

# **„Common Morality“ Approaches for Ethics of Environmental Health**

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# 1. The imperative for „common morality“

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The moral philosophy underlying the recommendations of the International Commission of Radiological Protection (ICRP) is not always made explicit.

Elements of utilitarian and deontological ethics, sometimes of virtue ethics have been identified.

Question: Is it appropriate in a more and more globalized world to base the recommendations of an international advisory body such as ICRP on particular theories of “Western” ethics?

# 1. The imperative for „common morality“

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<b>World Region</b>	<b>Population (2006, estimated)</b>	<b>Population % of total</b>
Africa	915 million	14.1 %
Asia	3,668 million	56.4 %
Europe	807 million	12.4 %
Middle East	190 million	2.9 %
North America	331 million	5.1 %
Latin America / Caribbean	554 million	8.5 %
Australia / Oceania	34 million	0.5 %
WORLD TOTAL	6,500 million	100.0 %

# 1. The imperative for „common morality“

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Religion	Followers (2006, estimated)	Followers % of total
Christianity	2,100 million	41.2 %
Islam	1,300 million	25.5 %
Hinduism	900 million	17.6 %
Chinese Traditional Religions	400 million	7.8 %
Buddhism	380 million	7.5 %
Judaism	14 million	0.28 %
Baha' i Faith	7 million	0.14 %
WORLD TOTAL	5,100 million	100.0 %

# 1. The imperative for „common morality“

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Nuclear power reactors in operation:

world-wide 434, Asia, Africa and the Middle East 115

Nuclear power reactors under construction:

world-wide 64, Asia, Africa and the Middle East 43

Nuclear power reactors planned:

world-wide 160, Asia, Africa and the Middle East 102

Computer tomography:

high income countries 10 – 30 units per million people

low income countries 0 – 2 units per million people

Asia, Africa and the Middle East catching up.

# 1. The imperative for „common morality“

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(1)

Ethics in the world today cannot be  
exclusively “Western” ethics

## 2. Principles of Biomedical Ethics

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One of the most widely used frameworks of biomedical ethics is the one developed by Beauchamp and Childress (1979).

It is based on four principles

- 1) Autonomy
- 2) Non-Maleficence
- 3) Beneficence
- 4) Justice

These are thought to be rooted in “common morality”, i.e. “not relative to cultures or individuals, because it transcends both”.

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## 2. Principles of Biomedical Ethics

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The four principles have *prima facie* validity, which means that they apply as long as there is no conflict between them. If there is, they need “balancing”.

The principles also need “specification” in order to apply them in different contexts.

How to do all this is the matter of long discussions in Beauchamp and Childress’ book.



## 2. Principles of Biomedical Ethics

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Assuming that the principles of biomedical ethics proposed by Beauchamp and Childress are indeed part of “common morality”, can they be of use in the context of radiation protection?

## 2. Principles of Biomedical Ethics

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Justification - Any decision that alters the radiation exposure situation should do more good than harm.

Optimization - The likelihood of exposure, the number of people exposed and the magnitude of their individual doses shall be kept as low as reasonably achievable, taking into account economic and societal factors.

seem to be related to Non-Maleficence and Beneficence

## 2. Principles of Biomedical Ethics

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Application of dose limits: The total dose to any individual from regulated sources in planned exposure situations other than medical exposure of patients should not exceed the limits specified by the Commission

seems to be related to Autonomy and Justice

## 2. Principles of Biomedical Ethics

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(2)

The approach of Beauchamp and Childress could become a model for the ethics of radiation protection, in that we try and identify relevant principles which constitute “common morality”

### 3. Cross-cultural validation of principles

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Beauchamp and Childress are not really interested in the sources of the “common morality”. They just claim that “all persons committed to morality” would agree with their four principles.

In my view, fundamental orientation has been provided throughout the ages by the written and oral traditions of the different cultures, and these continue to be of great influence for people not versed in “Western” secular philosophy.

### 3. Cross-cultural validation of principles

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Fundamental documents for establishing a “common morality” are therefore the Holy Writings of the world’s great religions, documents produced by way of intra- and interreligious dialogue, time honoured philosophical works such as those of Confucius or Aristotle, as well as the oral traditions of indigenous peoples.

# 3. Cross-cultural validation of principles

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It can be shown that the four Principles of Biomedical Ethics

- 1) Autonomy – Human Dignity
- 2) Beneficence
- 3) Non-maleficence
- 4) Justice

are indeed highly respected in virtually all cultural contexts.

### 3. Cross-cultural validation of principles

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Beyond these four, I would argue that at least the following three are also widely accepted:

5) Concern for the underprivileged

6) Intergenerational Equity

7) Precaution



### 3. Cross-cultural validation of principles

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For questions of risk communication, I suggest the following four are of particular importance:

5) Concern for the underprivileged

8) Honesty

9) Empathy

10) Participation

They, too, can be cross-culturally validated.

