Can Moral Principles Be Justified?

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenging philosophical question of whether moral principles can be rationally justified. It seeks to understand the challenges of justifying moral principles in a pluralistic world, where ethical and metaphysical foundations are increasingly contested. By analysing three dominant ethical frameworks, deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics, the paper argue that moral principles can achieve a defensible form of justification through coherent processes that balance our considered judgments with philosophical principles. While foundationalist certainty remains elusive in morality, the paper demonstrates through theoretical analysis and practical case studies that we can establish reasonable, though potentially revisable, justifications for moral principles that withstand rational scrutiny and guide ethical decision making in society. The paper concludes that moral justification represents an ongoing process of deliberation rather than a final destination, acknowledging the complexity of moral reasoning while resisting scepticism about the possibility of moral knowledge.

Keywords: moral principles, ethical frameworks, justification, ethical decision making.

Introduction

The question of whether moral principles can be justified is a very striking one that hits at the heart of moral philosophy. When we claim that 'murder is wrong', or

'justice is virtuous', or 'suicide is wrong', or 'One ought not to commit adultery', are we merely expressing our personal preferences or cultural conditioning, (as this may lead to some sort of disagreements about the acceptability of certain moral principles), or can we provide compelling reasons that should persuade any rational person? We see that this occasion may be the result not of a difference about some easily determinable matter of fact, but of some fundamental divergence of moral attitudes. This problem becomes especially pressing in contemporary pluralistic societies, where individuals and groups often hold fundamentally different moral outlooks. In some case, serious treatment of the disagreement about the acceptability of moral principles may lead to the raising of topics of the most profound kinds, which few have the insight or intellectual capacity to handle. For help in such difficult situations, people might turn to the moral philosopher. The moral philosopher is expected to examine the different systems of morals, and different ways in which these have been justified; and a great deal more. The challenge of moral justification extends beyond theoretical interest. It has practical implications' for how we structure our legal systems, educate future generations, and navigate ethical disagreements in public and private life.

This paper argues that while moral principles cannot achieve the same kind of certainty as mathematical theorems, or empirical facts, they can be justified through a process of reflective equilibrium that systematically balances our considered judgments, moral principles, and background theories. This approach acknowledged the complexity of moral reasoning while resisting the conclusion that moral disagreements are ultimately irresolvable or that all moral positions are equally defensible. The justification of moral principles requires what John Rawls would call a 'reflective deliberation'- which is a back-and-forth process between our intuitions about particular cases and our general principles until we achieve a coherent moral outlook.[1] This paper develops the argument in five silent parts. Firstly, we introduce the work, and then move towards reviewing the basic problem at hand. Walking through the landscapes of ethical theories, we examine how virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and deontology approach justificatory questions in moral philosophy. Thereafter, we launch into the specific justificatory strategies

[1] Little, Daniel. (1984). *Reflective Equilibrium and Justification.* Southern Journal of Philosophy.

employed by these theories, and then examine the method of reflective equilibrium as a promising approach to moral justification. By applying these theoretical frameworks to concrete case studies, demonstrating how moral justification operates in practice. The paper finally syntheses these insights and offers conclusions about the nature and limits of moral justification.

Throughout this inquiry, the paper confronts sceptical challenges to moral justification including the fact of ethical disagreement across cultures and individuals, the apparent absence of objective moral facts, and difficulties in establishing a secure foundation for moral claims. By engaging these challenges directly, this paper aims to show that moral principles can be rationally defended in a way that makes ethical dialogues possible and meaningful, even in the face of persistent disagreement.

