

The Natural Foundations of Moral Principles

Published: November 17, 2025

Author: Nathan A. Wright

Title: Managing Director & Chief Instructor

Organization: Northern Sage Kung Fu Academy,

Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu

Email: nathan.wright@northernsagekungfu.com

Website: www.NorthernSageKungFu.com



理一分殊

The pattern of life manifests in infinite relations

ABSTRACT

This article advances a naturalistic theory of moral principles as emergent orientations grounded in life's evaluative intelligence. Rather than abstract rules or subjective preferences, moral principles are reflective condensations of lived experience—stable patterns distilled from the ways actions sustain or erode viability, integrity, and coherence across biological, psychological, and social levels. Drawing on enactive and relational perspectives, the discussion traces how adaptive regulation evolves into reflective moral discernment through feedback, prediction, and learning. *Evaluative facts*—empirically observable relations that reveal what sustains or destabilizes life—serve as the foundation for normativity, linking descriptive patterns of consequence with prescriptive guidance for action. Principles function as the durable architecture of moral understanding, organizing perception, judgment, and conduct while remaining responsive to changing contexts. Grounded in consequence rather than decree, they transform the adaptive intelligence of living systems into the reflective order of ethical life, uniting empirical coherence with moral responsibility.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. What are moral principles?
3. Enactive foundations of moral principles
4. Relational Nature of Evaluative Facts
5. Functional Role of Moral Principles
6. Limitations of Moral Principles
7. Conclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

Moral principles emerge from life as it is lived. They are the distilled memory of living well under constraint—patterns of conduct that preserve viability, sustain integrity, and secure coherence across changing conditions. This essay develops a naturalistic account of principles as durable

orientations that emerge from evaluative engagement with the world: we learn, through feedback, which actions stabilize trust, coordination, and mutual regard, and we refine those lessons into guidance that travels with us from one situation to the next.

The central claim is straightforward: moral principles are neither private preferences nor metaphysical properties. They are reflective condensations of *evaluative facts*—empirical, relational patterns that reveal how behavior affects the conditions of life together. Because these patterns can be observed, tested, and revised, they carry normative force without appealing to intuitionism or decree. Principles earn their authority by reliably indicating what preserves

human flourishing in context.

This orientation is *enactive*: evaluation begins in the organism's ongoing regulation of itself within a changing environment and matures, in human beings, into reflective appraisal and reason-giving. What is first sensed as improvement or breakdown in the fabric of relation becomes, over time, an articulated orientation for action. On this view, the familiar gap between "is" and "ought" narrows: moral guidance arises from stable regularities in how actions sustain or erode the goods upon which agency depends.

The argument proceeds in four steps. Section 2.1 clarifies what moral principles are: enduring orientations that organize perception, deliberation, and action. Section 2.2 grounds their genesis in the enactive intelligence of living systems—showing how regulation, prediction, and learning seed normative awareness. Section 2.3 specifies the *relational* nature of evaluative facts and explains why their empirical status underwrites normativity. Section 2.4 sets out the functional role of principles—how they regulate choice, integrate understanding, coordinate action, and discipline prediction—before 2.5 turns to limitations, showing how principles can drift from experience and why they must remain answerable to consequence.

Two commitments guide the analysis. First, moral reasoning must remain accountable to lived reality: principles retain legitimacy only when they track the evaluative facts that first disclosed them. Second, moral life is layered: the same patterns that protect individual agency also scale—carefully—to families, communities, institutions, and ecologies. The task is to keep orientation stable without letting it harden into rule.

Taken together, these claims present a disciplined, empirically anchored view of moral principles: not constraints upon freedom, but the intelligible forms through which freedom stays faithful to what makes a human life—and a shared life—endure.

2. WHAT ARE MORAL PRINCIPLES

Moral principles can be understood as the enduring orientations through which reflective agents discern what sustains life and guides right action. They take shape as recognizable patterns of regularity that grow out of lived interaction rather than as products of abstraction or private inclination. When human beings observe that certain ways of acting tend to preserve security, stability, trust, or cooperation, those observations can crystalize into principle—a generalized insight into how moral and social order endure.¹

A moral principle functions as an organizing pattern. It helps links biological and social necessity with reflective understanding, providing orientation across shifting contexts by identifying what kinds of conduct tend to maintain—or undermine—the conditions of integrity. Through principles, the intelligence of regulation can become the structure of judgment. They give continuity to moral life by transforming momentary evaluations into coherent frameworks of discernment.²

Each principle expresses a relation between self and other, autonomy and mutual regard, individual agency and shared viability. It can help anchor personal freedom within the recognition that one's integrity depends on the integrity of others. Through this relation, moral understanding often

¹ Philippa Foot, "Moral Beliefs," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958–59): 83–104; Robert Axelrod, "The Evolution of Cooperation," *Science* 211 (1981): 1390–1396; Hilary Putnam, "The Fact/Value Dichotomy and the Future of Philosophy," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 11 (2003): 3–14.

