

THE ETHICAL DILEMMA IN A HUMAN SOCIETY A BRIEF CRITICAL READING OF ETHICAL THEORIES

Prof. Dr. SAMAH KHALED ZAHRA

Professor of Personality and Social Psychology- Ain Shams University-Egypt

Received: 30/05/2026

Accepted: 06/06/2026

Published: 14/06/2026

ABSTRACT

The current article aims, through examining theories of ethics, to identify the causes of the moral decline that our contemporary human society is suffering from. This is done through a brief critical reading of the theories, including what they have added and what has been taken away from them, and when ethics is an influential factor or an independent variable, then, it is a dependent factor or a variable dependent on other influential factors? All of this is in order to identify the causes of this decline and treat it as much as possible.

Keywords: The ethical dilemma, human society, critical reading, theories of ethics.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Periodic and updated United Nations reports indicate the multiplicity and exacerbation of problems facing human society in large segments of its nations—ranging from economic problems such as the unequal distribution of resources, manifested in poverty and hunger, to environmental problems such as pollution and desertification, to political problems such as wars and armed conflicts, and social problems such as family breakdown, rising suicide rates, and an increasing prevalence of mental illness. All of this constitutes a setback suffered by contemporary human society as a whole. Undoubtedly, the absence or decline of morality, the standard for regulating human behavior, is a stark example of the growing woes afflicting contemporary societies.

Despite advancements in science and technology, they have failed to adequately bring happiness to humanity. On the contrary, moral decline has manifested in the increased misuse of these machines and tools against the common good.

This article critically examines this predicament and its underlying causes, seeking solutions.

2.0 CONCEPTS COVERED IN THIS ARTICLE

2.1 The ethical dilemma:

The dilemma represents the essence of man and his higher values, and it is represented in the conflict between two or more ethical values, so that man becomes subject to choice between

what is actually and what should be, and the standard of what should be, and when it is right and good and when it is evil and wrong. (Al-Afrawi, Iman Naeem: 2011: 389-427).

2.2 Human Society:

Human society is a complex social and historical organization. It consists of a group of individuals (Homo sapiens) who live on planet Earth, interact within shared structural and cultural relationships, and contribute to the production of knowledge, values, and sustainable development. Humans are social beings by nature, and their humanity is only complete through living with and sharing life with others, thus creating a "human space" that embodies their lived experience and development. (Wikipedia: 2026: Human Society).

Human societies have passed through several stages throughout history, from primitive societies to slavery, then feudalism, and finally capitalist and socialist societies, within the context of the development of the means of production and social relations. (Omran, Hani: 2026: Lectures in Sociology: https://www.spu.edu.sy/downloads/files/1555780583_Lecture .)

2.3 Critical Reading:

Critical reading is the process of analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating a text in depth. In this case, the text is represented by various ethical theories. (Wikipedia: 2026: Critical Reading).

2.4 Ethical Theories:

Ethical theories are organized philosophical frameworks that seek to explain and define what is "right" or "wrong" and what is "good" or "evil" in human behavior. These theories serve as analytical tools to guide ethical decision-making and the resolution of social dilemmas by focusing on either the consequences of actions, duties and rules, or personal virtues. <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0449/chapters/10.11647/obp.0449.02>.

3.0 A BRIEF CRITICAL READING OF ETHICAL THEORIES:

Ethical theories vary, ranging from biological and evolutionary to social, philosophical, and finally, psychological. Each seeks to understand the origin of values and human moral behavior.

Below is a brief overview of the intellectual foundations of each, with a more detailed examination of psychological theory:

3.1 The biological evolutionary theory:

This theory, proposed by Darwin and developed by Richard Dawkins, posits that morality exists in all living beings, and that morality is not absolute but rather a product of genetic

predispositions that evolve through natural selection for the purpose of adaptation and survival. Initially, selfishness emerged, based on the prioritization of the individual's own interests over others. This selfish behavior then evolved into altruism through natural selection when the group realized that the individual's interest lay in cooperating with others of their kind. However, patterns of altruistic behavior do not appear consistently among all members of the same species; behaviors are still largely governed by utilitarianism. (Sra'iah, Huda: 2025: 227-262).

3.2 Social theory:

It interprets and views ethics as rules established by society to regulate life. It is the application of ethics in practical reality, and focuses on the development of human relations and social interaction among people. It deals with addressing social, political, and economic problems through the principles of applied ethics. (Musa, Muhammad Yusuf: 2017: 43-94).

3.3 Philosophical theory:

This theory studies moral judgments themselves, meaning that it sets rules of conduct on which morality is interpreted, in what is called "normative morality," and examines concepts such as virtue morality, utilitarianism, and duty morality. (Spinoza: 2026: Chapter 6).

3.4 Psychological Theory:

These theories explain morality and link it to the psychological and inner state of the psyche. They consider morality to be a state of mind that compels it to act and behave in a certain way. They also study moral emotions such as empathy or guilt, and examine social knowledge, emotional responses to moral situations, and moral development.