The Problem

What are moral principles, or a moral principle? I understand moral principles, or a person's moral principle, as a system of rules (or principles), judgments or reasons that are practical or action-guiding; that is, they state that actions of a specified sort ought, or ought not, to be performed. This first condition, that moralities are practical or action-guiding, simply locates morality within the domain of practical reasoning[2]. Any attempt to justify moral views by arguments might be rejected *a priori* on the grounds that the use of reason in such a contest is suspect. The attack on the use of reason to justify moral principles could be made on the very general ground that all use of reason is unjustifiable, for it is clear that the general use of reason does not admit rational justification. Another feature of morality or moral principles, concerns the content of its action-guiding rules, judgments or reasons. The content of a morality is such that it requires a person to act in ways that may conflict with the maximization of his own self-interest; in any morality, some considerations, rather than the agent own self-interest justifies action, and can in at least some possible cases of conflict, override and so require the sacrifice of the agent's self-interest. Focusing on this requirement, shared by different moral theories, of some personal sacrifice of one's own self-interest since it is this requirement that is usually thought to place morality in need of

[2] Phillips Griffiths. Justifying Moral Principles, s104

justification[3]. The principal non-moral alternative to moral principles among systems of practical reason or to egoism, having in mind, universal egoism: For any person **P** and action **a, P** ought to perform **a,** if and only if, doing so will maximally promote his overall self-interest. Second, it brings out the final feature might be used in characterising moral principles, often called the finality, over-ridingness or authority of moral principles: moral judgments (reasons, rules) override non-moral judgments in cases of conflict, and specifically, override judgments of self-interest[4]. Therefore, for fully appreciating the problem of justifying moral principles, it includes characterising moral principles into both a condition on its content and on its finality. This means that if moral principles are characterised as final but its content is left open, it is difficult to raise the question of its justification at all. If moral principles are specified simply as a system of judgements of what, all things considered, one ought to do, then the question whether one ought to be moral- do what, all things considered, one ought to do- makes no sense at the outset. Looking at the characterization of moral principles as already stated above, the finality condition raises crucial difficulties for justifying moral principles. But at least if we also give a minimal specification of the content of moral principles (rules, judgments) we can then sensibly ask *why these* particular reasons, reasons with *this* content, should be final or overriding. And it is of cause, only when moral principles are understood as having some sort of minimal content of the sort specified above that the issue of the justification for acting morally or accepting moral reasons is raised.

The Landscape of Ethical Theories

To understand how moral principles might be justified, it is important to grasp an understanding of the dominant ethical frameworks that attempt to explain the nature and source of moral claims. These theories offer different accounts of what makes actions right or wrong, and consequently, they employ distinct justificatory

[3] For an analysis of the concept of morality, this content condition that moral requirements sometimes conflict with requirements of self-interest w**o**uld have to be specified differently; in this form, it could be satisfied by a system of practical reasoning that we would intuitively regard as non-moral. However, specifying it in this way helps focus the argument.

[4] The overriding condition of morality is a property of moral judgments, reasons, or rules, because moral philosophers making judgments, reasons, or rules primary in their theories have all adopted it, though I believe it is problematic whether finality can be successfully defined as a property of moral reasons.

strategies. Examining these frameworks reveals the rich tapestry of approaches to moral justification that philosophers have developed across centuries.

1. Virtue Ethics - (Justification through Character)

Virtue ethics, with its origins in Aristotelian philosophy, shifts the focus of moral evaluation from actions to characters. According to this approach, an action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances[5]. The justification of moral principles therefore depends on an account of human flourishing (eudaimonia) and the traits that enable individuals to achieve it. As one source explains, 'virtue ethics focuses on the character traits of an individual as the basis of moral decisions. According to this theory, what matters most is an individual's character and the type of life they lead'[6]

The justificatory strategy of virtue ethics is teleological, - because it grounds moral principles in facts about human nature and our proper end. For Aristotle, the justification for cultivating virtues like courage, justice, and wisdom lies in their necessity for achieving a distinctly human form of excellence. Contemporary virtue ethicists have expanded this framework, arguing that moral principles are justified insofar as they promote or constitute flourishing lives. When we ask why we should be honest, a virtue ethicist might answer that honesty is essential to meaningful relationships and personal integrity, both constitutive elements of human flourishing.

