Ethics and the media

1 What is ethics?

Suppose that you live with your wife, Ellen, and your mother-in-law, Dorothy, who has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Dorothy, at 93, is not capable of living alone. Dorothy has become progressively more difficult to live with. Ellen has developed health problems from the pressure of caring for Dorothy. A physician strongly advises Ellen to move Dorothy to a nursing home, a move Dorothy would strongly oppose. It would be easier if you lied – tell Dorothy her move to a nursing home is temporary, while you and Ellen go on holiday.

As you attempt to decide, you experience conflicting emotions and thoughts. How can you do what is best for Dorothy, while respecting her desires and autonomy? Should you simply soldier on, allowing her to remain in your house? Or do you have to take Ellen's physical deterioration as your main concern? What is the right thing to do for Ellen, for Dorothy, and for the three of you?

Most of us recognize this situation as "ethical" because it raises questions about the correct thing to do, apart from self-interest and what is required legally. Ethical situations raise questions about values, responsibilities, and achieving certain goods while not ignoring the rights of others. Deciding on Dorothy's health care exhibits features typical of most ethical problems: pressure to decide under uncertainty; a complex set of facts; conflicting values and options.

We will work with situations of this kind throughout this book only the situations will involve media practice – what responsible news media should do across a range of typical problems. The aim of our study is twofold: (1) to clarify and critique our beliefs about what constitutes ethical media practice; and (2) to develop and improve our ethical reasoning by application to problems. "Improve" here means we act more consistently, think more deeply, reason more acutely, and reach better informed ethical

judgments. All of this contributes to the ethical life, the development of ethical citizens, and hopefully to a better world.

This chapter and the next introduce an ethical framework for understanding media ethics and for applying that understanding to major issues and cases. Be forewarned: the framework is *not* a formula for generating absolute answers. The methods of ethics do not prove conclusions as we might deduce theorems from axioms in mathematics. Rather, they provide a systematic analysis of ethical beliefs and problems. The framework has two parts. The first part, the subject of this chapter, is conceptual. It explains the nature of ethics. The second part, the subject of the next chapter, discusses how to use these ideas to analyze the problems of media ethics. We start with general concepts because it is important for our methods to be based on a clear conception of the topic, ethics.

The ethical sphere

What is ethics?

"Ethics" comes from the Greek word "ethos" meaning "character," "nature," or "disposition" – roughly, how someone is disposed to act. This notion is close to the common idea of ethics as an "internal" matter of virtuous character that motivates people to act correctly. "Morals" stems from the Latin "mores," the customs of a group. Morality as "mores" is close to the other common idea of ethics as external conduct according to the rules of a group.

The etymology of "ethics" and "morality" suggests that ethics is both individualistic and social. It is individualistic because individuals are asked to make certain values part of their character and to use certain norms in making decisions. It is social because ethics is not about every person formulating their own rules of behavior apart from others. Correct conduct is honoring rules of fair social interaction – rules that apply to humans in general or to all members of a group. We experience ethics internally as the tug of conscience. We experience ethics externally as the demands placed upon us by codes of ethics, backed by social sanction. Psychologically, one learns ethics as a set of responses shaped by social enculturation and the ethical "climate" of society.[1] My ethical capacities

[1] Blackburn, *Being Good*, 1–8.

are nurtured and exercised within groups. Also, ethics requires that I adopt a social perspective that looks to the common good and transcends selfish individualism. Ethically speaking, "how ought I to live?" cannot be asked in isolation from the question, "how ought *we* to live?"

Ethics has wide scope, dealing with the conduct of individuals, groups, institutions, professions, and countries. Ethics is demanding. It demands that we live in goodness and in right relation with each other. Ethics may require us to forego personal benefits, to carry out duties or to endure persecution. Through ethics, we articulate our beliefs about what is of greatest moral value in life. By combining internal and external aspects, we can define ethics as being disposed towards virtuous conduct in society according to certain principles and values.

General principles of ethics, such as "help others in need" and "live a life of non-violence and peace," plus more specific directives and norms, are brought together to form moral systems or codes of conduct, such as utilitarian ethics and Buddhist ethics. The Bible's Ten Commandments is one such general code. In addition, there are codes of increasing specificity for doctors, lawyers, and journalists. As a set of principles, "ethics" can refer to something singular or multiple. We can understand "ethics" as the proper name for a single ethical system. One may believe that there is only one set of correct principles and that is what ethics *is*. Or, we can think of "ethics" as a general term that refers to many ethical systems. "Ethics" as a general term resembles "language" which refers to many language systems. I prefer to use "ethics" in this plural sense, reserving "ethic" for a single set of principles such as a libertarian ethic for a free press. Yet, despite the ubiquity of rules in morals, ethics should not be identified simply with a set of rules, such as "do not steal or lie," "keep one's promises," "treat others as you would have them treat you." A set of rules is too static to capture the dynamic nature of ethics. Ethics is a practical and evolving *activity*. It is something we do. We *do* ethics when we weigh values to make a decision. We *do* ethics when we modify practices in light of new technology.

