

Reciprocal Ethics

The Formal Science of Ethics

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Abstract

Reciprocal Ethics is a novel ethical framework rooted in praxeology, the study of purposeful action. It represents an entirely new paradigm in moral philosophy, placing interaction at the core of universal ethics. Traditional ethical theories often divorce thought from action.

Reciprocal Ethics contends that they are two aspects of the same phenomenon in the human experience, removing the traditional boundary between theoretical and practical ethics. The system categorizes all social interaction as either "self-directed" or "other-directed", and by introducing the concept of "normative signaling" it also exerts legitimate prescriptive power.

The theory is a self-consistent, purely descriptive approach to ethics, that suggests that one's actions serve as semiotic signs that signal one's ethical stance in social interaction. Hence actions do not only define individual moral profiles, but also the moral ecosystem within which one actually operates. The theory operates in real time, adapting to the complexity of reality by taking into account uncertainty, incomplete data and social asymmetries.

Reconciling elements of consequentialism and deontological theories, Reciprocal Ethics delivers a streamlined, yet comprehensive ethical system for social interaction, offering tangible insights for navigating complex moral dilemmas. By synthesizing descriptive metaethics and normative moral philosophy into one comprehensive formal theory, a bold assertion arises: Reciprocal Ethics becomes the Formal Science of Ethics.

Keywords

Reciprocal Ethics

Praxeological Method

Ethical paradigm shift

Normative Signaling as a solution to Hume's Guillotine

Teleology as an epistemological foundation for ethical analysis

Background and Introduction

Historical context

Moral philosophers have always tried to derive a universal framework for ethical judgments, but this noteworthy endeavor has so far generated more questions than it has answered. The reason is the flawed epistemological foundation the field has struggled with historically, which has meant that the starting point for ethics has always been the moral philosopher's own values and convictions, without any real scientific grounding. Deontological approaches are criticized for being too rigid and for lapsing into dogmatism. Consequentialist approaches, on the other hand, have been criticized for being too flexible, and allowing undue sacrifice of the individual for "the greater good".

Introduction to Reciprocal Ethics

Reciprocal Ethics seeks to formalize ethics as a descriptive and universally valid science, by creating an epistemological framework that allows for seamless integration of deontology and consequentialism in a way that preserves the strong elements of both approaches, and weeds out the weaknesses. Reciprocal Ethics also integrates virtue ethics, by introducing two basic ethical categories of action.

The Evolution of Teleology

The starting point for all ethical analysis is the teleological status of humans as acting individuals. Teleology, understood as purposiveness, has evolved from being an all-encompassing explanatory model for all observed change to being replaced by causality and teleonomy in all domains of scientific inquiry. The only domain that remains relevant for teleological analysis is human behavior itself, as human beings act to achieve ends based on our values.

Our purposiveness directly implies two basic categories of social interaction; self-directed and other-directed, voluntary and involuntary. These categories represent two distinct and fundamental moral ecosystems. Our actions must be considered to be an expression of our real values, thus signaling to those we interact with which moral ecosystem we operate under. By introducing normative signaling which integrates "is" and "ought" into one dynamic and flexible social process that takes place in real time, this approach turns ethics into a formal, value-neutral science with extreme adaptability and normative power.

Critique of the formal logical approach

Attempts have previously been made to formalize and systematize ethics, including through the use of formal logic. These efforts have largely limited themselves to the systematization of existing moral principles, and have not successfully been applied as the scientific basis of ethical inquiry. A fundamental reason for this can be that by using formal logic, one translates the nuanced reality into symbols only to translate it back into understandable and applicable theory. It makes sense to use such systems to study complex phenomena that cannot easily be explored directly. Ethics, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in human experience, interaction and language, and is thus a science that can be explored directly through language, which bypasses the need for a formal-logical approach.

This also makes ethics far more accessible to a wider audience, and provides a heuristic that is completely analogous to the theory as a whole and therefore also practically applicable, which is of essential importance in such a central part of the social sciences.

Reciprocal Ethics is not one theory among many, but constitutes the epistemological and methodological framework for deriving universally valid ethical theory.

Epistemological Basis

Ethics as a field is at a fundamental level linked to humans as teleological beings, i.e. as goal-oriented, acting individuals. Without ends and values, which are implicit in action, ethics have no real existence. This teleological status encompasses everything that is distinctly human, and everything that can be subjected to ethical analysis. What falls outside purposeful behavior cannot be the subject of ethical assessments in any meaningful way. The real challenge lies in the fact that values arise in our individual minds, and therefore are strictly subjective. This has created problems for moral philosophers who have tried to balance on the thin line between rigid universality and total moral relativism. Reciprocal Ethics uses the fact that values are subjective as an objective fact for further analysis, which creates a solid epistemological foundation for ethics as a science.

