fraught with conflict and tension, humanity does not need a moral philosophy that dogmatically advances absolute moral codes. Nor can it abandon a search for morality in favor of individual relativism. More than ever, what is needed is an ethic that is dynamic, fallible and situational.

This goal takes on added urgency when we consider environmental and social crises — such as overpopulation, deforestation, global warming and species extinction — that threaten not only human civilization but also the other vulnerable forms of life on this planet. If humans are to have any hope of reversing the potentially catastrophic destruction of our natural environment, their understanding of morality and ethics must undergo a dramatic transformation.

No longer can it be limited exclusively to those relations among human beings, or even those among sentient beings. Rather, morality must concern how humans ought to conduct themselves with every aspect of reality — from the most insignificant flicker of existence at the opposite end of the universe to complex humans themselves.

The paradox of morality

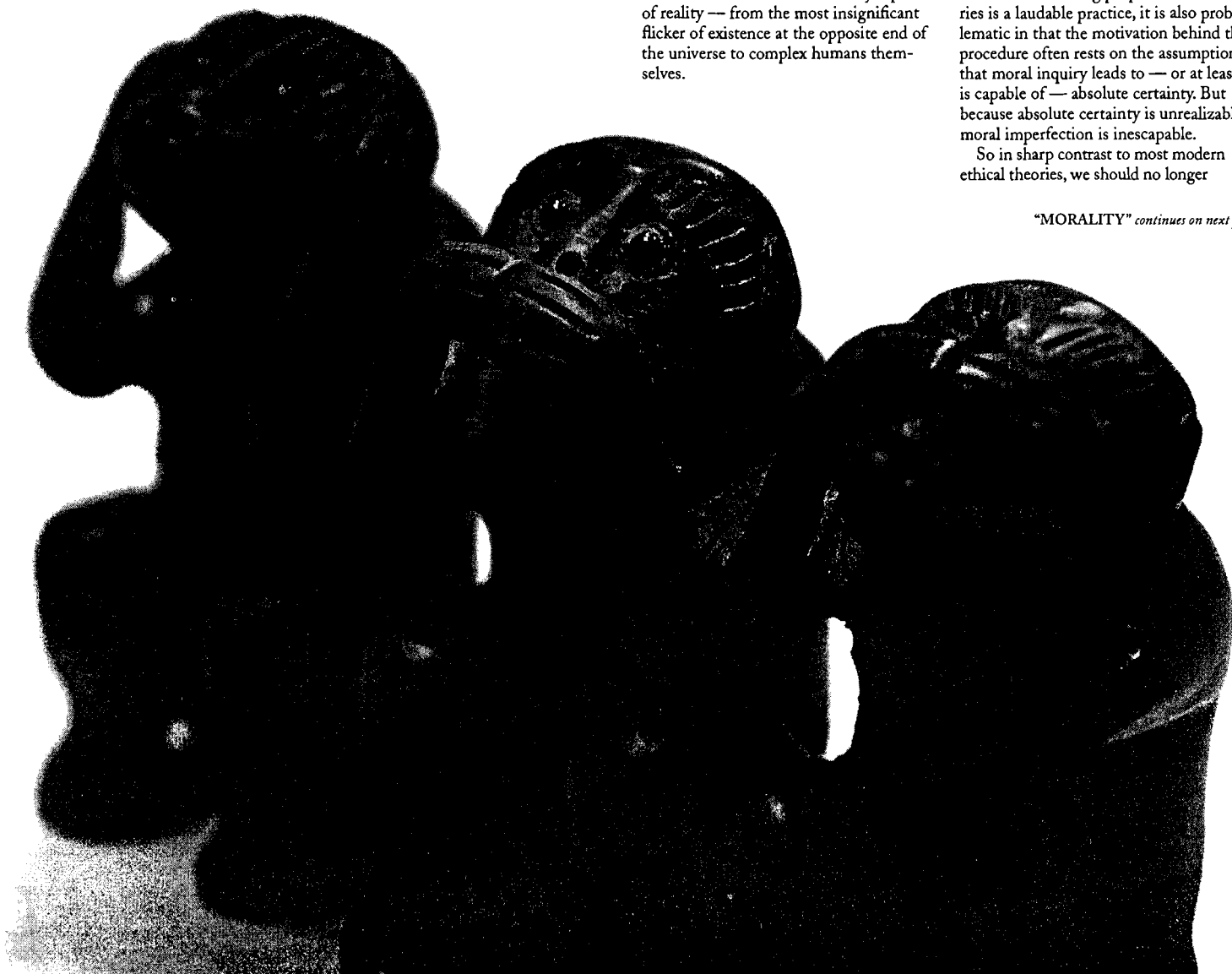
According to the dominant theories, the aim of morality is to construct abstract theories capable of determining what one ought to do in any moral conflict.