2. Utilitarianism - (Justification through Consequences)

Utilitarianism, most famously associated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, represents a form of consequentialism ethics. According to this view, the rightness or wrongness of actions depends exclusively on their consequences-specifically, their impact on overall happiness or wellbeing. The utilitarian justification for moral principles is straightforward principles such as 'do not lie' or 'keep promises', are justified because following them generally produces the

[5] Rueter, Sondra. (2023). *Ethical Theories: Virtue Ethics*, *Utilitarianism*, *and Deontology*. The Philosophos.org
[6] Rueter, S. (2023)

greatest good for the greatest number.[7] This approach offers a clear justificatory strategy: that is, when challenged about a moral principle we must demonstrate that its general adoption would maximize utility. It is important that we note that utilitarianism looks at the consequence of an action to determine if its right or wrong. However, utilitarianism faces significant challenges in its justificatory project. Critics question whether we can adequately measure and compare utility across persons, whether maximizing utility might sometimes justify intuitively appalling actions (such as punishing an innocent person to placate an angry mob), and whether the theory can adequately account for considerations of justice and individual rights.

3. Deontology – (Justification through Duty)

In contrast to both virtue ethics and utilitarianism, deontological theories emphasize duties and rules rather than character or consequences. The most influential deontological theory comes from Immanuel Kant, who argued that **moral principles are justified by reason alone.** It argues that there are moral rules and principles that are inherently right or wrong, irrespective of the consequences. Kant's Categorical Imperative provides a test for moral principles: we should act only according to maxims that we could will to become universal laws without contradiction[8].

Deontology offers a distinctive justificatory strategy. This means, moral principles are justified if they can be universalized without contradiction and if they respect rational beings as ends in themselves. Deontology looks at the intentions behind an action and whether it follows a moral law[9]. This approach purports to offer objective moral principles that hold regardless of cultural differences or personal desires. However, deontology faces its own challenges, including potentially rigid applications that ignore the moral significance of consequences and difficulties in resolving conflicts between duties.

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[7] 'Explanation and Examples Ethical Theories'. Philosophy Terms. 2 December, 2023. Accessed 15 October, 2025.
[8] Kant's Moral Philosophy. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. Substantive Revision. 2025
[9] Rueter, Sondra. (2023). *Ethical Theories: Virtue Ethics, Utilitarianism, and Deontology.* The Philosophos.org

4. Contemporary Approaches – Reflective Equilibrium

Each of these traditional theories offers a different foundation for moral justification – human flourishing, utility or rational duty. In contemporary moral philosophy, however, many philosophers have adopted a method known as reflective equilibrium[10], most fully developed by John Rawls. This approach seeks to justify moral principles through a process of mutual adjustment between our considered judgments about particular cases and general moral principles[11]. Rather than seeking indubitable foundation for morality, reflective equilibrium employs a coherent epistemology, whereby a moral theory gains justification through its systematic connections with a wide range of moral commitments. As Rawls describes it, this process involves 'a continual interaction between the formulation of theoretical principles and a consideration of pre-theoretical commitments, until theory and commitments achieve harmony. This method acknowledges the revisability of both particular judgments and general principles in light of each other.

Various Frameworks for Moral Justification

Having surveyed the landscape of ethical theories, let us examine more closely the specific justificatory strategies, or what I call the various frameworks ethical theories employ. By analysing how the various approaches conceptualize the project of justifying moral principles, I intend to identify the strengths and limitations of each framework.

1. Consequentialist Justificatory Strategies

Consequentialism (consequentialism) approaches to moral justification share a common structure because they justify moral principles by reference to the goodness of their outcomes[12]. The most familiar consequentialism theory is utilitarianism, which identifies goodness with happiness or preference satisfaction, but other versions may prioritize different values. What unites consequentialism approaches is their forward-looking orientation – moral principles are justified instrumentally based on their tendency to produce desirable states affairs. The power to justify moral principles in consequentialism

[10] Little, Daniel. (1984*). Reflective Equilibrium and Justification.* Southern Journal of Philosophy
[11] Ibid
[12] Moral Principles: Their Justification. Encyclopaedia.com.

