

# Ethics and realism

## Ética y realismo

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<https://doi.org/10.36105/mye.2026v37n1.07>

**Millán-Puelles, A. *Ética y realismo*.** Ediciones Rialp.  
Madrid; 1996.

### 1. About the author Antonio Millán-Puelles

The author Antonio Millán-Puelles, who lived from 1921 to 2005, was a figure of great importance in Spanish philosophy at the time. He was originally from Alcalá de los Gazules, in Cádiz, and died in Madrid. Intellectually, he left us a large collection of books, translations, and interviews in which he delves into key topics for the study of ethics, such as philosophical anthropology and ontology. He also

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**Reception:**  
03.06.2025

**Sent for review:**  
03.07.2025

**Acceptance:**  
22.09.2025

**Published:**  
02.01.2025

CÓMO CITAR: García Hazas, A. S (2026). Ethics and realism. *Medicina y ética*, vol. 37, núm. 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36105/mye.2026v37n1.07>



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taught at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and was a member of the Royal Academy of Political Sciences.

Classical realism, together with Thomism, are central to his ideological influence, representing how the post-war experience shaped his perspective and reflections on social reconstruction and the validity of universal values in his era of cultural and moral crisis (1).

## 2. Historical and philosophical context

After surviving the Spanish Civil War, Spain went from being a Francoist, religious, and institutionalist society to one marked by post-modernist influence. This intellectual shift profoundly questioned the cultural pillars that had previously sustained society: family, religion, and the state.

This emerging progressivism led to the emergence of multiple discourses and relative values that undermined the absolutism of traditional moral criteria, giving way to the significant influence of moral relativism and weakening objective morality as a social norm. This eliminated the possibility of judging human actions based on universal and firm principles.

To this day, the fruit of this moral uncertainty and ethical openness to relativity generates confusion, and in response, philosophers such as Millán-Puelles have presented their proposals in a concise and well-founded manner. Their commitment to a realistic ethic, based on the truth of human beings and oriented toward their perfection, represents a successful and necessary attempt to offer firm criteria amid contemporary moral uncertainty.

## 3. Ethics and Realism

The work *Ética y Realismo*, originally published in 1996, which arose from a series of lectures given by the author himself during 1995,

has established itself as a well-known reference within contemporary ethical thought in the Western world.

This book represents a position that vigorously defends an ethic based on metaphysical realism, in which truth is defended as an objective reality, in contrast to relativism and emotivism, where values, morality, and truth depend on each person, sustained by specific culture, religion, and context, and ethical formalisms that judge moral actions more by their form than by their content, which, in the author's view, has weakened the understanding and practice of ethical values and morality (2,3,4).

At the core of the work is a truly human and achievable ethic that can only be built on objective foundations of human nature, which are based on three pillars: the ontological foundation of morality, the relationship between relativity and moral relativism, and the link between "being" and "ought to be," emphasizing prudence as an indispensable ethical virtue in this exercise. All this ultimately questions the ultimate foundation of "ought to be."

Antonio Millán-Puelles takes morality as a free affirmation of one's own being, that is, that human beings reaffirm themselves through their conception of practical freedom, which leads them to act correctly and seek the good, and thus also complete happiness. The book emphasizes the deep ontological roots of human beings and the morality that justifies this idea. For the author, acting morally does not imply inventing values from a subjective perspective or unquestioningly obeying a set of external and imposed norms. Rather, it means that the person, in the responsible use of their freedom, decides whether to act in accordance with their own reality or to distort it.

From this perspective, human nature is not reduced to biological but constitutes an institution that ethically regulates and guides the person through a perfectible structure that is, in fact, open to improvement.

Moral good is conceived as that which allows human beings to favor this full development, while moral evil is that which corrupts and destroys it.

Sartre and Camus are good examples of existentialist philosophers who oppose the thesis proposed by the author of this book; they argue that human beings are understood as beings who make themselves out of nothing, and little by little, with experience, they are created. However, Millán-Puelles insists that personal freedom does not consist of denying what one is, but rather of accepting it and realizing it in the best possible way. In this way, moral action behaves dramatically, since every action that is carried out involves the decision to affirm or deny one's own humanity. To simplify it: one can go against what one is through immoral acts such as torture, slavery, or other dehumanizing behaviors, which, in addition to breaking a norm, means, above all, compromising one's own existential structure. That is why the ethics proposed by Millán-Puelles are neither idealistic nor utopian but offer a human and deeply realistic perspective (5,6).

One of the most relevant aspects discussed in this book is the criticism of what the author calls "the fallacy of relativism"; he distinguishes between relativism as a philosophical position that denies universal moral truths, and relativity, which recognizes the need to adjust moral content to specific circumstances. He rejects the idea that "everything is relative" because he finds it contradictory: if everything is relative, then even the statement itself would be relative, and therefore could not be upheld with universal validity (6).