Thinking that rigid moral theories can provide a guaranteed path through life first fails to recognize the fallibility of human inquiry. Because morality has, like much of contemporary philosophy, become a game, people test ethical theories by posing various, often-exaggerated moral dilemmas — so-called “burning building” scenarios. If the theories can’t neatly resolve a given dilemma, they are rejected whole cloth.

And while testing proposed moral theories is a laudable practice, it is also problematic in that the motivation behind this procedure often rests on the assumption that moral inquiry leads to — or at least is capable of — absolute certainty. But because absolute certainty is unrealizable, moral imperfection is inescapable.

So in sharp contrast to most modern ethical theories, we should no longer

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conceive the task of moral philosophy as the construction of absolute and unchanging laws. We must acknowledge the limitations of moral philosophy imposed by the shortcomings of human inquiry and, consequently, no longer expect our moral theories to be capable of abstractly prescribing what ought or ought not to be done prior to a particular concrete situation.

As Aristotle recognized long ago, "Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject matter admits." Moral problems do not have indisputable answers existing prior to their solutions that we need only divine and then codify.

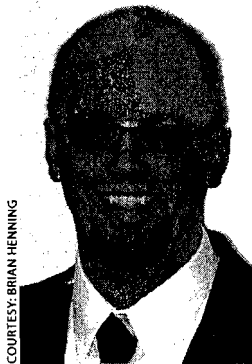
Modeling morality on science's methodology

Morality, like life, is inherently messy. Yet without qualification, the rejection of absolute moral codes is likely to be misunderstood as implying a gross relativism wherein each culture or individual decides what is right for them. Moral laws should not be rejected wholesale, but how their status is conceived should be dramatically revised.

In a sense, moral laws should be seen as analogous to physical laws.

Initially, this comparison may seem to imply the opposite of my intention. Indeed, for many, science epitomizes the pursuit of absolutely certain truths. Yet this interpretation embodies an inaccurate understanding of the nature of scientific

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Current position

Brian Henning is an assistant professor of philosophy at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Md.

Publications

Henning's recent book *The Ethics of Creativity: Beauty, Morality, and Nature in a Processive Cosmos* is featured here.

Background

After receiving a bachelor's degree from Seattle University,

Henning received a master of arts, a master of philosophy and a doctorate in philosophy, all from Fordham University in the Bronx, N.Y. In addition to his teaching position, Henning serves as associate director of the Society for the Study of Process Philosophies as well as co-director for the environmental studies minor program at Mount St. Mary's.

Family life

Henning is the happy father of two daughters — one is 3

years old and the other is six months old. He and his family have settled in Gettysburg, Pa., after living in Seattle and New York.

Keeping active

Before having children, Henning enjoyed hiking, camping, mountain biking and rock climbing but now admits to being more focused on getting more than a couple hours of sleep each night.

— Bethanie Edwards

theories. Of course, there is little doubt that many scientific theories possess a great many truths. It's not that one account may be truer — or more explanatorily adequate — than another but that any of these "truths" are of the sort that could be called "final." The comparison between moral and natural laws highlights the fact that moral inquiry is a form of inquiry in general, and all forms of inquiry are inherently fallible.

Accordingly, the laws of science are not infallible formulations immune to development or revision. Rather, they are exceedingly probable formulations of

observations. Scientists may still use the word "law," but few perceive laws as absolute formulations as, for example, Newton did. If the last century's scientific discoveries have taught us anything, it should be that the truths of science are limited.