Methodological Approach to Ethics

Methodological Individualism

With a foundation in methodological individualism, which regards the individual as the indivisible social unit of which all collectives consist, Reciprocal Ethics says that all collective interaction can be broken down into individual interaction, and that all ethical judgment must take place between concrete individuals. All collective values are individual values. All collectives consist of individuals, and cannot act in any other way than through individual behavior.

For example, it is not the state, but the state's agents, i.e. the people who recognize an affiliation with this collective, who actually act on behalf of the state. If one is to make an ethical assessment of something the state undertakes as a collective, one must therefore analyze what the state's agents actually undertake. The ethical analysis therefore always starts with analyzing individual actions and the signals they send in the context in which they are carried out.

By focusing on our intersubjective existence as cognizing individuals, methodological individualism implicitly recognizes both individual and collective aspects of human existence.

Methodological Dualism

Reciprocal Ethics uses a methodological dualism, which considers human reality as divided into two distinct spheres: The outer, physical reality of chemical and physiological processes, and the inner, conceptual reality of thought, evaluation and action. This is not an ontological claim about a two-part "ultimate substance", but a methodological approach to the study of man as an acting being. In human reality, mental objects and physical objects are distinct and fundamentally different in nature. Methodological dualism is an acknowledgment that human reality presents itself as twofold, and that the conceptual reality we study in the social sciences cannot be explored directly using the same methods that are used to acquire knowledge in the natural sciences. Methodological dualism then constitutes an analytical lens for the interpretation of social phenomena, which is able to handle both the subjective and the objective aspects of human experience.

Axiomatic Starting Point

A useful axiom contains many implications. These are inherent in the axiom, but by no means always obvious. They must be elucidated through rigorous logical deduction. Once illuminated, the implications may seem self-evident and obvious, but it takes thought to bring the concepts into the light. What you discover through deduction is what the concepts and categories contain and do not contain, and how they relate to each other.

Humans are individuals who use reason to navigate physical reality through purposeful behavior. With this backdrop, an indisputable axiom is established: human action is purposeful behavior.¹ This is both an observed fact, an introspectively confirmed phenomenon, and a tautological truth that cannot be denied without ending up in a contradiction; any attempt to counter the axiom will involve purposeful behavior. Human action is one part of the triality of teleology: thought, speech, and action, and everything that is distinctly human has its basis in our teleological status as purposeful beings. Social science as a whole exists only within the teleological sphere.

Reciprocal Ethics does not solely study action as such; it focuses on interaction as the core of universal ethics. This approach elevates our perspective from the subjective and individual-specific to the intersubjective and universally valid aspects of interaction.

Theory derived from the action axiom within this framework cannot be falsified or verified through empirical observation. This is due to the notorious lack of *ceteris paribus*, i.e., all else being equal, in the humanities. A discrepancy between theory and observation merely reveals that there are other factors and variables that have not been controlled for.

Rationality

Human purposiveness directly implies that people, on the basis of their values, choose among available means to reach concrete ends, a process that originates in reason, i.e. our human ability to draw logical conclusions. This means that all action is rational, in a strictly formal sense, independent of concrete knowledge and concrete values. Even apparently irrational actions only appear irrational to a concrete observer, based on their own values, knowledge and ends. For the acting person, the action is always an attempt to reach a goal, and therefore

¹ Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Yale University Press, 1949, pp. 51-75.

rational. The term "rational action" becomes pleonastic in this context. It does not matter what unfathomable depths the individual's values come from or what their origin is. They are always expressed through individual actions, and nowhere else. Even when we act under strong impulses or emotions, we act rationally. The impulses only affect our value scale, also when it comes to assessing the potential consequences of actions. Every human action is therefore an expression of an ethical position, whether it is conscious or subconscious.

The Special Status of Human Action

There are normally considered to be two separate paths of scientific inquiry. In natural sciences we use empirical data and observation to test our hypotheses. In formal sciences like mathematics we use pure logical deduction that is not falsifiable by empirical observation, which leads to precise knowledge that is not directly related to the imprecise physical world.

Einstein postulated in his 1921 lecture "Geometry and experience" that: "*As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality*".²

This represents the common view that apodictic systems do not convey knowledge of real things, but only represent a pure form of conceptual knowledge that is not directly related to the real world.

The science of human action represents a third category. Since action is an offshoot of reason, the formal structure of action – and all logical implications of the action axiom – are always present in any physical action in life and history.

