

A “Family Tree” of Ethical Theories

[This is section 10.10 of the draft of my book *The Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Class Interest Theory of Ethics*. –JSH]

Chart 10.1 in this section is an effort to depict the relationships between the various types of ethical theories, and specifically how other ethical theories relate to the MLM class interest theory of ethics. The idea is to look for the most fundamental division among the various types of theories and to separate them into two groups on that basis. Then to further divide the remaining theories in each group in the same way, leading to sort of a “family tree” of ethical theories based—not on how they actually evolved—but rather on how they relate to each other logically.

The chart has a lot of information in it and may be somewhat hard to initially comprehend. For that reason I am further explaining it below. In the chart I have also printed in red the attributes or categories which encompass the two moral systems supported by MLM ethical theory (i.e., proletarian morality and communist morality).

The first big division among ethical theories is between COGNITIVISM and NON-COGNITIVISM. Cognitivism holds that moral judgments are meaningful, and that they are true or false. Somewhat amazingly, there are numerous theories of ethics which deny this, and hence deny that it is *meaningful* and/or *true* to say, for example, that genocide is wrong! The logical positivists, in particular, claimed that moral judgments are meaningless. Some people in this general positivist tradition, including Charles Stevenson, went on to claim that moral judgments are merely expressions of emotion and “commands” that others have the same emotional reaction to something as the speaker does. (Thus for them “murder is wrong” is roughly equivalent to “murder—UGH!—and that’s the way you should feel too!”) Another, much more widespread, variation of non-cognitivism is the notion that moral judgments merely express approval or disapproval, but are neither true nor false. This is the view of several influential British philosophers including John Austin and R. M. Hare, and—indoctrinated by them—the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Of course, according to our MLM ethical theory, moral statements are definitely meaningful, and are true or false. Thus we say that the statement “It will be very good and important thing to overthrow imperialism and put an end to imperialist wars!” is both fully meaningful, and definitely true.

Within cognitivism the biggest division is between INTUITIONISM and NATURALISM. Intuitionism holds that the basic moral term or terms signify a “non-natural” and “indefinable” quality of things. The meaning of a statement using such moral terms is supposedly grasped not in the same way we understand statements about the world and society around us, but through “direct inspection” or by “immediate intuition” (whatever those things are imagined to be!). Naturalism, on the other hand, holds that moral words (such as ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘ought’, etc.) can be defined in terms of non-moral concepts. Most versions hold that “moral judgments are empirical statements verifiable by the same methods of natural science” as any other statements. The MLM class interest theory of ethics is therefore one major type of ethical naturalism, and holds that moral terms can be defined and explicated in terms of people’s collective interests, and—in class society—in terms of class interests.

One form of intuitionism is AXIOLOGICAL INTUITIONISM which says that the basic moral term is ‘good’, but that the word ‘good’ is an “unanalyzable” concept. It also claims that

“goodness” or “badness” is “inherent” in actions and is not due to the consequences arising from those actions. This is clearly an idealist perspective. G. E. Moore is the most famous exponent of this particular nonsense. Don’t let the esoteric words used in ethical theory throw you! ‘Axiology’ just means “the analysis of value or of what is good”.

Another form of intuitionism is DEONTOLOGICAL INTUITIONISM which says that the basic moral term is ‘ought’. (‘Deontology’ is just a fancy word deriving from the ancient Greek word *deon* which meant “moral duty”, “obligation”, or “necessity”.) The central dogma of this ethical theory is that you “cannot derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’”, or in other words that facts about the nature of the world (and such things as people’s interests) cannot determine what you ought to do. Of course from our point of view that is utterly ridiculous! H. A. Prichard and R. D. Ross were champions of deontological intuitionism.

