

**Undergraduate Research Academy (URA)
Application for Student Fellowship**

1. Name Matt Warren

6. Academic Major Phil & Poli Sci 7. Hours Completed 48 hrs 8. GPA (4-point scale) 4.0

9. Nominated by Rachel Singpurwalla

10. Reviewed by: (Please print)

Faculty Mentor Rachel Singpurwalla Department Chair Bill Hamrick

11. Title of Research Project The Evolution of Ethics

Please send the original plus 10 copies of the proposal, including budget justification and cover page.

12. Budget Summary Total: \$ 800
 Commodities: \$ 237 Contractual Services: \$ 0
 Travel: \$ 563 Other (specify): \$ 0

13. Valid nominations must carry all of the following approval signatures with dates:

a. Clearances (as appropriate):

Animal Care Human Subjects Toxic Waste

b. Student Matt Warren's Signature

c. Faculty Mentors Rachel Singpurwalla's Signature

d. Department Chair William S. Harmick's Signature

e. Dean of College/School David Steinberg's Signature

f. Undergraduate Research Academy Interview Cindy Scarsdale's Signature

Cover Sheet

SEND TO CAMPUS BOX 1300
BY NOON, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2003
(Please type)

STUDENT Matt Warren MENTOR Prof. Rachel Singpurwalla

PROJECT TITLE The Evolution of Ethics

ABSTRACT: The abstract is a brief, comprehensive summary of the content of the proposal in about 150 words in *plain language*. Reviewers receive their first impression from this abstract. The information needs to be concise, well organized, self contained, and understandable to persons outside your academic discipline.

The goal of this project is to create a meta-ethical theory. Meta-ethics is a subfield of philosophy that deals, primarily, with the problem of moral relativism and moral objectivity. Moral relativism is the idea that our values are mind dependent; moral objectivity is the idea that our morals are mind independent. My project will be to write a paper in which I suggest that our moral values have evolved over time along with society, and, in creating the theory, answer many of the problems that face moral relativism. I will also improve on the few theories similar to mine that have been written in the past. After writing my paper I will present it at a unique undergraduate and graduate philosophy conference in Boulder, Colorado. At the conference I will receive crucial feedback on my paper. With the feedback, I will revise my theory and then submit it for publication to an undergraduate philosophical journal or possibly a professional philosophical journal.

Upon submitting this proposal, I verify that this writing is my own and pledge to fulfill all of the expectations of the Undergraduate Research Academy to the best of my abilities. I understand that failure to do so may result in return of fellowship money to the University and forfeiture of academic credit and honors recognition.

Signature of the Student Matt Warren's Signature

I am able, willing, and committed to providing the necessary facilities and to take the time to mentor this student during this project. I verify that this student is capable of undertaking this proposed project.

Signature of the Faculty Mentor R. Singpurwalla's Signature

This project is within the mission and scope of this department, and the department fully supports the faculty mentor and student during this venture.

Signature of the Department Chairperson William S. Hamrick's Signature

I testify that all necessary research protocols (human, animal, toxic waste) have been fulfilled, and I support this proposed faculty-student scholarly activity as within the mission of the College/School.

Signature of the Associate Dean of the College/School _____ David Steinberg's Signature_____

Matt Warren

I. Introduction and Significance

Are our morals objective facts or are they only relative to each society? This question is the focal point of an area of philosophy known as meta-ethics, and there are two groups that have opposing answers to it. One group, the objectivists, generally believe that our morals are objective facts; the other group, the relativists, believe that moral values are relative from person to person and from society to society. Take, for example, the moral value of monogamy. An objectivist would claim that monogamy is right or wrong independent of any persons mind. On the contrary, a relativist would believe that the value of monogamy is relative to each person and society. In addition, the objectivist believes there is one absolute answer to whether or not monogamy is right or wrong while the relativist believes there is no answer. If one culture believes in monogamy and another believes in polygamy then the objectivist would claim that one society is wrong; the relativist would claim that they are both right in respect to their own beliefs.

Both theories of morality have their problems. The main problem facing objectivists is explaining why different societies have different moral values. The objectivist has trouble explaining, for example, why American society believes that killing is wrong while many cannibalistic tribes believe that it is not wrong. The main problem facing the relativists is explaining why we (society) act as if our moral values are objective if they are not so. For example the relativist has trouble explaining why people engage in moral argument if there is no answer that is to be reached. The relativist also has trouble explaining why we have laws that are sometimes based on our morals if our morals are simply relative.

My aim is to answer the problems facing relativism in a way that has not extensively been

explored. To accomplish this I will present our moral development in a much different way than is typical among relativists. I will suggest that our moral values have evolved along with human society. I will also suggest that our morals are based upon the success of societies that at some point made choices (perhaps arbitrarily) on how to run their communities. The fact that some societies have different moral values will be explained by their development in isolation. Why it is that we act as if morals are objective will be explained by showing that people within a society have incredible difficulty in viewing morality without doing so with the eyes of the society in which they have been raised.

I will also address problems that may arise as the result of my claim. The aim of my project, then, is to answer the problems of relativism and provide a new theory of relativism that explains these problems. I plan to give my paper at the Rocky Mountain Student Philosophy Conference at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The conference is usually held in early March and is a unique combination of graduate school students and undergraduate students. This will give me the opportunity to receive feedback on my theory that will be crucial to a final revision of it. After I revise the paper, to take into account objections from the conference, I will submit it for publication in an undergraduate philosophical journal (hopefully the *Student Philosophical Journal* or the *Harvard Review of Philosophy*) or possibly a professional journal.