The Duality of Ethics: Immanence and Transcendence

Cognition and teleological agency are in themselves transcendental phenomena, as they consist of narrative structures detached from direct causality and locality. Human behavior is influenced not only by immediate circumstances and direct stimuli, but also by purely abstract concepts such as the past, future, and identity, thus transcending physical reality. At the same time, ethics is inherent in our cognition and teleological status, and is thus immanent in our human reality. This implies that Reciprocal Ethics is both immanent and

² Albert Einstein, "Geometry and Experience." Lecture delivered to the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin, January 27, 1921. (Available at: https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/Extras/Einstein_geometry/ – paragraph 3).

transcendental, meaning that ethical principles are no longer dependent on external sources like God or "nature," but is inherent in our nature as purposive, acting beings.

A priori Knowledge

Social phenomena cannot be observed directly, but must be observed through the lens of understanding. Understanding precedes any observation of social phenomena. The principles and categories in Reciprocal Ethics are independent of specific situations, and provide an understanding of the structure of ethics as a phenomenon. This thus constitutes a priori knowledge that allows us to observe ethics in practice and enable us to make ethical assessments.

Conceptual thinking is a higher-level brain function that operates on an abstract level, meaning as metaconstructions based on a simplification of reality through the complex operations of our cognitive apparatus. This means that the resulting narrative structures that constitute our cognition and purposiveness cannot be studied through natural scientific methods. They are not physical objects, but mental objects. They cannot be measured, weighed, or studied under a microscope, but must be understood through introspection and logical analysis. This underscores the need for an axiomatic-deductive method to explore the ethical principles underlying human interaction.

Actions as Carriers of Values

Once we understand the universal validity of the action axiom, it becomes clear that actions actually reveal our real values and preferences in all concrete situations. These real values that are revealed through action are fundamentally different from the dreams and wishes we often convey as our values. If I say that I value A over B, but through action show that I always prioritize B over A, then my statement is not correct, and my real values are revealed through my behavior. Action is the objective measuring stick for the validity of espoused values. This means that congruence between speech and action serves as a marker of authenticity, signaling to others reliability and ethical integrity.

Voluntary / Involuntary: Basic Categories of Social Interaction

The action axiom implies two distinct modes of social interaction, each involving participation in an implicit moral ecosystem. The two categories are voluntary, i.e.

self-directed, and involuntary, i.e. other-directed. These are basic, fundamental categories for ethical assessments of relational teleological activity that helps focus our analytical lens.

Self-directed interaction occurs when both parties are acting autonomously in social interaction. Other-directed interaction occurs when one part is forcing their will on the other.

Self-directed Behavior

Self-directed behavior involves voluntary interactions, and leads directly to a moral ecosystem that implies autonomy, peace and individual freedom, which directly implies property rights, natural division of labor and social cooperation. These may appear as normative statements, but are purely descriptive. Autonomy is individual operation according to one's own will. Voluntariness is autonomy in social interaction. Property rights are the voluntary solution to the problem of scarcity, and constitute the only alternative to conflict and involuntary mode of operation in a world of scarce resources and unlimited human needs. Property rights and autonomy are thus directly derived from voluntary interaction. They represent the only available alternatives to violence and coercion in social interaction.

Other-directed Behavior

Other-directed behavior by logical necessity involves violence, coercion, deception and conflict. Involuntary interaction is any action that has material consequences for other individuals against their will. This type of behavior creates an unpredictable environment for social interaction, as the involuntary moral ecosystem allows for extreme measures with no regards for autonomy.

Involuntary Interaction: The Negation of Ethics

Purely descriptive and formal, everything that is voluntary by logical necessity is also according to autonomy in social interaction and thus ethical. That is to say according to interpersonal teleological agency, which is the prerequisite for the existence of ethics. All that is involuntary is to revert to our pre-human state of amorality, non-ethics. The involuntary moral ecosystem is where other animals exist by nature. Humans can use this ecosystem consciously, and choose it or opt out. That is the big difference.

This means distinguishing between voluntary / ethical, and involuntary / unethical, in a purely formal sense, without reference to the content of the actions. These are value-neutral terms for what falls within ethics and what falls outside.

In short, voluntariness can be linked directly to the maintenance of social cohesion, while involuntariness forms the core of a dissolution of society. All the implied content and the actual topography of the two moral ecosystems are only partially discovered, and have yet to be fully illuminated. This is the task of moral philosophy.