Just as there is no final or absolute certainty in physics that allows one to make perfect predictions about future physical events, there is no final truth in ethics that allows one to dogmatically determine in advance the good in any particular situation. Just as scientists revise their conclusions based on new evidence, every person must continually and resolutely revise his or her moral conclusions in light of the goods we see and resist the temptation to codify these conclusions in absolute moral laws. New experiments may force the revision and reinterpretation of physical laws, and the emergence of new forms of social order will inevitably require the revision and refinement of moral laws. Thus, as the philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead once noted, the true foe of morality is not change, but "stagnation."

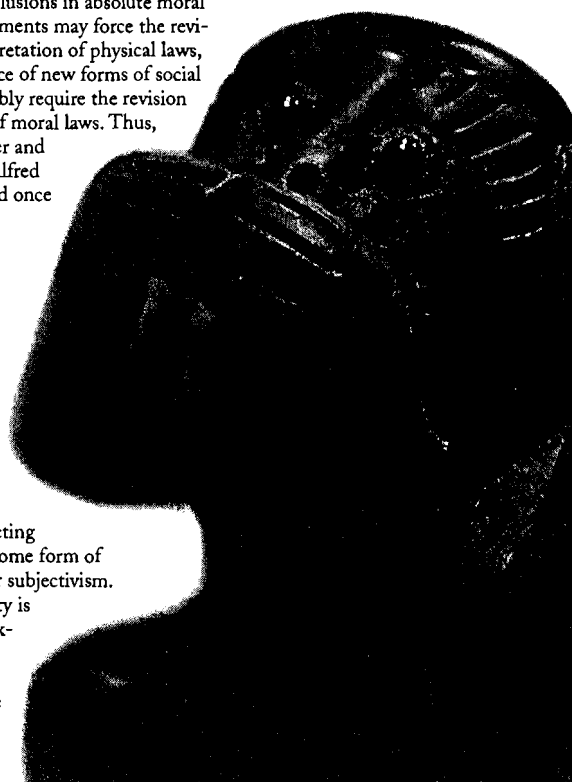
The relativistic deep end

In an effort to avoid moral dogmatism, we must be equally wary of embracing the opposite extreme and rejecting moral codes for some form of pure relativism or subjectivism. Although morality is always in the making, we must recognize that novel and intense experiences can only be achieved within a suf-

ficiently stable environment.

Law and order, for instance, are critical to the functioning of complex human communities. Yet all too often, the conservative becomes obstructionist, particularly in debates over morality. Whitehead has a unique way of putting this point: "It is true that the defense of morals is the battle cry which best rallies stupidity against change. Perhaps countless ages ago respectable amoebae refused to migrate from ocean to dry land — refusing in defense of morals." In attempting to defend absolute, unchanging moral laws, he goes on to argue, the "pure conservative is fighting against the essence of the universe."

To be adequate, therefore, morality



Ethically speaking

A look at the major ethical theories today

Ethics is the investigation of how we ought to live. Ethical theories identify moral guidelines to solve moral problems and help us to live together successfully. The orienting concern of ethics is widely debated, however. Here are brief descriptions of some dominant ethical theories:

- **Divine Command Ethics** — What God commands is good, and we ought to obey God's commands.
- **Ethical Relativism** — An individual's or a society's own moral guidelines determine what is good and what ought to be done.
- **Rule-Based Ethics** — Every good action is guided by a particular law and these laws apply to all people.
- **Utilitarianism** — The good is that which, all things considered, produces the greatest good for the greatest number.
- **Moral Rights** — A good action respects and supports the rights and value of others.
- **Virtue Ethics** — Good actions are those that produce or affirm people of good character.
- **Care Ethics** — In relationships with others, one does good when caring for others and minimizing their harm.

These dominant ethical theories often overlap and are often combined. For instance, one might combine divine command ethics and care ethics to argue that God commands people to care for others and minimize their harm. Utilitarianism and moral rights theories might be combined to argue that it is good to respect and support the rights and values of the greatest number.

