



Morality for Humans: Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science

Mark Johnson

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What is the difference between right and wrong? This is no easy question to answer, yet we constantly try to make it so, frequently appealing to some hidden cache of cut-and-dried absolutes, whether drawn from God, universal reason, or societal authority. Combining cognitive science with a pragmatist philosophical framework in *Morality for Humans: Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science*, Mark Johnson argues that appealing solely to absolute principles and values is not only scientifically unsound but even morally suspect. He shows that the standards for the kinds of people we should be and how we should treat one another—which we often think of as universal—are in fact frequently subject to change. And we should be okay with that. Taking context into consideration, he offers a remarkably nuanced, naturalistic view of ethics that sees us creatively adapt our standards according to given needs, emerging problems, and social interactions.

Ethical naturalism is not just a revamped form of relativism. Indeed, Johnson attempts to overcome the absolutist-versus-relativist impasse that has been one of the most intractable problems in the history of philosophy. He does so through a careful and inclusive look at the many ways we reason about right and wrong. Much of our moral thought, he shows, is automatic and intuitive, gut feelings that we follow up and attempt to justify with rational analysis and argument. However, good moral deliberation is not limited merely to intuitive judgments supported after the fact by reasoning. Johnson points out a crucial third element: we *imagine* how our decisions will play out, how we or the world would change with each action we might take. Plumbing this imaginative dimension of moral reasoning, he provides a psychologically sophisticated view of moral problem solving, one perfectly suited for the embodied, culturally embedded, and ever-developing human creatures that we are.

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