² Evan Thompson, "Life and Mind: From Autopoiesis to Neurophenomenology," *Philosophy Today* 44 (2000): 40–54; Karl Friston,

"The Free-Energy Principle: A Unified Brain Theory?" *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 11 (2010): 127–138; Dan J. Siegel, "The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 18 (2005): 179–210; Terrence W. Deacon, "Emergent Symbolism and the Evolution of Language," *Nature* 386 (1997): 705–708.

moves beyond impulse or preference toward the reflective question of proportion, optimization, and rightness: how should action align with the deeper requirements of human flourishing? Principles are therefore both descriptive and directive—they reveal what sustains the ecology of moral life and prescribe how to remain aligned with it.³

Three related terms are used here with deliberate distinction. **Viability** refers to the biological condition of continued existence; **integrity** denotes the normative unity of that existence when sustained through reflection and care; and **coherence** describes the cognitive and relational alignment that integrates perception, intention, and action. Moral principles aim to support all three dimensions: they arise from the viability of life, express the integrity of agency, and help sustain the consistency of understanding.

Moral understanding takes root in experience and develops through reflection. We often encounter moral significance in the immediacy of lived situations—acts of care and neglect, trust and betrayal, harm and restoration. These encounters register as felt evaluations: bodily recognitions of what sustains or fractures the coherence of life.⁴ Reflection arises later, abstracting from experience to discern regularities that reveal the enduring conditions of balance and integrity.⁵ From these cumulative insights, principles emerge as reason's crystallization of memory—stabilized patterns distilled from the flux of moral learning.

Over time, these lived recognitions can extend beyond the individual. Families, communities, and societies carry them forward through story, imitation, and shared ritual.⁶ In this way, moral

learning can become cultural learning—the refinement of experience into practice, and of culture into moral understanding.⁷ Each generation inherits living traces of insight, renewed and reshaped through participation in common life. This process is also ecological, shaped by the conditions that make life possible—the interdependence, scarcity, and cooperation that teach every community what must be preserved for existence to endure.⁸ Each principle is, in effect, a summary of practice—a reflective condensation of the recurrent ways in which human beings have learned to sustain coherence, trust, and viability within the living world.

The origin of moral principles lies in the same evaluative intelligence that organizes living systems. Organisms, through feedback and adaptation, tend to learn to differentiate supportive from destructive conditions. In human beings, this evaluative awareness becomes symbolic and communicable—it enters language, culture, and eventually law.⁹ Reflection allows the agent to stand within this process and examine the basis of its own judgments. From this recursive self-understanding, principles emerge as crystallized forms of moral learning—patterns of coherence that persist even as experience varies.¹⁰

Moral principles thus represent the stabilized memory of moral intelligence. They distill recurrent insights of experience into durable forms that guide action when immediate cues are uncertain or conflicting. In this way, principles can help translate adaptive wisdom into ethical order. They do not constrain freedom; they clarify the structure within which freedom remains

³ Christine M. Korsgaard, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 24–52; Michael Tomasello and Melinda Carpenter, "Shared Intentionality," *Developmental Science* 10 (2007): 121–125.

⁴ Antonio Damasio, "The Somatic Marker Hypothesis and the Possible Functions of the Prefrontal Cortex," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 351, no. 1346 (1996): 1413–1420.

⁵ Shaun Gallagher, "The Practice of Mind: Theory, Simulation, or Primary Interaction?" *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, no. 5–7 (2001): 83–108.

⁶ Michael Tomasello, "The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 364, no. 1533 (2009): 2405–2415.

⁷ Joseph Henrich and Robert Boyd, "The Evolution of Conformist Transmission and the Emergence of Between-Group Differences," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 19, no. 4 (1998): 215–241.

⁸ Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, "A Critical Review of Philosophical Theories of Altruism," *Ethics* 100, no. 3 (1990): 519–536.

⁹ Terrence W. Deacon, "Emergent Symbolism and the Evolution of Language," *Nature* 386 (1997): 705–708.