Normative Signaling: The Solution to the "is"/"ought" Problem

When we accept that actions reveal one's real values, and see that there are two basic moral ecosystems to deal with, the concept of normative signaling arises as a useful tool for ethical analysis. Your behavior constitutes semiotic signs that signal to those you interact with which of these moral ecosystems you accept in social interaction. If you act in a way that goes against other people's own will, then you effectively signal that you accept an involuntary mode of operation in social interaction, which normatively justifies others actually treating you accordingly.

Normative signaling as a concept can be considered a formalization of The Golden Rule:

Normative: "Be towards others as you would like others to be towards you"

Formal/Descriptive: "You are towards others as you would like others to be towards you"

Normative signaling: "Others are towards you as they would like you to be towards them".

By considering actions as carriers of normative signals about which moral system an individual accepts, we solve the old "is"/"ought" problem, often called Hume's Guillotine. By saying that "is" and "ought" are an integrated process and two aspects of the same phenomenon, we are saying that the "is" of my actions constitutes your "ought" in interaction with me.

Uncertainty in the interpretation of other people's normative signals must be taken into account for the acting person to operate within the voluntary moral ecosystem. It is only

when the signals clearly show acceptance of involuntary social interaction that one can legitimately step into the involuntary moral ecosystem.

This is decentralized ethics in practice, where the individuals themselves determine which material consequences of others' actions are voluntarily accepted.

In this way, we have laid a robust, universally valid and value-neutral foundation for interpersonal, value-laden ethics, and thereby formalized ethics as a science.

Apodictic Validity

All ethical analysis can and must take place within the framework of man's teleological status as acting individuals. Outside of this epistemological framework, ethics has no existence as an ontological phenomenon.

The principles of Reciprocal Ethics are therefore always valid in all their apodictic certainty, because they are value-neutral and universal, while it is concrete actions in a concrete context that bring the value-laden and normative aspects.

There is no act in which the categories of Reciprocal Ethics do not appear complete and perfect. There is no way to imagine interaction in which voluntary and involuntary cannot be clearly and precisely distinguished from each other. There is nothing that only approximately or incompletely fits the ethical category of voluntary interaction. There is only self-directed and other-directed, and in any interaction, all the general theorems of social interaction are valid in their full rigidity and with all their implications. No experience can ever be made that contradicts these statements. Such an experience would be impossible in the first place for the reason that all experience concerning ethics is conditioned by the categories of Reciprocal Ethics, and becomes possible only through their application.³

When assessing the ethics of actions in life and history, one inherently uses the principles of Reciprocal Ethics. The explicit understanding of these principles proportionally increases the quality of one's ethical inquiry.

³ Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Yale University Press, 1949, pp. 87-88. (Action related terms are replaced by ethical terms.)

The Dynamic Nature of Interaction and the Right to Self-defense

Interactions are dynamic and can change character from moment to moment. They are in a state of perpetual flux. The signals you send are not permanent signals about your own moral affiliation, but must be interpreted in real time. This means that in the case of ambiguity in normative signaling, one has a framework that is flexible enough to adjust behavior and social dynamics continuously in order to find out which moral ecosystem one should operate under. A martial artist who "taps out" is a good example of normative signaling which means that further fighting can no longer be considered ethically justifiable, as it is a clear signal that consent to voluntary participation has been withdrawn. If the opponent continues, he has entered the moral ecosystem of involuntary social interaction, thereby legitimizing corresponding involuntary behavior in return. This legitimizes self-defense. Since the signals of interaction must be evaluated in the present, this means that revenge cannot be legitimized if the behavior that would allow action within the involuntary moral ecosystem is no longer present.

Ethics in Life and History

Reality is ambiguous and chaotic, and we always lack information. That complex ethical dilemmas, in many cases, must be reduced to a matter of factual analysis does not reflect a weakness of Reciprocal Ethics, but rather a characteristic of our human existence. We always have limited information and live in a state of uncertainty. This clarifies the need for a solid basic framework for ethical analysis.

The formal approach of Reciprocal Ethics provides the only reasonable way to treat the flawed empirical data in an ethical sense. The basic categories of voluntary and involuntary permeate the ethical assessments of any action. The same action totally changes its ethical character depending on the voluntary aspect. For example, involuntary sex is rape.

Involuntary transfer of property is theft. Involuntary fighting is assault.

The only sensible way to make ethical assessments of people's actions is by analyzing which moral ecosystem they belong to, by looking at the extent to which the other party's actions signaled an acceptance of the actions we are analyzing.

Multidimensional ethical aspects of interaction

There can be several layers of ethics in each action, depending on how the action relates to different individuals. This is why methodological individualism is such an important methodological choice. The same interaction can therefore be both voluntary and involuntary, but in relation to different individuals.