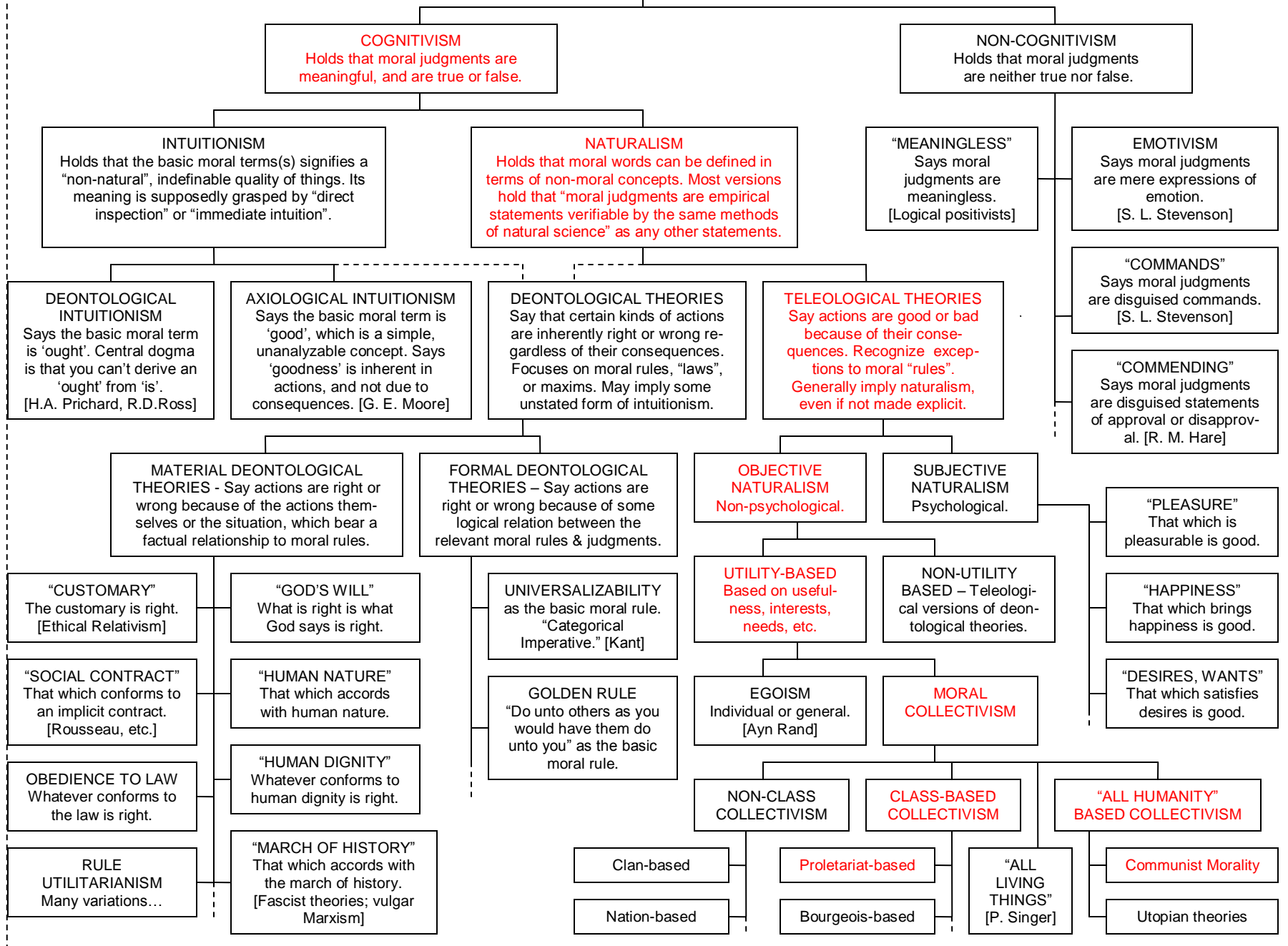
There is another group of deontological theories which do not take an explicit stand on intuitionism-naturalism issue, but which often implicitly accept some unstated form of intuitionism. In any case, they maintain that certain kinds of actions are inherently right or wrong regardless of their consequences, and focus on moral rules, “laws”, or maxims. Within this category there are MATERIAL DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES and FORMAL DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES. The material deontological theories say that actions are right or wrong because of the actions themselves, or because of the situation, which bears a factual relationship to the relevant moral rules.

Among the many material deontological ethical theories there are:

- The view that GOD’S WILL determines what is right or wrong. (This makes morality just a matter of God’s whims, and subject to instant change whenever God changes his mind!)
- The view that right or wrong accords with HUMAN NATURE. (This generally assumes—quite falsely—that human nature is always and everywhere the same and never changes.)
- The view that whatever conforms to HUMAN DIGNITY is right.
- The view that whatever conforms to the MARCH OF HISTORY is right. (This includes fascist theories and also vulgar interpretations of “Marxism”.)
- The view that whatever conforms to the law is right. (This sounds like fascism too!)
- The view that right and wrong is determined by an implicit “SOCIAL CONTRACT”. This of course means you must accept whatever form of society you happen to be born into! Rousseau was one of many bourgeois philosophers who have pushed this idea.
- The view that what is right is that which is “CUSTOMARY”. (This is similar to the social contract notion.)
- Many varieties of RULE UTILITARIANISM. (These are attempts to combine the “rule based” and utilitarian approaches to ethics.)