¹⁰ John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62 (1979): 331–350; Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814–834.

meaningful.¹¹

3. ENACTIVE FOUNDATIONS OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

A living system endures by regulating itself within the flux of its environment. This dynamic equilibrium—maintaining internal stability amid continual change—provides a basic foundation of adaptive intelligence. Through feedback and correction, an organism discriminates between conditions that support viability and those that endanger it. Even at this elementary level, life already involves evaluation: a patterned responsiveness that senses, appraises, and adjusts to preserve continuity.¹²

As living systems evolve greater complexity, these regulatory processes acquire predictive and representational depth. Organisms learn from past interactions, anticipate future outcomes, and shape behavior in advance of immediate necessity. Within this recursive interplay of perception and prediction, *value* can be understood as the felt orientation toward what sustains, enhances, threatens or diminishes viability. To live is thus to care—in a minimal, embodied sense—for the conditions that make life possible. Evaluation and regulation often function as two aspects of the same adaptive act.¹³

In human beings, this enactive intelligence becomes reflective. We do not merely adapt to the world; we also interpret and question the grounds of our adaptation. Reflection allows the agent to evaluate not only what works but why it matters. When the organism that regulates becomes aware

of its own regulatory activity, a new form of normativity arises. The question once implicit in behavior—*what sustains integrity under changing conditions?*—is now posed consciously, and its answer begins to carry moral weight.¹⁴

This marks the enactive root of moral discernment. The same feedback structures that govern physiological and behavioral regulation now inform reflective awareness. What began as automatic adjustment becomes moral evaluation: a deliberative appraisal of action in light of its consequences for life, relation, and meaning. The functional question persists, but its scope expands—from metabolic coherence to ethical coherence, from the preservation of viability to the preservation of what matters for living well.¹⁵

Through this recursive reflection, human beings internalize the world's feedback into conscience. Experience often shows that certain ways of acting stabilize trust, harmony, and cooperation, while others corrode them. These lessons form the raw material of moral understanding. Over time, recurrent patterns of restored balance and successful coordination can be abstracted into principles—articulated forms of the same adaptive intelligence that once operated beneath awareness.¹⁶

Moral principles, in this sense, can be understood as the symbolic codification of life's enactive logic. They express, in reflective language, the relational patterns that tend to support viability across scales of existence. Each principle preserves the integrity of life at a higher level of organization—first

¹¹ Philippa Foot, "Moral Beliefs," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958–59): 83–104; John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," *The Monist* 62 (1979): 331–350; Hilary Putnam, "The Fact/Value Dichotomy and the Future of Philosophy," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 11 (2003): 3–14.

¹² Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, "Autopoiesis: The Organization of the Living," *International Journal of General Systems* 5 (1979): 187–196; Antonio Damasio, "The Somatic Marker Hypothesis and the Possible Functions of the Prefrontal Cortex," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 351 (1996): 1413–1420.

¹³ Karl Friston, "The Free-Energy Principle: A Unified Brain Theory?" *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 11 (2010): 127–138; Andy Clark, "Whatever Next? Predictive Brains, Situated Agents, and the Future of Cognitive Science," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 36 (2013): 181–204; Evan Thompson and Dan Zahavi, "Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences,"

Trends in Cognitive Sciences 11 (2007): 67–73.

¹⁴ Evan Thompson, "Life and Self-Awareness," *Philosophy Now* 70 (2009): 5–8; Shaun Gallagher, "The Natural Philosophy of Agency," *Philosophy Compass* 12 (2017): e12404.

¹⁵ Owen Flanagan, "Ethical Naturalism and the Cognitive Neurosciences," *Mind & Language* 12 (1997): 169–194; Antonio Damasio, "Self Comes to Mind," *Cerebrum* (2011): 1–14.

¹⁶ Robert Axelrod, "The Evolution of Cooperation," *Science* 211 (1981): 1390–1396; Michael Tomasello, Malinda Carpenter, and Henrike Moll, "Two Key Steps in the Evolution of Human Cooperation," *Current Anthropology* 53 (2012): 673–692; Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814–834.

biological, then psychological, then social-moral. The capacity for principle thus marks the full emergence of moral agency: the point where the regulation of living becomes the reasoning of living well.¹⁷

4. RELATIONAL NATURE OF EVALUATIVE FACTS

Moral principles are best understood as arising within a world that becomes meaningful through the organism's ongoing engagement. Living systems are never indifferent to their conditions: every act of regulation presupposes a distinction of degrees between what sustains viability and what endangers it. These discriminations, extended through reflection and relation, are best grounded in evaluative facts—empirical, relational patterns that reveal how actions and environments affect the integrity of life. Such facts are most coherently understood as *Relational*. They do not reside within isolated minds or inert matter but within the ongoing coupling of organism and world, self and other, perception and response.¹⁸