Consider two slaves working in a field. They help and support each other, and their cooperation is voluntary between them. On top of this, you have a slave owner who has forced the couple to work. This means that the same action has elements of both voluntary and involuntary interaction, depending on the concrete interaction we are studying.

This increases the complexity of ethical analysis, but also shows why the binary analytical lens of self-directed and other-directed social interaction is so important, not to simplify but to enable ethical analysis.

Method of Application

Another remarkable aspect of Reciprocal Ethics is that the heuristics of the system are completely analogous to the theory as a whole. The whole theory is implied in the heuristic. The method of application is only a distilled version of the theory. This is a sign of the theory's fundamental robustness, internal coherence and logical consistency.

The heuristic can be summed up in one sentence, which implies the theory as a whole: *In the choice between voluntary and involuntary social interaction, others are towards you as they want you to be towards them.*

This makes Reciprocal Ethics uniquely accessible, tangible and applicable, both in the context of social science, in a societal perspective, in business, and in one's own professional and personal life.

Asymmetry in Social Interaction

There is always a greater or lesser degree of asymmetry in any social interaction. Both information asymmetry and power asymmetry. Information asymmetry is only an ethical

problem if it is deliberately used for one's own material gain at the material expense of others. This is called fraud. If you are exposed to direct pressure or threats from someone in a position of power, this falls under the category of involuntary social interaction.

Externalities

In Reciprocal Ethics there are no externalities, as actions always either have consequences for specific individuals or not. If it cannot be demonstrated that the consequences of a given action violate the voluntary participation of other people, then ethically nothing wrong has happened, as there is no discernable involuntary social interaction to evaluate. To make ethical judgements of such actions based on ideas of indirect harm or potential harm is not ethically valid, as the judgements are purely based on the judging individual's personal convictions.

When it comes to the environmental impact of action, Reciprocal Ethics firmly posits that pollution of the land, air, or water of another individual, against their will or without their legitimately implied or explicit consent, constitutes an involuntary social interaction. This means that environmental degradation is a form of action that is categorized within the realm of the involuntary moral ecosystem. Therefore, any form of environmental harm that impacts the life, health, or property of others must be addressed as a violation of voluntary interaction under the principles of Reciprocal Ethics.

For environmental challenges like ozone depletion or global warming, which are not directly inflicted by individuals, those advocating for societal change must foster mutual understanding and engagement voluntarily, without resorting to coercive means such as political mandates to impose their solutions on others, if they want to remain within the voluntary moral ecosystem.

A Legal Analogy

Reciprocal Ethics provides a form of legalistic framework, analogous to "statutory law" in jurisprudence, where one can assess how various actions in a given context relate to the law. This process establishes a kind of ethical precedent, akin to "case law" in legal studies. The systematization of such ethical precedents thus becomes a pivotal task for moral

philosophers, contributing to the construction of a comprehensive platform for ethical analysis of social interaction.

Moral Relativism

One of the most important aspects of Reciprocal Ethics is that it constitutes a solid defense against moral relativism, while at the same time recognizing the subjectivity of moral values as such. This is based on the formal basic categories for analyzing social interaction; voluntary and involuntary.

Ethical freedom as ethical responsibility and duty

Man has the ability to choose between a voluntary and involuntary modus operandi in social interaction, and therefore has ethical freedom. Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same phenomenon. If you have ethical freedom, you have ethical responsibility for your actions, and a duty to accept their consequences.

Teleological Universality

Reciprocal Ethics is valid for all interactions between teleological beings. This means that it is valid and relevant regardless of cultural, social or historical context, and even valid as an ethical framework in interaction with potential extraterrestrial creatures we come into contact with.

A formalization of Kant's categorical imperative

Kant's categorical imperative states that one should "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law", meaning that an action is only ethically justifiable if it can be universalized without contradictions or adverse consequences.

Reciprocal Ethics makes it clear that only voluntary interaction can be universalized in the way Kant prescribes, as a universalization of the principles of voluntariness and reciprocity will never lead to contradictions. Involuntary interaction immediately leads to self-contradictions, as by undermining the autonomy of others you also undermine your own autonomy through normative signaling.

On personal ethics and moral ideology

In many cases, ethics is about answering deeply personal questions that go beyond social interaction. How should I prioritize conflicting values? How do I live my life in the best way possible? How to be a good person? These are questions to which there is no clear answer, despite the fact that many wise minds have worked hard to try to answer them in a way that any reasonable individual must find satisfactory.

Reciprocal Ethics does not deal with questions directly related to personal conduct in life, but represents a framework for universally applicable, interpersonal ethics in social interactions.