Instead, it argues that moral duty must be absolute, that is, it always requires acting with integrity, but relative in its content, depending on the human being in question and their situation. Thus, duty is absolute because it requires acting in accordance with human dignity, but what must be done in each case will depend on multiple factors: who is acting, in what circumstances, and with what resources. However, it makes very clear that this relativity does not weaken ethics but rather implants it in a concrete and realistic life (6).

On the one hand, the book mentions classical realism, which requires distinguishing between two fundamental concepts: the nature of things and the nature of the sciences. The former refers to the intrinsic qualities of objects: for example, a sphere is a three-dimen-

sional body with all its points equidistant from the center, and any essential alteration would cause it to cease to be a sphere. In contrast, the nature of science does not define or exhaust objects but rather studies them from different perspectives. Thus, disciplines such as physics or geometry can analyze how a sphere behaves when thrown against a surface, according to its material properties and environmental conditions. Both natures can intertwine and give rise to multiple realities. For example, a soccer ball may vary in color or size, but it must retain its spherical shape to continue to fulfill its function within the game.

Using this analogy, Millán-Puelles would say that the spherical nature of the ball is irrefutable; however, given the circumstances, the sphere can have different uses. Nevertheless, this becomes complicated when it comes to moral actions: for human free will, good must be the solid foundation on which the various forms of that same good are based. Recognizing this allows us to avoid both subjectivism and inflexible moralism.

The author then delves into one of the most relevant debates in modern ethics: whether it is possible to separate “being” from “ought to be.” He asserts that the “being” from which ethics departs is not a neutral fact or a simple reality, but rather a reality charged with meaning. Human beings, as free and rational beings, possess within themselves an orientation toward the good; if we understand this, duty is not something imposed, but rather accepted and natural from the very structure of the person. Seen in this way, prudence, above all virtues, becomes key. It is not enough to have ethical principles; wisdom is required to apply them appropriately to each situation. Millán-Puelles, following the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, defines prudence as “right reason in action.” This virtue allows us to decide responsibly in each moment, balancing universal principles and the particularities of each real case. Unlike Kant, an example we will return to later, who associates prudence with cunning guided by self-interest, Millán-Puelles’ realistic approach presents it as a rational and ethical virtue that guides good conduct

and moral living (6,7). Finally, the author asks a crucial question: if moral duty is absolute, what is its ultimate foundation? The answer is ethics. When he asks about the origin of duty, he points to a higher reality, to an absolute being that gives meaning to the moral order. In this sense, God ceases to be merely a reality based on the faith of each individual and becomes the path that rationally guides the practice of ethics. Assuming that the divine will is wise and loving, it is natural that it manifests itself through the will of human beings and their capacity to understand reality, from which the foundations of duty arise solidly and objectively.

#### **4. Critical contributions and contrasts**

Antonio Millán-Puelles' proposal stands out for the depth with which he addresses the fundamental nature of being and reality and how this shapes the understanding of ethical and moral values.

Although his position effectively defends the ontology of being as the basis of ethical realism, it also opens a space for dialogue and contrast with other currents of his time that are still valid today.

One example: utilitarianism, for its part, measures the moral value of actions by their consequences and seeks as its goal the maximum benefit from them. In contrast, Millán-Puelles argues that ethics must be based fundamentally on the dignity of the person, leaving the benefit of the results in the background.

Another valuable example is Kantianism, which promotes an ethic that responds to the universal law of the categorical imperative. Although it places the person at the center, it falls into the perspective that the validity of moral acts depends on a rational consensus among individuals, and therefore becomes a reality dependent on the individuals involved, unlike Millán-Puelles' proposal, which is based on the ontological structure of the human being, supporting the objectivity of good as a maxim above any agreement (6,7,8,9,10).

## 5. Application in bioethics

*Ética y Realismo*, published almost three decades ago, continues to spark rational debate around its proposal for an objective ethic centered on human dignity, and continues to offer valuable tools for the foundation of principles and decision-making in health contexts and new legislation that protects the most disadvantaged. Issues such as the care of vulnerable people, respect for life, and end-of-life dilemmas find in these realistic ethics a solid framework that allows for the discussion of ethically justified responses, beyond changing consensus or purely utilitarian criteria.

## 6. Conclusion

The author's main proposal in this work is to offer reliable and solid alternatives that counter relativist trends. The ethics he proposes, inherent in human nature, provide objectivity in the judgment of moral actions.

Although the author writes for an academic audience, his work is also accessible to anyone interested in bioethics. However, his approach and dialogue are deeply theistic, which may seem unattractive to some readers who do not share his religious views.

This work, entitled *Ética y Realismo*, shares a wealth of philosophical reflection that firmly defends an objective and realistic ethic oriented towards the full development of the human being. In criticizing relativist currents, the author emphasizes prudence as a central value in moral actions and relates it to "being" and "ought to be" in such a way that this reading becomes a great starting point for those seeking to enter the world of ethics and truth without renouncing the dignity of the person.

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