— Thomas Jay Oord

must at once be conservative and adventurous. Morality requires that people intrepidly revise our moral laws in light of new forms of order while preventing relapse to lower levels. This is what Whitehead calls the "paradox concerning morals."

At its best, then, morality concerns itself not with codifying certain behaviors but with the formulation of moral ideals that serve to inspire and challenge. Ideals are, as Whitehead put it, "at once gadjies irritating, and beacons luring, the victims among whom they dwell." This conception of ideals as gadjies and beacons beautifully captures what I take to be the primary role of moral philosophy. The task of moral philosophy is not to deduce and codify particular forms of behavior but to continually formulate, test and revise our moral ideals. Yet beyond our epistemological limitations there is a deeper, metaphysical basis for abandoning the pursuit of abstract moral codes.

Our processive cosmos

Final truths in morality — and science, for that matter — are unattainable not only because of the finitude and fallibility of human inquirers but also because we live in what theologian John Haught calls an "unfinished universe." The notion that one could achieve anything like a final or absolute formulation in any field of study — with the possible exception of some of the more elementary branches of mathematics — presupposes that one's subject is static. Thankfully, we do not live in such a universe.

Over the last century, scientists have continually discovered that the universe is not a plenum of lifeless, valueless facts mechanistically determined by absolute laws. Rather, we live in an ever-changing cosmos best understood as a dynamic field of *events* organized in complex webs of interdependence, rather than a collection of objects interacting via physical laws.

The intuition that the universe was fundamentally a clockwork machine successfully guided science in the wake of Newton's inspirational formulation of the laws of mechanics, but this metaphor proved increasingly inadequate as Newton's work was supplanted in the early 20th century by both quantum mechanics and general relativity. Even at its peak, the mechanical metaphor created difficulties for thinking about human beings, who were never effectively illuminated by the assumption they were complex machines. At the level of elementary particles, quantum mechanics

disclosed a world of wave-like particles spread out in space and inextricably entangled with other particles in the local environment. The notion of autonomous "individual" particles disappeared.

Although all metaphors are misleading to some degree, the metaphor of the world as an evolving organism has become more helpful than the old mechanical model of the world as a clock. This, in a sense, is the founding insight of Whitehead's "philosophy of organism," which took as its starting point the view that individuals — particles, plants and people — are not discrete facts walled off from each other but parts of complex and interesting wholes. Conceived of as an organic process, every individual is inextricably intertwined and interconnected with every other. The fundamental reality is no longer the individual entities but rather the ongoing process by which they interact and create new and novel structures.

Once we recognize that every individual — from a subatomic event to a majestic sequoia — brings together the diverse elements in its actual world in just this way, just here and just now, we see that nothing is entirely devoid of value and beauty. This process whereby many diverse individuals are brought together into the unity of one new individual, which will eventually add its energy to future individuals, characterizes the most basic feature of reality and is

what Whitehead calls the "category of creativity." In this view, reality is not an unending march of vacuous facts but a precarious creative advance toward richer forms of beauty and value.

In this way, the primary task of my book, *The Ethics of Creativity*, is to engender the movement from a metaphysics of creativity to an ethics of creativity.

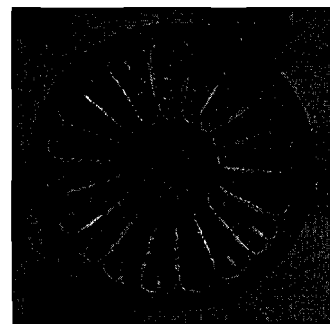
An understanding of reality as composed of vibrant, organically interconnected achievements of beauty and value has a dramatic effect on how humans conceive of themselves, nature and moral obligations. By grounding morality in the universe's unrelenting impulse toward aesthetic achievement, the ethics of creativity reorients the way in which ethics has been conducted for millennia: Morality can no longer be limited to merely interhuman relations.

In a world filled with so much ugliness and fear, the ethics of creativity calls on each of us to act to bring about the greatest universe of beauty and value possible. We must, as William James said, "Seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see." ■

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