The idea of ethics as correct conduct according to rules is deficient in failing to emphasize the knowledge and skill required to determine what is correct conduct in a complex, changing world. To do ethics requires three things: (1) analysis: the articulation and justification of principles; (2) practical judgment: the application of principles and rules to issues; (3) virtuous character: a disposition to follow those principles affirmed

by (1) and (2). Ethics, therefore, has three concerns: appropriate ethical beliefs, correct application, and the disposition to act ethically.

If ethics is a dynamic, changing form of activity, then ethics is not a set of rules to be followed blindly or defended dogmatically. In many cases, there will be legitimate debate as to *whether* and *how* rules should apply. Even principles we hold dear may have to be reinterpreted in light of new developments. For example, how to apply the principle of respect for life to the issue of how long to keep a dying person alive through new technology. Moreover, the boundaries of ethics shift. As noted, in our time ethics has come to include such issues as animal welfare, protecting the environment and the rights of gay couples. Ethics is not just the disposition to adhere to rules but also the disposition to critique and improve the rules. There is an important difference between living one's ethics, as an activity, and simply following a set of rules. The former rejects the sheer acceptance of rules and conventions. Ethics requires that we follow rules that we have examined critically.

Taken as a whole, ethics is the never-completed human project of inventing, applying, and critiquing the principles that guide interaction, define social roles, and justify institutional structures. Ethical deliberation is *reason in social practice* – the construction of fair ethical frameworks for society.

Ethical experience and reflection

The starting point for ethics is lived experience. We seriously discuss ethics *after* we have had some experience in living well or badly. For anyone who asks "what is ethics?" we can reply: think about your most difficult decisions. Did you break a promise or let others down? Did you have to report improper behavior by a colleague to authorities? Did you promote your career by spreading rumors about a co-worker? Or, think about horrible and dehumanizing actions such as torturing prisoners or child abuse. The heartbeat of ethics is felt wherever people struggle to do good and oppose evil. Reflection within and upon ethics is prompted by doubt and conflict.[2] Faced with uncertainties in our experience, we draw distinctions,

[2] The idea of doubt and conflict as the origin of serious thinking was put forward forcefully by John Dewey in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 80–83.

generate principles, and clarify goals so as to face the world with a manageable number of clear ideas and guidelines. As experience throws up new situations, we alter our principles. We find ourselves in a circle of experience and reflection.

A variety of experiences stimulate ethical thinking. One experience is the felt inadequacy of our current beliefs, such as when our norms lead to troubling consequences. For instance, we question the value of patriotism when it leads to extreme nationalism. We question our belief in a free press when reporting causes irreparable harm to someone's reputation. We reflect on our values when confronted by people and cultures with different beliefs. We think about ethics when the complexity of experience baffles us. Difficult situations, like the example of Dorothy at the start of this chapter, present us with a "knot" of facts, potential consequences, and options, which swamp our ability to think clearly. Finally, we are moved to take thought by the plurality of value. As complex creatures, humans are torn between their different desires and attachments. We occupy many roles and incur many duties. Inevitably, conflict arises as I try to follow a coherent plan of life. How do my duties as a parent line up with my career ambitions? How can I integrate my desire to help the poor with a desire to retire to my garret to paint my masterpiece? Do I value freedom or security? These considerations force us to rephrase our definition of ethics as the activity of critically constructing and adhering to an *integrated* system of principles and values, prompted by the experience of doubt, conflict, and plurality.

Distinctive features

Yet even this rephrasing is not entirely adequate. It does justice to ethics as activity, but it does not explain how ethical activity is distinct from other activities.

There are many types of agencies that enforce norms, from school boards to the police. Many values and norms are not ethical, such as the value of a good beer or norms for greeting someone on the street. There are the norms of etiquette; the norms of behavior in private clubs; the norms of fashion, aesthetics, law, and ethics. Therefore, when we say we "ought" to do some action we may not mean that we have an ethical duty. We may mean that we ought to be polite, as a matter of etiquette. Or we ought to use seat belts because it is required by law.

