

## POPPER'S ETHICS — MORALISING OR NOT?

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Although his work comprises nearly all fields of philosophy, Popper has not provided us with a systematic conception of ethics. In this paper, I will nevertheless try to reconstruct some fragments of a Popperian ethics.

Popper puts forward six main theses about ethics: 1) Ethics is not a science. 2) Norms and standards cannot be logically derived from facts. 3) There are criteria to distinguish between better and worse conceptions of morality. 4) Like scientific theories, norms and standards cannot be justified, but only criticised with reference to their consequences. 5) Moral progress through experience is possible. 6) The most important maxim of an ethics of critical rationalism is “minimise pain”. Therefore I call Popper’s ethical position “negative consequentialism”.

I will then discuss the question whether Popper’s ethics can be regarded as “moralising”. A moralising conception of ethics can be defined as one that addresses primarily the individual and tends to ignore structural or institutional problems of societies and thereby the problems of actors in the political sphere. Elements of moralising and anti-moralising positions can both be found in Popper’s writings, but in sum, I would not regard him as a “moraliser”.

Nevertheless, I will conclude by pointing to an element that Popper’s ethics is lacking, and propose a way of filling this gap. Critical rationalist ethics needs a ‘material’ element: the idea of consensus. In spelling out the details of this idea, methods and results from economics in the tradition of J. M. Buchanan (*The Limits of Liberty*, Chicago 1975) can be employed: Economics can derive general agreement from individual advantages and introduce the important idea of a hierarchy of different levels of consensus. I will present this position in detail and show how economics can, in this way, both fill a gap in Popper’s ethics and remove its remaining moralising elements.