

Three Moral Theories

I. Introduction

Here are five questions we might want an ethical theory to answer for us:

- i) Which acts are right and which are wrong? Which acts *ought* we to perform (understanding the "ought" as a moral "ought")?
 - a. Who is part of our moral community? Towards whom (or what) do we have moral duties and obligations? (some/all other humans? Animals? Ecological systems? Androids/computers?)
 - b. How do moral 'oughts' interact with other reasons for action? Do they always "trump" other reasons?
- ii) What *makes* a particular action right or wrong? What is it about the action that determines its moral status?
- iii) How do we *know* what is right and wrong?
- iv) What, if anything, motivates us to do what is right?

Normative ethics: addresses "first-order" questions about our moral lives, questions about what morality requires/permits us to do, and what is morally valuable. E.g. should we be vegetarians? Is euthanasia permissible? Is it (morally) good to devote oneself to a life of pleasure?

Meta-ethics: addresses questions about first-order (normative) ethical judgments, e.g., about the nature of morality; the meaning of moral talk; whether morality is absolute or relative; whether moral judgments can be true or false (objective) or merely subjective, how we can have knowledge of moral truth.

II. The Big Three

1. Consequentialism: focus is on consequences of action.

One version of consequentialism is **Utilitarianism (Mill)**:

Greatest Happiness Principle: ...actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

Or as contemporary moral theorists state it:

You ought always to act so as to maximize happiness, i.e., the right act is the act that results in the greatest amount of happiness overall.

2. Deontology (Kant): focus is on moral rules or reasons.

Categorical Imperative (version 1: *Principle of Universal Law*): Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Categorical Imperative (version 2: *Principle of Humanity*) So act that you use humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only.

In more contemporary terms:

You are No Exception Principle (YANE): "...in whatever you do, you should act for reasons that could serve as acceptable reasons for everyone." (Sayre-McCord, 5)

and

Respect for Persons Principle (RPP): In all action one should respect others as sources of value and never merely as an instrument for one's own purposes. (Sayre-McCord, 7)

3. Virtue Ethics (Aristotle): focus is on character.

Virtue (excellence), then, is (a) a state of character concerned with choice, (b) lying in a mean, (c) the mean relative to us, (d) this being determined by a rational principle, (e) and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. (Nich. Ethics 1106b36-1107a2)

In simpler terms:

An action is right insofar as it is the manifestation of a virtuous character trait, where virtuous character traits are those that are present in the fully flourishing human being.

III. Utilitarianism (a version of consequentialism)

In developing a theory of right and wrong, utilitarians begin by asking what, if anything, is *good in and of itself*, something that is not merely instrumentally good--as a means to some other good--but is good *per se*. They answer this question by looking at the structure of human desire, what it is that (well-informed) people ultimately aim for in action. The idea is that once we understand what this good is, the right act is the one that promotes the maximum amount of it.

So what is the ultimate good? We considered several possibilities in the first section of the course on goodness (or welfare). Mill, however, proposes that happiness is the greatest good. Suppose he's right. It would seem then that the more happiness the better--if it is good for me to be happy, it's even better if I'm happy and others are too; and then it seems that if happiness is really what's important, then in order to promote the good we ought simply to aim to bring about the greatest amount of happiness. Our own happiness is a fine thing, but it's no more valuable than someone else's happiness--it's the total amount of happiness that matters. Thinking along these lines leads to the Utilitarian or "greatest-happiness" principle.

Objections:

- What utilitarianism says is right/wrong conflicts with ordinary moral judgments, e.g., promise keeping, not punishing the innocent.
- Utilitarian thinking doesn't respect ordinary moral distinctions, e.g., between killing and letting die, harming and failing to help.
- Utilitarianism is too demanding: every decision and every action has to be morally evaluated for its consequences.
- Utilitarianism is not demanding enough: sometimes reasons or motivations for acting seem relevant to moral appraisal, not just the consequences; but utilitarianism doesn't care about what comes before the action except insofar as it has good or bad consequences.

Useful distinctions for the utilitarian:

- Direct vs. indirect effects.
- An action's being right/wrong vs. an action's being praiseworthy/blameworthy

IV. Deontology (Kantianism)

The most important alternative to utilitarianism, historically speaking, derives from the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and so predictably is called a **Kantian** approach, or sometimes a *deontological* approach. At the core of Kant's ethics is a principle known as the *Categorical Imperative* (CI) which Kant states in different ways.

One interpretation of the CI is the "You are No Exception Principle." (YANE) It does seem to be ubiquitous in moral life. We generally think it is wrong to do something that we know would be problematic if everyone else did it too, e.g., cheating on an exam, removing a pollution control device from a car, stealing a book from the bookstore. In each of these cases the agent's goals could not be achieved if everyone else did the same thing, so the success of the action depends on making a distinction between what the agent does and what others do. But making oneself an exception this way seems wrong. Kant thought that in cases like this there was a sort of inconsistency.

The idea is that in any intentional action, I am implicitly or explicitly acting on a principle of some kind. Consider two shopkeepers, both of whom are committed to giving correct change to their customers. They act, however, on different principles, or what Kant called "maxims":

Mr. Practical: When I can gain a good business reputation by giving correct change, I shall give correct change.

Mr. Righteous: When I can perform a morally right act by giving correct change, I shall give correct change.

In each case there is a generalized form of the maxim of the form:

General Form: Whenever one is _____, he/she shall _____.