There are countless avenues of moral philosophies, self-help philosophies, and religions that can provide many good answers, but no one can claim to constitute a universally valid truth that everyone must accept. They are all manifestations of what can be called moral ideology, i.e. moral philosophy that is based directly on normative statements and culturally conditioned "truths" without any value-neutral foundation.

What they all have in common is that they can be combined with Reciprocal Ethics, by using the generally valid theory as a framework for judging one's personal ethics as they relate to social interaction, regardless of which moral ideology one personally adheres to.

An ideologue is someone who strongly identifies with and promotes a particular ideology, meaning a system of ideas, beliefs, and ideals. In light of Reciprocal Ethics, past moral philosophers can thus be viewed as moral ideologues in a formal sense, as none have succeeded in establishing a formal, value-neutral, and scientific foundation for their approach. Instead, they have constructed systems of virtues, vices, concepts, and categories from their own values and convictions in a given cultural and historical context.

The Best of All Worlds: Deontology, Consequentialism and Virtue Ethics

Deontological trends have traditionally been champions of universal principles, but have been criticized for entailing an overly rigid ethical framework detached from context.

Consequentialism, on the other hand, has provided a more flexible approach to ethics, but has been criticized for in some cases allowing individuals to be sacrificed for the "greater good".

Reciprocal Ethics continue the strongest aspects of both systems, while at the same time filtering out all the problematic aspects of the two approaches.

Reciprocal Ethics also incorporates elements of virtue ethics. This is manifested through the two fundamental ethical categories of action: 'voluntary' and 'involuntary.' These categories serve as indicators of ethical position and can be interpreted as virtue and vice, providing a natural connection to the focus of virtue ethics on character and morality. Since virtues and vices are not explicitly defined, the framework allows for ethical pluralism, where the individual can define their own virtues and vices within the overarching principles of voluntariness and reciprocity. Thus, it can be argued that Reciprocal Ethics not only integrates but also amplifies elements of virtue ethics, offering a holistic approach to ethical questions.

The ethical principles derived through Reciprocal Ethics are generally valid, universal and purely descriptive. Their application involves looking at concrete, direct consequences of actions from the subjective perspective of the other parties in a social interaction. This means that one starts from value-neutral ethical theory when making ethical judgments, while it is the value-laden actions of other people in a concrete context that bring the normative element. In this way, Reciprocal Ethics becomes a synthesis between concepts that have previously been considered contradictory: rigid and flexible, general and personal, universal and subjective, descriptive and prescriptive, value-neutral and value-laden.

Reciprocal Ethics does not challenge these approaches directly. Instead, it consolidates them by placing them on a solid epistemological and methodological foundation, which makes all the approaches suddenly make sense as a unified whole, solving issues with excessive rigidity, excessive flexibility, and conflict between virtues.

With the integration of deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics, and all the implications of this endeavor, Reciprocal Ethics establishes itself as a fundamentally new ethical system that encompasses all previous attempts to establish ethical theory.

Reciprocal Ethics as the "Heliocentrism" of Moral Philosophy

Historically, moral philosophers have assumed that there are no fundamental objective ethical principles, and have operated on the idea that it is the moral philosopher's task to delve into the matter in order to construct such a framework of principles. This can be considered an ethical "geocentrism", where one starts from the fact that oneself is the origin of ethical principles. Reciprocal Ethics makes it clear that there absolutely are objective ethical principles, which are universal and context-independent, thus establishing a kind of ethical "heliocentrism" in the form of a new, controversial ethical paradigm. Reciprocal Ethics renders obvious that ethical principles are discovered as direct implications of our purposiveness, and have a true existence beyond the subjective mind of the moral philosopher.

When the objectivity of the principles is pointed out, it is important to specify that the principles are not detached from man and objective in an absolute or ontological sense, but rather closely integrated into our existence as purposeful beings and thus completely, intersubjectively universal.

That ethical principles are something that must be discovered and elucidated, and not something that can be constructed, is a new thought that ethics will need time to absorb. But like astronomers had to come to terms with heliocentrism, ethicists in the future will find themselves compelled to accept Reciprocal Ethics as the formal, scientific approach to the subject.

Implications for the Social Sciences

The praxeological framework with the axiom of action at its center is an insight originating from Ludwig von Mises, the founder of the Austrian school of economics. In his major work "Human Action" from 1949, he uses a significant part of the book to establish the axiom of action as the basic starting point for deriving the implications of purposeful behavior in the form of economic theory, and to defend the concept in the face of potential criticism. His strong defense of the validity of the action axiom is as relevant today as it was then. Many of Mises' insights are prevalent in this paper, and his thorough, purely descriptive and logically precise language invites further reading of his works.