lies in its pragmatic appeal. This simply means that when asked why we should follow a particular moral principle, consequentialists can point to tangible benefits. For example, principles of honesty can be justified by appealing to the social coordination and trust that honesty facilitates. Similarly, principles prohibiting violence can be justified by reference to the suffering they prevent. This strategy of justification (justificatory strategy), aligns with common ways of thinking about rationality – we typically justify instrumental rules by reference to the ends they serve. However, consequentialist justification of moral principles faces at least three significant challenges. First, is the *measurement problem:* how do we quantify and compare the goodness of outcomes across different individuals? Second, there is the *demandingness problem:* if moral principles are justified solely by their consequences, we might end up with extremely demanding principles that requires significant personal sacrifice for the greater good. Third is the *justice problem:* pure consequentialist justification might endorse principles that produce good consequences overall but violate individual rights or distribute benefits unjustly.

2. Deontological Justificatory Strategies

Deontological approaches to moral justification offer a different structure: they justify moral principles by their intrinsic rightness rather than their consequences. For Kantian deontologists, moral principles are justified through the categorical imperative procedure, which tests whether maxims can be universalized without contradiction and whether they respect rational beings as ends in themselves. The justification of moral principles thus derives their form rather than their effects. The strength of deontological justification lies in its respect for persons and its ability to account for certain moral intuitions that consequentialism struggles with.[13] For example, deontology can explain why we should not violate individual rights even to produce better overall consequences – because doing so fails to respect persons as ends in themselves with intrinsic values. The deontological framework also captures the sense in which moral principles often present themselves as constraints on our actions rather than as advice about how to achieve our goals.

[13] Little, Daniel. (1984*). Reflective Equilibrium and Justification.* Southern Journal of Philosophy.

Nevertheless, deontological justification of moral principles faces its own set of challenges. The problem of rigidity as it were, refers to the potential for deontological principles to yield counterintuitive results in complex situations where following a rule would have catastrophic consequences. Secondly, the problem of conflicts arises when multiple deontological principles apply to a situation but cannot all be satisfied. Finally, the foundation problem which questions whether the categorical imperative procedure can truly generate substantive moral content without struggling in contingent values.

3. Virtue Ethical Justificatory Strategies

Virtue ethics approaches justification differently still, focusing not on actions but character traits. Moral principles are justified by reference to the virtues – excellent traits of character that enable human flourishing. Where consequentialists ask, 'what will produce the best consequences?' and deontologists asks, 'what does duty require?', virtue ethicists ask, 'what would a virtuous person do?'. The justification of moral principles thus derives from their connection to developed excellence in character.

The advantage of virtue ethical justification is its *connection to human psychology* and its ability to capture the complex reasoning of moral life. Rather than reducing morality to a set of rules or calculations, virtue ethics recognizes the importance of practical wisdom (phronesis), in navigating particular situations. This approach also naturally accounts for the motivational aspects of morality – the fact that moral behaviour typically springs from settled character traits rather than abstract reasoning.

Challenges or problems associated with virtue justification of moral principles includes the pluralism, which is associated with the fact that different cultures and individuals may have different conceptions of flourishing and the virtues that promote it. Also, the action-guidance problem questions whether virtue ethics can provide sufficiently specific direction for action, especially in novel or complex moral situations. Finally, the circularity problem suggests that virtue ethics may struggle to justify why certain traits count as virtues without appealing to independent moral standards.

As a theory, Consequentialism produces good consequences as its justificatory foundation, and has its strengths embedded on pragmatic appeal, and clarity of evaluation, and its weaknesses on measurement problems and the potential to justify injustice. Deontology is consistent with rational duty and respect for persons, while accounting for constraints in moral actions. However, it could be rigid in complex cases and has the potential for conflicts between duties. For virtue ethics, a significant justificatory foundation is the development of excellent character, cutting across psychological realism, howbeit, acknowledges complexity in moral actions and behaviours, and its weakness lays on the potential for cultural relativism as well as limited action-guidance.

Reflective Equilibrium as a Method of Justification

Haven seen the limitations of foundationalist approaches to moral justification, many contemporary philosophers have adopted John Rawl's method of reflective equilibrium as a more promising framework. I intend to examine this method in detail, exploring its coherentist epistemology and its application to moral reasoning.