As said above, the problem at hand is the focal point of the discipline in philosophy known as meta-ethics. The problem has been addressed by many of the most famous philosophers throughout history. Plato, Aristotle, Mackie, Kant, Nietzsche, and St. Aquinas are just a few of those who have struggled to explain morality. I feel that my view of relativism is different than those that have been displayed in the past, and that it may have a significant impact on how morality

is viewed by philosophers and others. If relativism can explain why people sometimes act as if their morals are objective (and I believe my view will do this), then I believe it will be in a superior position to objectivism.

II. Literature Review

The amount of work on the conflict of moral relativism/moral objectivity is enormous. J.L. Mackie is often looked upon as a founder of moral skepticism and wrote an impressive work called *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1). Moral objectivity is often times argued for by those involved with a religion (usually Christianity), but this is by far not always the case.

Different accounts of relativism are given by Gilbert Harman (2), David Hume, and Friedrich Nietzsche (3) among others. However, I have had difficulty finding other authors who have written on the exact resolution that I would like to pursue. I have found three articles (written by Alfred Benn (4), Frederick Pollock (5), and Norman Wilde (6)) that are similar to the topic that I propose and all three are from the very early 20th Century. I will go through all three of these articles extensively and identify why they have failed to become main ideals. I have also found four books, all written within the last five years, that seem to be moving in the direction that I desire to go, but do not explain things in the same way as I would like to. The books are written by Paul Farber, Leonard Katz, Michael Bradie, and Matthew Nitecki. In my work I will attempt to solve the problems that these views faced.

Also, since my work will be based somewhat on a type of evolution theory, it will draw on some of the ideas brought about by Darwin (as does nearly all talk involving evolution). Yet, it will

not be of human physical evolution, but instead on their moral evolution. For this I will need to consult a great number of history books and anthropologies in order to find accounts of morality over the course of history.

III. Hypothesis

Why do we act as if our moral values are true if they are relative? This question is the beginning and the focal point of my investigation. I hypothesize that our morals are the result of an "evolution". Hopefully, the explanation I propose will answer the question above. I will suggest that because of the evolution of our morals we are unable to see outside of our own moral schemas/beliefs. We look at them through a window tinted by survival needs and therefore can not see them for what they truly are. This is the reason why it seems to many people that our morals are objective and that it is right to argue about them and have laws based upon them. In the end, my theory will hopefully show that moral relativism is a much more plausible theory than objectivism and that it has far fewer problems. I find relativism to be a very plausible and likely position (much more so than objectivism) and I would like to dispel some of the problems that face it. I also find that my idea, the evolutionary concept of ethics, to be an even more plausible version of moral relativism.

IV. Materials, Procedures, and Timeline

The materials needed for my research project are available at the Lovejoy Library or on inter-library loan. I may also use the journal article system JSTOR (provided by the Lovejoy Library) for some of the research. I will spend September and October of 2003 doing extensive research and reading of all articles and books relevant to my topic. During November and December I plan to write my rough draft and submit it to the Rocky Mountain Student Philosophy

Conference. I will then revise my work and prepare to discuss and present it at the Rocky Mountain Student Philosophy Conference in March of 2004. After the conference I will add any needed revision to my paper and submit it for publication in an undergraduate or professional journal by May of 2004.

Since my work is a philosophical theory, it will not be testable by empirical methods. Unlike biology, psychology, archeology, and other disciplines, philosophical developments are usually not tested empirically. Rather, philosophical theories are “tested” by publishing them or giving them at a conference and then receiving feedback. The philosophical theories are usually then revised until they can meet the objections, or the theories are given up on because they can not answer certain objections. This is exactly the procedure I will use to “test” my theory. I will give the paper at the conference in March and receive feedback; then I will revise my paper for publication and hopefully receive more feedback from other philosophy students or philosophers. Also, when my work is finished there will not be a final result like there might be in empirical sciences. Instead, my finished work will be a paper that contains the meta-ethical theory that I suggest.

V. References

- (1) Mackie, J.L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.
Harmondsworth. Middlesex: Penguin, 1977.
- (2) Harman, Gilbert and Judith Jarvis Thomson. Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity. Malden: Blackwell, 199
- (3) Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Genealogy of Morals.
Trans. Francis Golffing. New York: Anchor Books, 1956.
- (3) Nietzsche, Friedrich. Thus Spake Zarathustra. Trans. Thomas Common.
Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999.

(4) Benn, Alfred. *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 11, No. 1.

(Oct., 1900), pp. 60-70.

(5) Pollock, Frekerick. *Mind*, Vol. 1, No. 3. (Jul., 1876), pp. 334-345.

(6) Wilde, Norman. *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 19, No. 3. (Apr., 1909), pp.

265-283.

VI. Budget Justification

I will need a number of books that I will use extensively and are not available to me at the Lovejoy Library. These books will be crucial to the construction of my paper. I will also need a print cartridge because of the numerous copies of my paper I will need to print. The trip to Boulder, Colorado will be where the majority of my budget goes. This trip is absolutely essential to my project because it is where I will receive the necessary feedback to make my paper publishable. I have estimated the cost of the trip to the best of my abilities at the current time. I expect to pay for food and part of the hotel room at my own expense.

Commodities

Books: The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics, by Paul Farber = \$25

Evolutionary Ethics, by Matthew Nitecki = \$30

Total Commodities = \$55

Trip

Hotel: 3 nights at \$75 per night = \$225

Flight to Jacksonville: \$470

Shuttle from Jacksonville to Conference: \$50

Total Trip = \$745

Total Budget = \$800