To encounter an evaluative fact is to engage the world through meaningful responsiveness rather than detached observation. The living agent perceives significance in patterns of consequence—how honesty stabilizes trust, how care restores balance, how neglect corrodes relation. These patterns are first sensed through the body, then interpreted through emotion, and finally refined through reflection. Human cognition can render them explicit: what was once enacted as adjustment becomes recognized as a principle of pattern.¹⁹

Contemporary cognitive science describes this

process as predictive attunement. The mind routinely models its environment, comparing expected and actual outcomes to minimize error and maintain coherence. Through this feedback, agents learn which actions tend to support stability across physiological, psychological, and social-moral levels. Evaluative facts are the relatively stable regularities discerned through this learning—the empirical relations that help indicate what allows life and meaning to endure.²⁰

Evaluative facts are neither cultural inventions nor metaphysical absolutes, they arise as emergent and revisable patterns of interaction. When experience repeats across contexts—when cooperation reliably yields security, or cruelty repeatedly yields fracture—these outcomes reveal the relational patterns through which moral significance emerges. Their validity is best demonstrated in practice: patterns that consistently sustain integrity acquire normative weight precisely because they prove themselves within the ecology of living systems.²¹

To understand why these patterns can carry normative force, we must clarify what kind of “fact” they represent. The regularities we encounter in lived experience usually display some degree of stability, observability, and consequence. This shifts the discussion from the vocabulary of intuition and belief to the empirical status of these relations themselves.

This naturalistic orientation contrasts sharply with traditional moral theory which often treats goodness or badness as if they were properties that actions or things somehow possess in themselves.²² Yet this “property conception” mistakes value for an attribute of isolated entities rather than an emergent feature of relational processes and

¹⁷ Stuart A. Kauffman, “Autocatalytic Sets of Proteins,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 119 (1986): 1–24; Christine M. Korsgaard, “Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Kant,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 14 (2000): 179–204.

¹⁸ Evan Thompson, “Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 6 (2007): 379–397.

¹⁹ Antonio Damasio, “The Feeling of What Happens,” *Nature Neuroscience*

2 (1999): 859–862.

²⁰ Karl Friston, “The Free-Energy Principle: A Unified Brain Theory?” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 11 (2010): 127–138.

²¹ Robert Axelrod, “The Evolution of Cooperation,” *Science* 211 (1981): 1390–1396.

²² Moore, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903, pp. 10–15, 36–38.

patterns.²³ On a naturalistic reading, value does not reside *in* objects or actions but arises *through* their functional significance within the living and social systems they affect.²⁴ To call something good or bad, then, is shorthand for describing the patterned ways it matters within the ecology of life and relation.²⁵

This naturalistic account of value invites a corresponding clarification of what we mean by truth and fact. Truth, in its most ordinary sense, pertains to belief—it designates consistency within propositions or systems of thought.²⁶ Philosophers also speak of truth in the correspondence sense, where a proposition is counted as true when it aligns with the features of the world it describes.²⁷ A fact, by contrast, concerns relations, events, or processes that can be verified independently of belief.²⁸ It can be observed, tested, and if necessary, falsified. In practice, such verification is always partial and provisional, especially in complex social contexts. Moral facts are therefore not abstract truths about value but empirically discernable relations within lived experience—the recurrent ways in which conduct alters the conditions of viability and relation.²⁹

In this respect, evaluative facts can be described as *facts of mattering*: empirically traceable relations that reveal how certain actions, traits, or environments contribute to or diminish the coherence of living systems.³⁰ Their validity rests not on intuition or consensus but on the observable

consequences that link behavior to functional outcomes.³¹ A value claim is true to the extent that it tracks an evaluative fact—a stable relation of mattering revealed through the ways actions support or disrupt the conditions of life.