Together, these many norms and values comprise society's "normative sphere" – those areas where behavior falls under rules and standards. It is important to distinguish one normative system from another, say law from etiquette, because these systems ask different questions and require different answers. A failure to distinguish these perspectives may cause us to not recognize a situation as raising an ethical issue, or to confuse ethical and non-ethical issues. For example, in a newsroom, consider a debate over whether to publish a sensational and damaging story on the personal life of a well-known public figure. As it stands, the normative question, "should we publish?" is ambiguous. It could mean, "will the publication further the career of the journalist who wrote it," or "will it attract the attention of readers?" It could also mean: "are we legally permitted to publish this story, since it damages the person's reputation?" Or, it could mean: "would it be ethically right to publish it, even if legal?" Ethical reasoning requires the capacity to distinguish these senses.

Why are we persuaded that there *is* a distinction between ethical and non-ethical norms? One reason is our experience. We encounter situations where the question, "what should we do?" goes beyond the law or our self-interest. Our concern for making the correct decision about Dorothy, for example, goes beyond what is convenient for the care giver (what serves his or her interest). In teaching ethics, instructors use examples of exceptional behavior to distinguish between ethics and self-interest. For example, they may note how some white Americans in the nineteenth century participated in the "underground railway," courageously helping black slaves escape to states that had banned slavery. Self-interest dictated that these white people should avoid such risky, illegal assistance. Instead, they acted out of a distinct *ethical* concern for others in distress. Other examples contrast ethics with inclination. I ethically ought to repay a loan to John even if I will never see John again and even if I am inclined to avoid repayment. Further, students are asked to consider examples where ethics and the law differ. Some acts that strike us as ethically wrong, like child slavery, are legally permitted in some societies. Protesting against a country's terrible human rights record is ethically correct but protests may be legally forbidden.

However, using examples to create an intuitive grasp of the difference between ethics and other normative spheres is not fully adequate. Intuitively, we may "get" the contrast between ethical and non-ethical

norms but we may still not be able to say what features explain the distinction. Saying how ethics is distinctive is surprisingly difficult. The sociologist Steven Lukes explained it as such: "Moral norms cover matters of importance in people's lives. They are directed at promoting good and avoiding evil, at encouraging virtue and discouraging vice, at avoiding harm to others and promoting their well-being or welfare. They are concerned with the interests of others or the common interest rather than just the individual's self-interest …"[3] Philosopher Thomas Scanlon argues that morality is distinct because of its perceived importance. People feel guilt when they violate these requirements. The victims of unethical actions feel resentment and indignation.[4] Such strong emotions are not caused by a violation of etiquette.

These writers capture essential points. Bringing the points together, we can say that ethics is distinguished by a combination of four features: (1) a specific subject matter defined by a family of concerns and familiar principles, that (2) are approached through an impartial stance. These concerns and principles are (3) serious and (4) justify other norms. Ethics is distinguished by its concerns and how it reasons about them. Let's examine each of these four criteria.

Identifiable concerns: ethics has an identifiable subject matter, even if the boundaries are not precise. So far, this chapter has proceeded by appealing to our implicit understanding of this subject matter. With Dorothy's case, we recognized as a subject matter the responsible treatment of aging people, and the rights of such people to respect and autonomy. Also, we are familiar with ethical rules prohibiting murder and theft, and the virtues of honesty and kindness. In sum, a discussion is ethical when it considers *what is good, what is right, or what is virtuous*. A discussion that did not address any of these three themes would not be "ethics." We will discuss these three areas below.

Seriousness: these three themes make ethics a serious enterprise.[5] Ethics is about the most significant issues in our lives: rights, freedoms and duties,

[3] Lukes, *Moral Relativism*, 62–63.

[4] Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Chapter 4. See also Lukes, *Moral Relativism*, 63.

[5] Hauser says the moral sphere is characterized by emotion and a "sense of seriousness." Hauser, *Moral Minds*, 238. Adams, in *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 18, talks about "the

respect for others, fairness and justice, and the development of human capacities. What ethical principles people affirm or reject has great impact on others. This is why we think that disagreements over ethics are more important than differences over etiquette or art.

Impartial stance: ethics adopts an impartial stance. A stance is a distinctive approach to something in the world. For example, I can adopt a cynical stance that believes that selfish motives are always behind people's seemingly well-intended actions. An egoistic stance evaluates all actions in terms of what promotes my interests. The ethical stance is an impartial approach to the determination of correct conduct. It requires persons to transcend egoism and give fair consideration to the interests of others. Ethical persons care about how people are treated, and they allow such considerations to restrain their pursuit of goods. The ethical stance can be ignored. Every day, people act unethically from uncaring, partial attitudes. Some people, such as sociopaths, are psychologically unable to adopt the ethical stance.

