

**Max Hayward**  
*Ethics as a Humanistic Inquiry*  
**Dissertation Abstract**

In "Ethics as a Humanistic Inquiry," I argue that ethics is made for humankind, not humankind for ethics. If the world contains nothing beyond the natural facts, if we cannot discover objective, mind-independent moral truths, if there are no exceptionless norms of practical rationality, then what follows for ethical inquiry and ethical life? Nothing follows - ethicists should not care about these things. Questions about ethics, even the most foundational questions, must always start from within the moral perspective. Judged from a basic humanistic commitment to the value of others, we can reject such sceptical and nihilistic worries as ethically misguided, along with theories like non-naturalist realism, which give unwarranted significance to these concerns even as they claim to answer them. I defend a naturalistic, anti-realist, constructivist view of ethics, drawing on the British Sentimentalists, David Hume and Adam Smith, and the American Pragmatists, William James and John Dewey. Contrary to the assumptions of many, such a view vindicates concern for ethics and practical rationality and represents the true goals of moral inquiry far better than its realist opponents.

**Chapter 1** Why is ethical investigation is ethically valuable? Rather than seeing ethical inquiry as a disinterested search for truth, we can better explain the nature of philosophical open-mindedness and the tolerance philosophers show to their opponents if we see ethics as already morally committed, as a search for humanistic mutual understanding.

**Chapter 2** The most plausible methods for ethical investigation, reflective equilibrium and other styles of rational reflection, cannot be expected to bring ethicists to the truth given the Nonnaturalist Realist's understanding of moral truth and presupposing uncontroversial premises about biological and cultural evolution. This would imply moral scepticism. But since we nevertheless find the influence of rational reflection on our views to be vindicating, that suggests that our goal is not truth - as the Nonnaturalist construes it - at all.

**Chapter 3** "Relaxed" Realists may be right to interpret supposedly external metaethical claims about ethics as assertions *within* normative ethics. But that this move actually damns Nonnaturalism rather than saving it. Questions about moral inquiry, about the correct bases on which to change and revise our moral views, can still be asked within normative ethics. The Nonnaturalist's insistence that moral correctness requires imperceptible, objective, mind-independent, non-natural facts makes her view an inhumane "counterfactual nihilism", and reprehensible as such.

**Chapter 4** A form of constructivism inspired by James and Dewey grounds norms for moral inquiry that best express a basic humanistic commitment to the value of persons. Ethical correctness should be seen as a matter of solving problems that arise from potentially incompatible interpersonal demands. In achieving such solutions, we can distinguish legitimate persuasion from brainwashing and browbeating by appeal to Smith's sentimentalist moral psychology.

**Chapter 5** Even in the intrapersonal case, we should not posit objective norms of "practical rationality." All such norms admit of exceptions, and there is no good reason to respect them. But if we see claims about practical rationality as expressions of frustrated sympathy in the senses of Hume and Smith, then we can explain the value of rationality as a precondition for human social relationships.