Ludwig von Mises himself believed that economics was only the hitherto best-elucidated part of the study of human action, praxeology, and that this larger field was what linked all the social sciences together. The system's purely descriptive nature has unfortunately prevented wide adoption in branches other than economic theory.

The introduction of normative signaling as the solution to the "is"/"ought" problem turns the praxeological method into a living dynamic system, which is actually applicable in other branches of the social sciences, such as ethics, law, political theory and psychology. An acceptance of the validity of Reciprocal Ethics will have far-reaching implications, especially for ethics as a discipline, but also for social science in general.

Final Considerations

On Speech

Speech is also action, but does not generally have physical consequences. Hence realistic threats and verbal pressure in a situation of power asymmetry constitute the only forms of speech that can be subject to ethical analysis. So-called "hate speech" is not recognized as having a separate epistemic existence within the framework of Reciprocal Ethics.

Thought and speech are, like thought and action, also congeneric, and two aspects of the same phenomenon. Thought is fundamentally internalized speech. Without free speech, there is no free thought.⁴ When individuals are able to think and speak without coercion, society is better able to adapt to the changing social environment by being able to compute the ever approaching horizon of uncertainty. This is an integral part of how a voluntary society maintains social cohesion.

On Coercion

The definition of the term coercion in Reciprocal Ethics is very precise: Coercion is the use of physical force to subject other individuals to your own will. Circumstances cannot exercise coercion, as this would deprive the concept of all explanatory power. Under such a definition, we would be forced to breathe, eat and sleep. This makes no sense in ethical terms. Coercion is only acceptable in the face of actions that signal acceptance of involuntary social

⁴ Jordan B. Peterson, "The Importance of Being Ethical." Hoover Institution, April 20, 2022. (Available at: <https://youtu.be/DcA5TotAkhs?t=1745>)

interaction, as a way of ensuring the restoration of voluntary interaction. Operating within the involuntary moral ecosystem then becomes a necessary measure for safeguarding voluntary social interaction.

On Egoism

Formal egoism, i.e. that people act by logical necessity to achieve their own ends, is a fundamental fact of our human existence, and says nothing about the contradiction between egoism and altruism as sets of values. Reciprocal Ethics is indifferent to the ultimate ends of actions, and both egoism and altruism can exist within the voluntary moral ecosystem.

On the Right to Life

The primary implication of voluntary interaction, seen as autonomy in social interaction, is a right to be an autonomous teleological agent. This implies a right to self-preservation within the limits of voluntary social interaction, and a right to not have your teleological agency taken away, but does not directly deal with any right to life.

On Non-purposeful Behavior

Reflexes and instincts do not represent purposeful behavior, and as far as they are not actions, they cannot be subject to ethical assessment in any meaningful way. This kind of behavior is just as foreign to ethics as the behavior of animals and plants.

On Collectives

A collective always operates through one or more individuals. Collectives as so-called "emergent phenomena" only have an existence in the form of shared ideas in individual minds, which shape individual behavior. It is the meaning that the individuals themselves and everyone involved attribute to their actions, that determines the character of the action. It is police officers who arrest individuals, not the state. If an armed group occupies a place, then it is the opinion of all those affected by this that determines whether this is an act on behalf of the nation. We must always look at the interpretation of the individuals involved in order to say something about the collective, because a social collective has no existence beyond the actions of its individual members. The existence of a collective unfolds through the actions of the individual actors who make up the collective as a whole. It is not possible for a collective to act in any other way than through individual actions.⁵ The existence of the individual as the

⁵ Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Yale University Press, 1949, p. 91.

indivisible social unit of which all collectives are composed is undeniable. This means that any understanding of collectives must start with analyzing individuals. Social justice is therefore the institutionalization of principles of individual justice at a societal level.

Historical Perspectives on Action as a Carrier of Values

There are countless references in history and literature to action as the thing that conveys real values, and thus the primary indicator of what moral ecosystem an acting individual really operates under. Here follows a brief overview:

"Actions speak louder than words" – This saying is well known and emphasizes that what you do is more important than what you say.

"By their fruits, you shall know them" – This statement from the Bible (Matthew 7:16) shows that it is the works that reveal a person's true character.

"The best index to a person's character is how he treats people who can't do him any good, and how he treats people who can't fight back" – This quote by Abigail Van Buren points to how actions in asymmetric power relationships reveal character.

"You are what you do, not what you say you'll do" – This quote is often attributed to Carl Jung and highlights the gap between intention and action.

"Talk is cheap" – A popular saying that emphasizes that actions have more value than words alone.

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions" – This expression emphasizes that good intentions are not sufficient; it is the actions that count.