Moral facts should not be understood as intrinsic properties of acts or things taken in isolation. They arise from evaluation—the significance that emerges within interaction between agents, or between an agent and its environment, in a given context.³² What grants these evaluations factual status is their stability and observability: recurrent patterns of consequence that reveal how certain modes of conduct tend to support or undermine the conditions of living well. Their normative force follows from this functional continuity between what occurs and what preserves.³³

To perceive an evaluative fact, then, is to discern alignment or distortion within the relational field that connects self and world.³⁴ This perception is at once empirical and ethical: empirical because it concerns observable consequences, ethical because it implicates the agent's participation in those consequences.³⁵ Through reflection, these insights consolidate into principles—generalizable orientations that guide conduct even when the original context has passed. Moral knowledge and reasoning, in this view, is learned from life's feedback. It is the cumulative understanding, recognition, acknowledgement, and embodied realization of how certain relations uphold the

²³ Richards, Richard A. "Evolutionary Naturalism and Valuation." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Evolutionary Ethics*, edited by Michael Ruse and Robert J. Richards, 129–142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 131–137.

²⁴ Dewey, John. *Theory of Valuation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939, pp. 5–10, 19–22; and Putnam, Hilary. *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 16–21, 38–40.

²⁵ Friston, Karl. "Life as We Know It." *Journal of the Royal Society Interface* 10, no. 86 (2013): 20130475, pp. 5–7; and Thompson, Evan. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 128–133, 199–203.

²⁶ Hilary Putnam, "The Fact/Value Dichotomy and the Future of Philosophy," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 11 (2003): 3–14.

²⁷ Philippa Foot, "Moral Beliefs," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958–59): 83–104.

²⁸ Hilary Putnam, "The Fact/Value Dichotomy and the Future of Philosophy," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 11 (2003): 3–14.

²⁹ David Wiggins, "Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism, and Motivating

Moral Beliefs," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 80 (2006): 73–99.

³⁰ Richards, Richard A. "Evolutionary Naturalism and Valuation." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Evolutionary Ethics*, edited by Michael Ruse and Robert J. Richards, 129–142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 136–138.

³¹ Dewey, John. *Theory of Valuation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939, pp. 19–22.

³² Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo, "Participatory Sense-Making: An Enactive Approach to Social Cognition," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 6 (2007): 485–507.

³³ Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo, "Participatory Sense-Making: An Enactive Approach to Social Cognition," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 6 (2007): 485–507.

³⁴ Shaun Gallagher, "Dynamic Models of Body Schema and Body Image," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2005): 195–212.

³⁵ Giovanna Colombetti, "The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets Enactive Mind," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 13 (2014): 501–523.

coherence of existence.³⁶

Within human life, evaluative facts often take the form of *social mattering*—the ways interactions sustain or erode trust, reciprocity, and shared stability.³⁷ Social mattering situates moral evaluation within lived networks of cooperation, where each act contributes to or detracts from the viability of the whole.³⁸ Through such patterns, the empirical relations of life acquire normative weight: they disclose how integrity, respect, and mutual reliability become conditions for continued existence together.

Such alignment or distortion can manifest at multiple scales of organization. An action that supports an individual's immediate well-being may undermine the cohesion of a family, community, or ecosystem.³⁹ Conversely, norms that constrain individual preference may preserve the stability of the larger social or ecological field. Evaluative facts therefore arise within layered systems of dependence—physiological, psychological, interpersonal, and collective—where coherence at one level must be balanced against integrity at another.⁴⁰ Moral discernment consists in recognizing and navigating these intersecting orders of mattering.

Evaluative facts thus provide the experiential substrate of moral principles.⁴¹ They are a connective tissue between the descriptive and the prescriptive, between is and ought as lived phenomena.⁴² To understand them is to see that morality emerges from the relational order of living systems.⁴³ Through such discovery, human beings

can transform the adaptive intelligence of life into moral understanding—the awareness that how we act toward others and our world is inseparable from the conditions that allow us to exist at all.

From these evaluative facts, reflection abstracts durable orientations of conduct—the moral principles through which agents stabilize meaning and coordinate action across contexts.

5. FUNCTIONAL ROLE OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

Moral principles organize moral life. They convert the continual flow of evaluative experience into stable orientation, giving agents a way to perceive, deliberate, and act with coherence across changing circumstances. Their function is threefold: they regulate choice by providing standards of appraisal, integrate understanding by linking personal judgment to shared meaning, and coordinate action by making reasons communicable and expectations reliable.⁴⁴

Regulative Function

Principles provide criteria for appraisal when immediate cues are ambiguous or conflicting. They help agents (1) identify what is at stake in a situation—what dimensions of viability are under pressure; (2) trace likely consequences for integrity across self, other, and environment; and (3) align intention and execution to preserve coherence over time. In practice this means setting thresholds (what must not be compromised), priorities (which goods have standing in this context), and limits (how far a response may extend without

³⁶ Shaun Gallagher, "Dynamic Models of Body Schema and Body Image," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2005): 195–212.

