

Ethics professors are no more ethical than the rest of us

Tom Whipple, Science Editor

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<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ethics-professors-don-t-walk-the-walk-d7n6097m8>



Chidi Anagonye, a moral philosopher in the US sitcom *The Good Place*, obsesses so much about ethics that he is sent to hell

COLLEEN HAYES/NBC VIA GETTY IMAGES

Max Scheler, the German ethicist, was once asked if he was a hypocrite, given the clear difference between the life he advocated and the one he led. “Signposts,” he explained, “do not walk in the direction they point to.”

Today’s ethics professors would recognise the sentiment - a study has shown that despite spending their lives thinking about how to live a better life, in almost every area they seem to be no more likely to achieve it than the rest of us.

The research, published in the journal *Philosophical Psychology*, investigated both the views and the behaviour of 417 professors - some ethicists, some not. The researchers wanted to know how their academic opinion correlated with their personal actions. They might be utilitarians, say, but did they sign up to the organ register? Or they could believe in deontological ethics, but do these high-powered professors also believe the primacy of duty extends to regularly phoning their mum?



Ethicists are more likely to say that eating meat is wrong and to be vegetarian
NATASHA BREEN/REDA&CO/UGC/GETTY IMAGES

The answer is, not really. As you would expect, ethicists believed you should give significantly more to charity, advocating 6.9 per cent of income compared with about 5 per cent for non-ethicists. However, when it came to actually doing it, they gave exactly the same amount: 4.6 per cent. Their beliefs had no effect on their actions.

Similarly the study, conducted among German-speaking professors, found that there were no differences in organ donation, blood donation or willingness to speak to their mum. On the latter category, at least, that was not a case of neglect. German academics are, whatever the specialism, dutiful children, with about 85 per cent calling home at least twice a month.

Philipp Schönegger, of St Andrews University, acknowledged that overall this might be surprising - a little like finding an English professor didn't like reading books. "You would think that thinking about ethics all day long would have some effect on how you act," he said. "Surely it should change your behaviour?"

But it did not — and not just in Germany. The study was a replication of a similar project that found the same result among English speaking ethicists. "Maybe ethicists are good at pointing people in the right direction, but not in leading?" he suggested.

One intriguing finding was that there was one area in which ethicists did have very different views from non-ethicists, and also acted on them. They were far more likely to say both that eating meat is wrong and to be vegetarian.

Only a quarter of ethicists reported eating meat at the last meal, compared to 40 per cent among other professors.

Mr Schönegger, who phones his mother "every Saturday", said this pointed to a possible value to his chosen discipline after all. "One reason that you might think ethics does have some good is it might prioritise really important issues, like not eating meat," he said. There is, he acknowledged, another

reason why they may obey their principles on vegetarianism but not other areas: the hypocrisy is more apparent. "You can say that giving to charity is really important, but then just not do it. Nobody catches you out."

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Rollo Burgess

1 HOUR AGO

Yet another example of empirical research evidencing things that anyone familiar with the area under question would already know.

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CHRISTOPHER ROBBINS

1 HOUR AGO

A well known philosopher wrote a book entitled 'Moral Literacy; how to do the right thing'. Later he was accused of sexual harassment and forced to resign his professorship

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julia mcshane

2 HOURS AGO

Ohhh - Really ? No surprises there then .

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Ross

3 HOURS AGO

Their beliefs had no effect on their actions. No, that is not what it means. It shows that their **teachings** had no effect on their actions. What any of them believe is nowhere revealed. And if they think that vegetarianism is "the most important thing" then they are definitely not functioning well: avoiding strife and promoting justice and honesty are all far more important.

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Edward Craig

6 HOURS AGO *Edited*

Massive spoiler in the picture caption! !

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Auslawyer

7 HOURS AGO

My father married a woman who said she taught ethics. She kept all the money when he died. Ethics indeed!

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Bodger

7 HOURS AGO

Auslawyer

But, in the absence of a will, she would automatically be entitled to all his money. He married her!

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•  R

Richard Smith

7 HOURS AGO

True morality or virtue incurs costs - having to sacrifice one's interests for others as the occasion demands. Vegetarianism is a costless exercise and so the virtue it is supposed to signal is paper thin. Ethics professors are just like the rest of us - they are only human after all.

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Turnbacktime

7 HOURS AGO

There is a saying. Those who can - do, those that can't teach. Maybe this is an example.

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Ethics professors are no more ethical than the rest of us

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Doc Savage

7 HOURS AGO

Turnbacktime

Those that can't teach... what? What comes next? Punctuation is key!

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Peter Dawe

5 HOURS AGO

Doc Savage

Those that can't teach teach teachers.

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Peter

7 HOURS AGO

Why should they be? Are all lawyers more law abiding than the rest of us?

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Dave Starman

7 HOURS AGO

What about the University of Ethics in Colchester?

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Colin Gordon

8 HOURS AGO

Swap the word ethicists for socialists and you sum up the abject failure of that ideology wherever it's been tried.