On the Margins

Children

Children are teleological agents within the framework of Reciprocal Ethics, with limited capacities for exerting will and power, and only a rudimentary understanding of long term

consequences. This means that there is a substantial power- and information asymmetry between children and adults, which in turn places a special burden on the adults when it comes to interaction with children. If a child harms others, proportional force can be utilized to restore voluntary interaction. If a child makes decisions that hurt their own well-being against their will, i.e. by them not understanding the consequences, force can similarly be used to correct the behavior and ensure the well-being of the child.

Parents have intentionally brought children into the world without their consent, and thereby assume a special ethical obligation. They are responsible for maintaining the children's well-being until they can operate independently as fully cognizant teleological beings. This responsibility is rooted in Reciprocal Ethics' core dichotomy of voluntary versus involuntary interaction, making the role of parents not just a social convention but a principled imperative within this ethical system.

The Cognitively Impaired

Some human beings have cognitive impairment, either as a consequence of natural development, or as an induced state based on rational choices. As far as their behavior is classified as purposeful action, all the principles of Reciprocal Ethics are valid for any social interaction with them. Practically speaking, cognitively impaired adults are in a similar ethical position as children, where they have a right to agency, but limited abilities when it comes to assessing consequences and acting in their own self interest. Cognitive impairment often leads to power- or information asymmetry, which means that extra caution needs to be taken by the other party in any social interaction, to make sure this power imbalance is not taken advantage of in a way that makes the interaction involuntary on the part of the cognitively impaired person.

Abortion

The issue of abortion is often an ethical minefield, but within Reciprocal Ethics, it can be viewed through the lens of "will to live" combined with "ability to live". While human in the biological sense, a fetus that has not sufficiently developed to exist outside the mother's womb cannot be considered an individual in the social sense, as they are functionally and physiologically dependent on another person's body for mere survival. Abortions in such cases fall outside the strict ethical guidelines. When a fetus reaches a developmental stage where it could survive with the help of medical technology, its status shifts to that of a

proto-teleological actor who operates within the framework of Reciprocal Ethics. This means that a fetus that could survive outside the mother has a right to voluntary interaction, unless it poses physical harm for a teleological being that can't be mitigated within the voluntary moral ecosystem. This provides a principally firm and flexible framework for considering the ethics surrounding abortion.

Other Animals

We share most things with other animals, such as emotions, impulses, and primary agency in the form of a "will to live", but they lack the teleological aspect where time and identity exist.⁶ Animals' lack of a developed concept of identity and time plays a critical role in their amorality. Without an understanding of themselves over time as continuous subjects, other animals lack the ability to see their behavior as part of a larger narrative context, which is necessary to establish long-term goals or make assessments based on past experiences and future consequences.

Other animals thus do not have what we call corporate agency; they do not have the cognitive ability to take part in social organization, and cannot have ethical duties⁷. In the framework of Reciprocal Ethics, this distinction is crucial for understanding our ethical obligations toward animals. As far as animal behavior does not cause harm to a teleological being, we must act in accordance with the principles of voluntary interaction. Curtailing an animal's state of being does not undermine its well-being within this framework. The act of killing animals, in this context, as it does not involve involuntary social interaction in any teleological sense, has no intrinsic moral status. The central principle therefore becomes to not inflict suffering on animals unless there is an immediate material threat. This creates a nuanced and principally consistent framework for human relations with other animals.

It can be argued that some animals, like dolphins, elephants, corvids or other primates like chimpanzees and gorillas, have a form of teleological agency. As far as their behavior is classified within the purposive realm of teleology, they too must be considered part of the

⁶ Bob Carter and Nickie Charles, "Animals, Agency and Resistance." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 2013. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jtsb.12019>. (Inspired by the concept of "primary agency.")

⁷ Bob Carter and Nickie Charles, "Animals, Agency and Resistance." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 2013. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jtsb.12019>. (Inspired by the concept of "corporate agency.")

ethical realm, and must be treated as such. The same goes for any other form of life that we classify as teleological in nature.

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Methodological Note

This work is mainly based on pure deduction from axioms using the axiomatic-deductive method, and represents my own thoughts. Appeal to authority is a logical fallacy in logical discourse, and thus I have referenced only a very few sources, such as Mises, who constructed the praxeological framework I am utilizing.

I extend my gratitude to my dear mother for her patience during all the hours on the phone, and her continued support.

The lucid insights of Ludwig von Mises have been the primary inspiration for this paper, and I leave you with his motto: *Tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito.* ("Do not give into evil, but proceed to fight ever more boldly against it").

Dedicated to Ludwig, my loving son.