³⁷ Richards, Richard A. "Evolutionary Naturalism and Valuation." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Evolutionary Ethics*, edited by Michael Ruse and Robert J. Richards, 129–142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 138–140.

³⁸ Tomasello, Michael. *A Natural History of Human Morality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, pp. 3–7, 71–74.

³⁹ Richards, Richard A. "Evolutionary Naturalism and Valuation." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Evolutionary Ethics*, edited by Michael Ruse and Robert J. Richards, 129–142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 136–137.

⁴⁰ Friston, Karl. "Life as We Know It." *Journal of the Royal Society*

Interface 10, no. 86 (2013): 20130475, pp. 5–7.

⁴¹ *Biological Foundations of Ethics*, "International Philosophical Quarterly" 6, no. 2 (1966): 168–69

⁴² Mark Johnson, *Morality for Humans: Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 28–32.

⁴³ Hans Jonas, "Biological Foundations of Ethics," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1966): 165–188.

⁴⁴ Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Philosophy of Moral Development," summarized in *American Psychologist* 36 (1981): 347–360; Jonathan Haidt and Selin Kesebir, "Morality," *Handbook of Social Psychology* 5 (2010): 797–832.

undermining the larger order it seeks to protect). Principles, in this sense, serve as instruments of disciplined attention: they structure what we notice, how we weigh it, and which courses of action remain permissible.⁴⁵

Integrative Function

Principles condense moral learning into shared memory. They stabilize what repeated experience has revealed about trustworthy relations—how honesty sustains confidence, restraint prevents escalation, or diligence restores balance. By articulating these recurrent insights, principles bind first-person evaluation to second-person recognition and third-person justification. They allow agents to give reasons that others can assess, endorse, revise, or contest. Through this integrative work, personal conscience becomes publicly legible, and moral disagreement becomes a site of refinement rather than fracture.⁴⁶

Coordinating Function

Moral life is inherently relational; it unfolds through patterns of mutual reliance, promise, and exposure. Principles make coordination possible under uncertainty. They enable agents to anticipate one another through counterfactual guidance (“if conditions shift thus, we will still act within these bounds”) and temporal continuity (keeping present action answerable to past commitments and future claims). By stabilizing expectations, principles reduce the volatility that arises when fear, power, or emotion dominate the field.⁴⁷

Predictive Discipline

From a cognitive perspective, principles act as

high-level priors for practical reasoning. They help the mind model situations, constrain interpretation, and minimize costly error. In moments of stress—when attention narrows and reactive impulses surge—principles preserve the through-line of agency by keeping perception, valuation, and action aligned with learned patterns that sustain viability and meaning. They function as safeguards against drift: anchors that keep local choices moored to broader goods.⁴⁸

Error Correction and Repair

Principles also guide recovery. When harm has occurred or relations have destabilized, they re-orient agents toward restoration: acknowledge what failed, re-establish alignment, reset limits, and re-open channels of mutual regard. In this reparative role, principles measure success by the extent to which integrity is rebuilt without compounding loss elsewhere in the system.⁴⁹

Scalability and Coherence

Because they abstract from individual events while remaining tied to consequence, principles scale from the personal to the institutional. The same orienting insights that govern interpersonal conduct can structure professional codes, public policies, and legal norms—provided those larger forms remain answerable to the evaluative realities from which principles arise. This scalability allows a living moral architecture to develop without severing itself from experience. In later sections, *Coherence* will reappear as one of the Five Principles of Defensive Ethics. Its cognitive meaning—alignment of perception, intention, and action—expands in the moral domain to signify the

⁴⁵ Albert Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action,” *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development* 1 (1991): 45–103; Roy F. Baumeister and Todd F. Heatherton, “Self-Regulation Failure: An Overview,” *Psychological Inquiry* 7 (1996): 1–15; Daniel Kahneman, “A Perspective on Judgment and Choice,” *American Psychologist* 58 (2003): 697–720.

⁴⁶ Michael Tomasello, “A Natural History of Human Morality,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* 113 (2016): 10296–10301; Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, “Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions Generate Culturally Variable Virtues,” *Daedalus* 133 (2004): 55–66.

⁴⁷ Robert Axelrod and William D. Hamilton, “The Evolution of Cooperation,” *Science* 211 (1981): 1390–1396; Cristina Bicchieri, “The

Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 36 (2006): 263–282.