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Murray Steele

8 HOURS AGO

And the value of this research is? Whoever funded this to prove ethics professors are not always ethical is a mug. Perhaps they fund my research to prove the world is round by flying first class to various attractive extremities of the globe.

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Doc Savage

8 HOURS AGO

We are actually discussing levels of development here. Kohlberg did a bunch of experiments on this. The higher your cognitive complexity, the less moral you might be because you know morality is subjective and does not exist. We align ourselves socially to a moral context, but in reality, it is personal and not always useful. We can have a moral story, but as far as individuals go, it depends on your capacity to think complexly as to whether you believe morals to exist.

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Jeremy Shearmur

7 HOURS AGO

Doc Savage

'The higher your cognitive complexity, the less moral you might be because you know morality is subjective and does not exist.' Perhaps if you were to study some recent work in ethics, you'd find out that this judgement is more controversial than you seem to think!

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Ethics professors are no more ethical than the rest of us

Doc Savage

7 HOURS AGO

Jeremy Shearmur

The problem is outlined in the article. The people teaching ethics are no more ethical than anyone else. And if they are low complex thinkers, then their interpretation of what it is to be moral or ethical will be different to mine, and ultimately futile. We can argue it all day. The fact is, if someone does not understand or is incapable of grasping my thinking, they will filter it through their limited perspective and come to the wrong conclusion. Morality is subjective.

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Jeremy Shearmur

6 HOURS AGO

Doc Savage

I am sorry, but your conclusion does not follow from the argument that you offered. Consider the following: suppose that we were engaged in an argument about some issue in macroeconomics. It might be the case that my grasp of the mathematics involved is poor, and I'm not able to follow what is, in fact, a cogent argument against the view that I have been championing. This would show that my intellectual skills in this area are defective, not that macroeconomics is subjective.

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Matt - Not the other one

8 HOURS AGO

Massive spoiler for the Good Place there.

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David Roberts

9 HOURS AGO

Do as I say, not as I do as they used to say

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Doc Savage

8 HOURS AGO

David Roberts

This is in the Labour manifesto. With all their crooked politicians spouting hyperbole on morality, then getting caught doing those exact things, they are akin to the Catholic Church!

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MichaelS

7 HOURS AGO

Doc Savage

I think you have filtered your understanding of religion through your limited perspective (and personal prejudice) and come to the wrong conclusion. As you also say, people teaching (or

preaching) ethics are no more moral than anyone else, but you then damn some of them for setting moral standards in the first place. The religion you criticise gave us the basis of the morality in our country, but I suppose in a country with no moral standards no-one can be criticised for immoral behavior. I would rather that people set standards and sometimes fail, than live with no standards at all.

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Doc Savage

7 HOURS AGO

MichaelS

I think my understanding of religion is perfectly fine, having researched it and having a PhD in a cognitive science. Do you? The religion I criticise did NOT give us the basis of morality and this just goes to show the very limited perspective of people who have superstitious beliefs. The human race was already doing every single thing via evolution before religion stole it and wrote it down. You fundamentally misunderstand "moral standards", so I am guessing you are American. Uneducated, superstitious and sanctimonious.

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kayjays

9 HOURS AGO

Ethics, morals and religion have always been the midwife and handmaiden of hypocrisy.

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Matt - Not the other one

8 HOURS AGO

kayjays

Yeah. In the same way that light has always been the midwife and handmaiden of darkness.

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MichaelS

7 HOURS AGO

kayjays

Yes, let's live without morals. What could possibly go wrong?

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jcm

11 HOURS AGO

If theory predicts one thing but in practice things are different then your theory is wrong and you are missing something.

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David Illsley

12 HOURS AGO

A lot of priests will tell you having sex with children is wrong.....

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George Monbiot

11 HOURS AGO

David Illsley

Edited

So will many religious Rochdale residents.

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Doc Savage

8 HOURS AGO

George Monbiot

Edited

What they say to your face isn't what they believe. It's allowed in their books...

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MichaelS

6 HOURS AGO

Doc Savage

Gibberish! Where does Christianity tolerate child abuse? I do however recall non-religious organisations in the 1970s advocating it; PIE was affiliated to the National Council for Civil Liberties and its policies supported by many atheists in the young liberals. Thank goodness religious organisations and other moral people spoke out against these "morals of abuse" and had the organisations criminalised. The reality is that you are quite happy to condemn a moral body because it has some bad apples, yet ignore the experience of what happened when people of no morals were given free rein.

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JT

8 HOURS AGO

George Monbiot

As will many non-religious ones...

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MichaelS

6 HOURS AGO

JT

Indeed, but never pass up the opportunity to criticise religion!

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Michaels

7 HOURS AGO

David Illsley

So will many abusing atheists. But let's ignore them...

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8  *This message was deleted.*

Michaels

6 HOURS AGO

Doc Savage

What an arrogant and deluded person you are (well loving up to the name "savage")! Who said anything about "arbitrators"? You obviously don't know what the word means, or can't understand the difference between setting standards and sitting in judgement of them. You do know that spouting hate against religion, something I suspect you frequently indulge in, is forbidden in these columns?

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25/03/2019 17:15