### 3. Cross-cultural validation of principles

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My current list of principles relevant for radiation protection (and environmental health in general) therefore looks like this:

- 1) Human Dignity
- 2) Beneficence
- 3) Non-Maleficence
- 4) Justice
- 5) Concern for the underprivileged
- 6) Intergenerational equity
- 7) Precaution
- 8) Honesty
- 9) Empathy
- 10) Participation

### 3. Cross-cultural validation of principles

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(3)

A „common morality“ can be established by studying the written and oral traditions which have guided people of different cultures over the ages.

# 4. The approach of Ross (and Clement)

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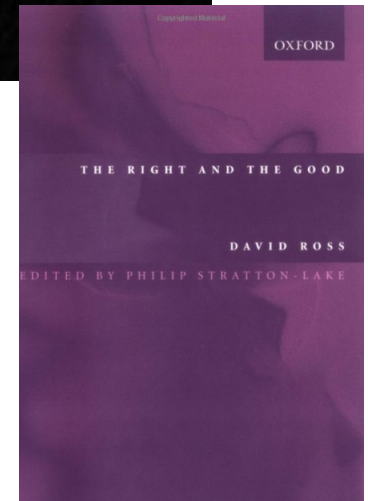
W.D. Ross (1877-1971):  
“The Right and the Good” (1930)

Rejects utilitarian and  
deontological ethics

Emphasises the complexity of  
ethical decisions

Obligations must be **balanced**  
depending on each circumstance

Ethical intuitionism



## 4. The approach of Ross (and Clement)

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## 4. The approach of Ross (and Clement)

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What is right is a matter of  
balancing potentially  
conflicting responsibilities  
(values)

## 4. The approach of Ross (and Clement)

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Is moral intuitionism cross-culturally convincing?  
Do people perceive their morality as a matter of intuition?

Are moral intuitions similar around the world?  
If so, is it because these intuitions are inherent in man, or rather because people have been educated according to the same principles everywhere?

Then where do these principles come from?  
What are the sources that have provided orientation in moral questions over the centuries?

# 5. The approach of Trivers (and Toohey)

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From Toohey's abstract:

Zölzer has suggested a „common morality“ exhibited by the world's religions could be one basis of a globally accepted ethical system.

This paper proposes a more fundamental basis from evolutionary psychology, the concept of mutual altruism, introduced by Trivers (1971) and further developed by Wilkinson (1982, 1984) and Stephens (1996).



## 5. The approach of Trivers (and Toohey)

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R. L. Trivers (1971) The evolution of reciprocal altruism.  
Quarterly Review of Biology 46:35-57

*Altruism, defined as an act of helping someone else although incurring some cost for this act, could have evolved since it might be beneficial to incur this cost if there is a chance of being in a reverse situation where the person whom I helped before perform an altruistic act towards me.*

# 5. The approach of Trivers (and Toohey)

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C. Stephens (1996) Modelling Reciprocal Altruism.  
British Journal of Philosophical Science, 47:533-551

*Biologists rely extensively on the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma game to model reciprocal altruism... I argue that... we should explore... new models of reciprocal altruism... These new models also predict that conditional reciprocators will prosper, but they differ over details.*

# 5. The approach of Trivers (and Toohey)

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D. J. Munro (2002) Reciprocal Altruism and the Biological Basis of Ethics in Neo-Confucianism  
Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy 1:131-141

*I have long been interested in trying to answer the question: Why has Confucianism endured for so long? I believe that the answer includes the fact that much of it is consistent with the human condition.*

# 5. The approach of Trivers (and Toohey)

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From Toohey's abstract:

The principle of reciprocal altruism forms the basis for much of religious common ethics, being codified as the „golden rule“. Because reciprocal altruism is a product of human evolution, it is common to all human societies, and therefore can serve as a global basis for ethical systems.

# 5. The approach of Trivers (and Toohey)

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How is it that in spite of a long history, anthropological approaches to ethics (tracing back moral principles to the „human condition“) have not led to undisputed results?

Even if we agree that reciprocal altruism is an „evolutionary stable state“ and therefore universal, does that mean it is understood and practiced in the same way everywhere?

Therefore, if we wanted to establish a „common morality“, would we not still have to see to what extent and in what sense people from different cultural backgrounds agree about the concept of „reciprocal altruism“?

## 4./5. The approaches of Ross and Trivers

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(4/5)

Moral intuitionism and evolutionary ethics may come to similar conclusions about “common morality” as the cross-cultural approach, but do not make it redundant.