⁴⁸ Karl Friston, “The Free-Energy Principle: A Unified Brain Theory?” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 11 (2010): 127–138; Andy Clark, “Whatever Next? Predictive Brains, Situated Agents, and the Future of Cognitive Science,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 36 (2013): 181–204; Michael I. Posner and Mary K. Rothbart, “Research on Attention Networks as a Model for the Integration of Psychological Science,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 58 (2007): 1–23.

⁴⁹ Margaret Urban Walker, “Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 20 (2006): 69–88; Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, “Trust and the Problem of Reconciliation,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32 (2002): 178–205.

consistency between understanding, judgment, and conduct: the structural integrity that sustains moral order.⁵⁰

Taken together, these functions reveal why principles are indispensable to a naturalized account of normativity. They preserve viability by directing attention to what sustains life in context; they secure integrity by unifying reflection with responsibility; and they maintain coherence by aligning reason with action across time. Yet no framework, however well-formed, is without limit. The same mechanisms that stabilize judgment can, under pressure, harden into rigidity or abstraction. The next section therefore turns to the limitations of moral principles—examining how they depend on cultivated judgment, remain vulnerable to distortion, and must stay responsive to the evaluative realities from which they arise.

6. LIMITATIONS OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

Principles give moral life structure, yet that same structure can constrain responsiveness. By abstracting from concrete episodes, principles stabilize judgment across cases; but in doing so, they risk drifting from the conditions that first disclosed their meaning. When applied without attention to circumstance, principled guidance can harden into rule-following and obscure the very feedback—relational, situational, and affective—that moral intelligence depends upon to preserve viability, integrity, and coherence.⁵¹

Every principle is a compression of experience. Compression aids deliberation by reducing complexity, yet it also reduces nuance. Under stress or novelty, salient details may be filtered out in

favor of familiar schemas; the signal of context blurs beneath the weight of general form. In rapidly changing environments, principles exhibit temporal lag: they encode what has worked and may hesitate before what is needed. Moral innovation must often precede moral codification—the agent restores order first, and only later refines the principle that better fits the world newly revealed through action.⁵²

Moral life is inherently plural. Legitimate principles frequently generate friction: self-preservation may pull against equality; reciprocity may constrain or amplify restraint; coherence may demand stability where care invites exception. No fixed hierarchy resolves these tensions in advance. Navigation requires *phronesis*—the capacity to discern which values are truly at stake, how they scale across persons and time, and where proportional remedy lies. Principles supply the language of deliberation; they do not deliver its verdict.⁵³

Principles also depend on the quality of judgment that wields them. They do not apply themselves. The quality of judgment rests on the internal capacities of human agency—those that allow individuals to understand their circumstances, evaluate reasons, regulate conduct, and sustain commitment over time. These capacities determine whether a principle illuminates or rationalizes. When attention narrows or emotion overrides regulation, even sound principles can be conscripted to justify harm. Cultivated judgment keeps principle answerable to consequence, reinscribing evaluation into the continuous loop of reflection and repair.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 16 (1990): 101–128; Douglas Hofstadter, “Analogy as the Core of Cognition,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 31 (2007): 499–558; Dan J. Siegel, “The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being,” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 18 (2005): 179–210; John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” *The Monist* 62 (1979): 331–350; Hilary Putnam, “The Fact/Value Dichotomy and the Future of Philosophy,” *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 11 (2003): 3–14; Owen Flanagan, “Ethical Naturalism and the Cognitive Neurosciences,” *Mind & Language* 12 (1997): 169–194.

⁵¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Equity and Mercy,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*

22, no. 2 (1993): 83–125; Bernard Williams, “Ethical Consistency,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 39 (1965): 103–124.

⁵² Patricia S. Churchland, “Toward a Cognitive Neurobiology of the Moral Virtues,” *Topoi* 37 (2018): 407–416; Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment,” *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814–834.

⁵³ Rosalind Hursthouse, “Practical Wisdom: A Mundane Account,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999): 283–309; John D. Doris, “Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics,” *Noûs* 32 (1998): 504–530.