1. **The Structure of Reflective Equilibrium**

The structure of reflective equilibrium describes a process of moral deliberation in which we move back and forth between our considered judgements about particular cases, the moral principles that might explain these judgments, and relevant background theories until we achieve a coherent fit among them. It could be best described as when we formulate a general moral principle, and then test it against our pre-theoretical commitments. Do its concrete consequences correspond to the judgments we would actually make? Does it satisfy conditions which we pre-theoretically believe to validly characterize all acceptable moral theories? It does not seek to ground morality in principles; rather, it aims for a systematic coherence among our moral beliefs at all levels of generality. When conflicts arise between our principles and our considered judgments, we may revise either – sometimes abandoning intuitive judgments that cannot be coherently incorporated into our best moral theory, and sometimes modifying principles that yield counterintuitive results.

Rawl's reflective equilibrium distinguishes between *narrow* and *wide* reflective equilibrium. Narrow reflective equilibrium involves coherence between our considered judgments and a set of moral principles. Wide reflective equilibrium introduces additional theoretical considerations, including a wide range of philosophical and empirical beliefs as well as considered judgments.[14] The wider process incorporates background theories about human nature, social organization, and the purpose of morality itself, creating a more comprehensive and theoretically informed coherence.

The method of reflective equilibrium provides a powerful framework for understanding how moral principles can be justified without claiming absolute certainty. Justification emerges from the ability of a moral theory to understand and make sense of our diverse moral commitments. A principle gains justification when it coheres well with our firmest convictions, helps resolve uncertain cases, and connects with other justifiable theories. Its ability to accommodate insights from multiple ethical theories is an important advantage of reflective equilibrium. Just as the name implies, instead of forcing a choice between consequentialism, deontological and virtue ethical approaches, reflective equilibrium allows us to incorporate the strengths of each while minimizing their weaknesses. For example, we might develop a moral outlook that respects deontological constraints' while also attending to consequences and character development.

2. Challenges To Reflective Equilibrium

Reflective equilibrium, as a form of moral justification, faces some sort of challenges. Some critics worry that it may simply be a systematize prejudice, which gives a coherent moral view that remains fundamentally arbitrary or parochial. If we begin with culturally specific considered judgments, the process of reflective equilibrium might simply produce a polished version of conventional morality rather than genuinely justified moral principles. The indeterminacy of the method of reflective equilibrium is another challenge, as different people might achieve different equilibrium points based in their initial judgments and weightings of different considerations. This raises questions about whether

[14] Comparative Moral Principles: Justifications, Values and Foundation. 2023. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, Vol. 10.

reflective equilibrium can provide objective moral justification or merely personal coherence.

Defenders of reflective equilibrium respond that the method includes critical resources through its requirement of wide reflection. By bringing to bear sociological, psychological and philosophical theories, we can subject our initial judgments to rigorous scrutiny. The process would lead to seeking agreement through dialogue with others who may have different initial commitments, working toward what Rawl's calls 'overlapping consensus'.

Conclusion

This paper has rigorously argued the possibility of the justification of moral principles, tracing the logical issues involved, through ethical theories and b explaining the possibility of the justification equilibrium in the contemporary context of justifying moral principles. However, we can see that the problem of the justification of moral principles, (seeing that ultimate moral principles are unquestionable, and they are not like the axioms of a deductive system and so sufficient to provide answers to practical moral problems), is not a single deductive argument but a cumulative case that draws on different aspects of our moral experience.

Focusing on theoretical justification of moral principles, the question of how moral principles guide concrete deliberation remains an important area for further investigation, which might delve into exploring how the synthesized approach developed here applies to or connects with how rational grounds for moral principles connect with the psychological forces that move people to act morally. The justification of moral principles remains a central task for moral philosophy, not as a purely theoretical exercise but as a necessary foundation for moral principles and behaviours. By showing how moral principles can be rationally defended, we affirm the possibility of genuine moral knowledge and the integrity of our moral experience.

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