On Kant's view, what matters in evaluating an action is not the consequences, but the principle that is employed in intending or willing. Two individuals can do the same thing, but one of them do wrong and the other right, depending on what they will. Some maxims fail the test, so the corresponding action is immoral, e.g., (in generalized form):

Whenever one has an exam and doesn't feel like studying, she shall copy off of her neighbor's work. Presumably we could not all act on this maxim, for if we are all planning to copy off each other, there will be no work to copy! The underlying rationale for an approach such as this is to show that the source of morality is in *reason* or *rationality*; those who are immoral are in some important sense acting *irrationally*. On this view, we don't ground morality in God's will, or in the seemingly arbitrary moral codes of particular cultures. Morality is grounded in reason itself, and the demands of morality can be discovered through rational reflection.

Objections:

- It appears in many cases that one can adjust the statement of the maxim so that the problem disappears, e.g., consider the maxim: whenever one has an exam and doesn't feel like studying, and everyone else is well-prepared, and she can do it without being caught, she shall copy off her neighbor's work.
- In some cases a maxim cannot be generalized, but its failure is not due to moral factors. E.g., consider a person who decides to withdraw all his money from the bank as soon as the Dow Jones reaches a certain number...x. This maxim would not be one that everyone could act upon, but not due to constraints on morality.

Consider another formulation of the CI drawing on the "Respect for Persons Principle" (RPP). This principle allows that we can use others as a means to accomplish our own ends; after all, we rely crucially on others all the time. You rely on your professors to teach you things—we serve as a means to your ends of gaining knowledge. But these are cases in which there is consent—your professors aren't deceived or coerced into serving your needs. According to the (RPP), cheating on your final would be wrong because you would be using me (or your TA) as a mere means to a good grade: you would be involving us in a scheme whereby you would get a good grade, but it would be a scheme that we would not—or better: could not reasonably—consent to.

On this view the Kantian picture has a strong negative component comprising the *duty of justice*: Don't treat others as a *mere* means. And a positive component comprising the *duty of beneficence*: As far as possible treat others as ends in themselves, i.e., as a rational person with his or her own aims, objectives, goals, conceptions of the good, etc.

Objections:

- It is a difficult and complicated matter to figure out how to help others achieve their own ends. We can't provide them with everything they need or want. How much is enough?
- How is it a demand of rationality that we respect others as ends in themselves (remember that Kant wanted to ground morality in reason itself)? What justifies this account of morality?

To summarize, on the Kantian view (in contrast to utilitarianism):

- The focus of moral evaluation is the maxim or principle implicit in the act, not the results. A good action might have bad results and vv.
- Acts can't be ranked on an order of merit.
- The theory works well when information is scarce. Utilitarian calculations require a lot of data in order to make plausible predictions about consequences. But because it is usually clear when an action would use another as a mere means (in contrast to what would promote human happiness overall), a Kantian view doesn't require that we have as much knowledge in order to determine what is right or wrong.

V. Virtue Theory

There seem to be three components of any action:

- a) The person who performs the action
- b) The action itself
- c) Consequences that result from the action

To determine the moral status of an action, utilitarianism has us look at (c), deontology (b), and virtue theory (a). What matters for virtue theory, more specifically, is the character of the agent.

For example, suppose your friend is struggling in 8.01 and the course is a breeze for you. Your friend asks for help with the material. You, however, want to watch *Heroes*. What should you do? According to the utilitarian, you should consider the likely consequences: overall it will bring about more happiness in the world if your friend does well in 8.01 than if you watch *Heroes* right now. According to the deontologist, you should consider the maxim of your action: helping others when it is of little cost to you is universalizable, and respects your friend's ends. Suppose you help your friend, but purely out of moral duty, not because you want to or care about how well your friend does. It seems that you have done the right thing, but have you done it for the right reasons? If you act in this way – so that your desires and emotions are disengaged from your action – do you have a healthy moral character? The virtue theorist says 'no'.

For the virtue theorist the primary question is: how can I live a good life? Aristotle thought that the best life was the life of a fully realized human being: a human being who demonstrated excellence in all human capacities, e.g., the capacity for emotion, for practical rationality, for theoretical rationality. This was a life of human flourishing. Just as the virtues of a tool (e.g., a pen) are those features (e.g., having flowing ink) that enable the tool to perform its proper function (e.g., writing), so the virtues of a person are those features (kindness, generosity, courage...) that enable it to excel as a human being.

Virtues are dispositions to act in certain ways for certain reasons and with certain feelings. Amy has the virtue of *courage* if Amy tends to take the appropriate risks for the sake of important things without panicking. Amy has the vice of *cruelty* if she tends to hurt others without concern for their well-being and takes pleasure in it. Unlike utilitarianism and deontology, virtue ethics cannot give us a formula for deciding how to act. Rather, it can only suggest a model for how we should aim to *be*, what sort of character we should strive for: have those character traits that are present in a fully flourishing human being.

Objections:

- Could one be happy or flourish, without a good character? Could one have a good character without being happy or flourishing?
- Aren't there some actions that are morally right, even if a non-virtuous person performs them? If a virtuous person does something that has terrible consequences (perhaps unforeseen), wasn't it the wrong thing to do?
- If we are a novice at virtue, and don't have knowledge of how to act properly, how do we know how to become virtuous? What are the states of character that lead to human flourishing? Are there a single set or are there different ways of flourishing?

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