Ethical theories vary, each representing a different perspective from which its proponents explain human behavior. Examples include:

1. Behavioral Theory: This theory explains moral behavior through the processes of reward and punishment, and the subsequent reinforcement of moral behavior as a reward, or the discouragement of immoral behavior as a punishment.

2. Psychoanalytic Theory: This theory explains moral behavior within the framework of the formation of conscience and ideals that the individual internalizes during the first five years of life from their parents. These attempts drive the child to acquire and embody the ethics of their parents and the society to which they belong.

3. Social Learning Theory: This theory explains moral behavior within the framework of observation, imitation, and mimicry, and the resulting reinforcement through reward or its absence.

4. Cognitive theory: This theory views moral development as a part of cognitive development, occurring through processes of maturation and experience within social interaction situations. According to Piaget's theory, moral behavior develops alongside stages of mental development; it begins with moral commitment motivated by the desire for reward and avoidance of punishment, then progresses to respect for authority, and finally develops towards serving the common good, according to the individual's level of development and subjective standards. (Khalil, Attia, and Al-Shazly, Mahmoud: 2010: Unit Ten).

The concept of moral intelligence emerged in the early 1990s to describe the degree to which an individual constructively engages with themselves and with the common good to achieve the public good. Among the most important aspects of Gardner's theory in this regard are: empathy, which is the ability to understand and consider the feelings of others; the ability to balance self-control, emotion, and compassion; respect for others and their rights, just as we respect our own; and finally, tolerance, which involves forgiving the mistakes of others and overcoming stressful situations with them. The more mature and balanced one's emotions become, the further one moves away from bias, prejudice, and excessive self-centeredness. (Saleh, Ali Abdul Rahim: 2025: 1-18).

From the preceding presentation of the theories, the following can be concluded:

1. Each theory focused on its own epistemological perspective in explaining ethics, ranging from biological and social to philosophical and finally psychological viewpoints.
2. Ethics is considered a product of all these perspectives combined. It can be explained, its development and causes investigated, and its relationship to all variables explored through the integration of the theoretical frameworks of all these theories collectively. Sometimes, the theory acts as the driving force, becoming an independent variable when it determines whether or not ethical behavior is present. At other times, it acts as the dependent variable when influenced by the surrounding environment of individuals, groups, and societies.
3. 3-These theories are criticized for failing to analyze the cause or causes of the decline afflicting contemporary human society as a whole. With the development of communication and transportation, human culture has become a unified, holistic entity with diverse manifestations, reflecting the differences in national and societal cultures within each country.
4. Based on the preceding data, a possible explanation for the moral decline afflicting our contemporary human society can be the absence of a widespread, constructive ethical model that considers the common good and maintains balance between this and the individual good, this model is not common; on the contrary, its opposite is more prevalent.

To generalize this constructive model within human society, we need the following:

- A. Everyone's awareness of the importance of balanced, cooperative behavior and that it will benefit everyone.
- B. This awareness creates complete self-conviction, self-motivation, and a specific drive for behavior; for no living being behaves without a motive.
- C. This collective awareness is complemented by collective behavior, which manifests as the entire society mobilizing to achieve and maintain this balanced, cooperative conduct.
- D. This mass societal movement works to change the rules of systems driven by a small group of individuals pursuing limited, selfish interests. These systems are then forced to yield to change by the vast majority, even if they don't act spontaneously. Once the group is homogeneous, it will be capable of influencing change.

Undoubtedly, the global problems facing modern humanity are sufficient, over time, to bring about this shift in public awareness and, consequently, behavior, however long it may take. If this doesn't happen, the inevitable end will be the demise of the collective due to the selfishness of a small minority that has controlled its destiny.

REFERENCES

1. Al-Afrawi, Iman Naeem: 2011: The Problematic Nature of Ethical Standards Among Intellectual Schools of Thought – A Critical Reading, Journal of Arts of Basra, University of Basra, College of Arts, Baghdad, Iraq.
2. Khalil, Atiya, and Al-Shazly, Mahmoud: 2010: Ethics Between the Sciences of Education and Psychology, Dar Al-Bidaya, Jordan.
3. Moussa, Muhammad Yusuf: 2017: Studies in the Philosophy of Ethics: Chapters Four and Five, Hindawi Publishing, Egypt.
4. Omran, Hani: 2026: Lectures in Sociology: https://www.spu.edu.sy/downloads/files/1555780583_Lecture
5. Saleh, Ali Abdul Rahim: 2025: Ethics in Psychology: Theories of Personality and Social Knowledge, Chapter Nine, Refereed Library Publications Series, The Arab Psychological Book, Library Publications in Medical and Psychological Sciences, Issue 84, Towards an Arab School in Psychological Sciences, Arab Psychological Sciences Foundation, Tunisia.
6. Sarai'iya, Huda: 2025: Evolutionary Ethics in Richard Dawkins: Journal of Studies: Issue 1, Volume 16: Abdelhamid Mehri University, Constantine.
7. Spinoza: 2026: Theory of Ethics: Hindawi Publishing Foundation website, Egypt.
8. Theories of Ethics: <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0449/chapters/10.11647/obp.0449.02>
9. Wikipedia: 2026: Human Society, A Critical Reading.