⁵⁴ Joshua D. Greene et al., “An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment,” *Science* 293 (2001): 2105–2108; Daniel

Institutional translation introduces another limit. As principles become policy, doctrine, or law, their living function can ossify into procedure. Administrative clarity replaces adaptive responsiveness; legitimacy becomes formal rather than relational. Renewal then requires a return to ground—re-examining whether the codified form still tracks the evaluative realities that first conferred its authority. Where misalignment appears, revision is not betrayal of principle but fidelity to its purpose.⁵⁵

Finally, some moral goods exceed principled articulation. Compassion, forgiveness, grace, and mercy do not disregard principle; they operate at the margins where restoration cannot be engineered through rule. A mature moral ecology leaves space for these gestures without allowing them to erode accountability. The measure of their right use is the extent to which they genuinely restore integrity without licensing new forms of injury.⁵⁶

Taken together, these limits do not diminish the place of principles; they specify the conditions under which principles remain worthy of trust. Their reliability depends on continuous recalibration through experience—on the same moral learning that first gave rise to them. When agents keep principles tethered to consequence, open to revision, and guided by disciplined judgment, principles retain their proper role: orienting action while remaining responsive to the living world they are meant to preserve.⁵⁷

7. CONCLUSION

Moral principles endure because they capture what life itself continually rediscovers: that coherence, integrity, and viability are not abstractions but

achievements sustained through relation. Each principle represents a stabilized insight into how order is maintained amid uncertainty—how honesty preserves trust, restraint prevents harm, and care restores balance. Their legitimacy lies not in divine command or subjective decree but in the demonstrable regularities of experience: patterns that reveal, again and again, what allows living systems—biological, social, and moral—to persist without collapse.

To understand morality in these terms is to recognize that the intelligence of life already contains the grammar of ethics. The same adaptive logic that regulates the organism extends, in reflective form, into moral understanding. When human beings learn from feedback—when they discern the conditions that sustain integrity and translate those lessons into guidance—they transform the necessity of survival into the normativity of right action. Principles are thus the living record of that transformation: the way life's own learning becomes moral orientation.

Yet their endurance depends on responsiveness. Principles remain trustworthy only when they stay answerable to the evaluative realities that gave them birth. Detached from consequence, they lose traction; kept in dialogue with experience, they refine moral life into a dynamic equilibrium—stable enough to guide, flexible enough to grow.

In this light, moral principles serve as instruments of adaptation—living expressions of how reflection remembers what the world has already shown. Freedom collapses when it loses coherence; care becomes corrosive when it exceeds proportion; and meaning endures only when action remains aligned with the conditions that sustain existence. To live

Kahneman, "A Perspective on Judgment and Choice," *American Psychologist* 58 (2003): 697–720.

⁵⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 16 (1990): 101–128; Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 317–344.

⁵⁶ Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," *Midwest Studies in*

Philosophy 7 (1982): 503–516; Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing," *Ethics & International Affairs* 20 (2006): 69–88.

⁵⁷ Owen Flanagan, "Ethical Naturalism and the Cognitive Neurosciences," *Mind & Language* 12 (1997): 169–194; Hilary Putnam, "The Fact/Value Dichotomy and the Future of Philosophy," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 11 (2003): 3–14.

by principle, rightly understood, is to participate—consciously and conscientiously—in the sustaining order of life itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nathan A. Wright

Managing Director & Chief Instructor

Northern Sage Kung Academy, Calgary, Canada

Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu

Nathan is the Managing Director and Chief Instructor of the Northern Sage Kung Fu Academy, and serves as the Chief Representative of Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu in Canada, and China. Having spent more than twenty-five years living in China, he is committed to preserving and transmitting traditional martial arts in their most authentic form. Now based in Calgary with his family, Nathan continues to teach, and writes regularly on topics of self-defence, combat, health and fitness, philosophy, ethics, personal cultivation, and leadership.

Mantis Publications & Research



Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu
Northern Sage Kung Fu Academy

PAST PUBLICATIONS



CONTACT US

Switzerland & Germany

Kai Uwe Pel
Global Chief Instructor
Email: kaiuwepel@asia.com
Website: LuoGuangYu.com
Facebook: [@LuoGuangYu](https://www.facebook.com/@LuoGuangYu)

Canada & China

Nathan Wright
Chief Instructor
Email: nathan.wright@northernsagekungfu.com
Website: NorthernSageKungFu.com
Facebook: [@NorthernSageKungFu](https://www.facebook.com/@NorthernSageKungFu)

New Zealand & Australia

Cameron Hirst
Chief Instructor
Email: nz.7star@gmail.com
Website: GongFu.nz

Disclaimer

The material and information contained in this publication is for general information purposes only. You should not rely upon the material or information in this publication as a basis for making any business, legal, health, or any other decisions, and should consult a physician first. Whilst we endeavor to keep the information up to date and correct, we make no representations or warranties of any kind, express or implied about the completeness, accuracy, reliability, suitability or availability with respect to the publication information, website information, products, services or related graphics contained herein for any purpose. Any reliance you place on such material is therefore strictly at your own risk.