The FORMAL DEONTOLOGICAL theories claim that actions are right or wrong because of some logical relationship between the relevant moral rules and the moral judgments. The two most important varieties here are the GOLDEN RULE as the fundamental moral rule, and UNIVERSALIZABILITY as the fundamental moral rule—which insists that nothing can be right unless it is *always and everywhere right for everyone*. Of course Kant, with his “Categorical Imperative”, is the founder and best known champion of this last curious theory.

Chart 10.1: The Relationships of Different Sorts of Ethical Theories



Returning way up to the NATURALISM level of the chart, most naturalist theories are either explicitly or implicitly TELEOLOGICAL THEORIES of ethics. In some branches of science, such as evolutionary theory, teleology is rightfully scorned. Thus while human beings are one of the many results of evolution of life on earth, human beings were in no way the “goal” or “end” toward which evolution was inevitably tending. But teleology in ethics is eminently sensible. It simply says that actions are good or bad because of their *consequences*. Ethical theories that agree with this are therefore also called *consequentialist*. Teleological or consequentialist theories recognize that almost all moral “rules” or maxims have exceptions to them and should not be considered as absolutes. Thus while lying is generally wrong, there are times when it is *not* wrong. The MLM class interest theory of ethics is one example of a teleological or consequentialist ethical theory.

There are two main branches of naturalism, SUBJECTIVE NATURALISM and OBJECTIVE NATURALISM. Subjective naturalism focuses on people’s psychology. One common version says that PLEASURE is the key to ethics—that what is pleasurable is good. Another version puts it in terms of HAPPINESS, and others focus on DESIRES or WANTS (such as by saying that “what is desired is what we call good”).

OBJECTIVE NATURALISM is based on non-psychological facts about actions and their consequences. The UTILITY BASED theories focus on usefulness, interests, needs, etc. Of course the MLM class interest theory of ethics is one such utility-based ethical theory. Strangely enough, most versions of UTILITARIANISM since Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are no longer utility based! Instead of focusing on utility and usefulness, what is called “utilitarianism” is now nearly always a type of subjective naturalism which focuses on psychological factors, especially the promotion of happiness and the avoidance of pain. The NON-UTILITY BASED theories within objective naturalism are teleological versions of deontological theories.

Within UTILITY BASED ethical theories there are EGOISM and MORAL COLLECTIVISM. Egoist theories of ethics focus on the individual, such as with Ayn Rand’s “objectivist” school of quintessential bourgeois thought. Moral collectivism holds that ethics is based on the common, collective interests or needs of groups of people. The four categories of moral collectivism are CLASS-BASED COLLECTIVISM, NON-CLASS COLLECTIVISM, “ALL HUMANITY” BASED COLLECTIVISM, and “ALL LIVING THINGS” BASED COLLECTIVISM.

Non-class collectivism includes theories which base ethics on clans, ethnic groups, nations, “races”, and so forth. The Nazi view that Germanic or “Aryan” peoples are all that matter was one notorious example. To some extent everyone who is patriotic toward their own country or who believes that people of their own country, ethnic group, linguistic community, or “race” should be treated better than those of other countries or groups at least implicitly adopts a similar view, to one degree or another.

Within class-based collectivism we have such things as PROLETARIAN MORALITY and BOURGEOIS MORALITY. Thus *one* of the two moral systems upheld by the MLM class interest theory of ethics is class-based. Within “all humanity” based collectivism there is COMMUNIST MORALITY, along with various utopian theories. Thus the *other* moral system upheld by the MLM class interest theory of ethics is situated here.

The ethical theory that the needs or interests of “ALL LIVING THINGS” should be the determinant of what is right and wrong has been championed by some, most notably Peter Singer and groups like PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Of course they are forced to discount *some* living things (such as the smallpox virus or the tiny organisms that cause

malaria). Some of these folks do believe, however, that rats and human beings should be put on a par when it comes to morality! When made considerably more rational than that, these views tend to blend into something close to Communist morality, since we agree that entities *that are sufficiently like* human beings (such as possible sentient and intelligent life on other planets and possible future artificial intelligence on Earth) should be put on a moral par with human beings, and we also favor the humane treatment of animals generally.

It would be possible to make a chart like that presented here which breaks things down in somewhat different ways. One could, for example, make the first division as consequentialism vs. non-consequentialism and deal with the cognitivism/non-cognitivism division later. But Chart 10.1 does organize the wide array of ethical theories that exist in the most coherent way I have been able to come up with.