I "show" my impartiality by being willing to universalize my ethical beliefs. Essentially, I agree that what holds for me holds for others, and what holds for others, holds for me. If I think that John is obligated to do *x* in situation *y*, then I agree that I am obligated to do *x* if I find myself in *y*. I am not thinking ethically if I hold that Mary ought to report someone cheating on a test but I am not obligated to do the same. The rules of ethics are universal in the sense that they apply to all persons in *similar* circumstances. There is no "special pleading" in ethics. There are exceptions to rules. A surgeon is not obligated to keep her promise to take her son to a movie if she must return to her hospital to treat injured people. However, there are no *arbitrary* exceptions. For example, "do not murder, unless you are Stephen Ward or an Irishman," is not a valid rule because it is not impartial. It is partial towards Stephen Ward and the Irish. An exception for murder based on someone's identity is arbitrary.

To be impartial is not to lack feeling. We adopt an impartial stance because we care deeply about being fair. We value impartiality as a means to the goal of correct judgment. Ethical caring is not a hazy, sentimental feeling. It is a tough-minded commitment to living ethically with others.

seriousness of normative discourse." Seriousness is stressed by Kupperman in *Value … and What Follows*, 113. See also Hare, *The Language of Morals*, 142–144.

Ethical caring may include but does not require that I have an emotional bond to the people with whom I have dealings.

The ethical stance is different from other stances for evaluating conduct. At a formal event, I adopt the stance of etiquette. I make sure to say the appropriate things. My rule-following is neither ethical nor unethical. It is non-ethical. It does not raise ethical concerns. Another stance is that of prudence. Prudence doesn't mean being a prude. It means reasoning about what is best for me. For example, it is prudent to save some of my salary if I desire financial security. Prudential reasoning is not opposed to the ethical stance. In fact, a certain amount of prudence is required by ethics. It is ethically required that I prudently take care of myself. Prudential reasoning need not be egotistic since I may include others, such as my family, as part of my interests. Prudence can motivate ethical behavior. If I operate a neighborhood laundry where everyone knows each other, it may be prudent to deal honestly and ethically with customers. But this coexistence does not erase the difference between ethical and prudential reasoning. Prudential thinking is partial. It is concerned with achieving goods for me or for a particular group. It is not impartial. My ethical duty as a laundry owner to be honest in business dealings is not based on prudence. It is based on an impartial concern for all. The prudential and the ethical are different modes of reasoning and evaluation.

Justification of other norms: the seriousness of ethics means that it is as basic as normative thinking gets, and therefore justifies other types of norms. To be sure, the law deals with serious topics. Laws are more important than rules of etiquette. Laws are justified, ultimately, by appeal to some conception of the good and just life for citizens. Modern constitutions, those fundamental legal frameworks, ground their laws in some ethical vision of the good and just society. Constitutional rights are legal expressions of ethical principles.

Some readers may feel that these four criteria fail to establish a hard line between ethics and other normative domains. They are right. The distinction is a matter of degree, such as ethics being more fundamental than law. We should *not* expect hard and fast boundaries. Etiquette, prudence, law, and ethics all deal with regulating behavior. All speak of what ought to be done, in contrast to what is done. Consequently, there is overlap in language and among the rules. Stealing is both unethical and illegal. Being boorish to a visitor is a matter of etiquette, yet at the extreme

it is also unethical since it shows disrespect to other humans. Human society only gradually distinguished these normative domains. Originally, to violate the commands of a tribal chief was socially repugnant, an ethical breach, and against the gods – all at the same time. Law only became a distinct area when societies built legal systems with their own rules, practices, and institutions.

The ethical stance amounts to a distinct and autonomous way to approach life. Ethics is self-justifying. I adopt the stance because I see inherent (and instrumental) purpose in the ethical ordering of our social relations and I see inherent value in the goods, duties, and attitudes that ethics supports. The validity of ethics does not depend on its ability to "prove" to sceptics that it is in their self-interest to adopt the ethical stance. That reduces ethics to prudential reasoning. The answer to "why be moral?" cannot be "because it serves your interests." Ethics may not serve your interests. The answer to "why be moral?" can only be, "because these are the values and forms of life that I deeply care about, and can justify (and recommend) to others." In recognizing the inherent value of ethical concerns, you know why one should be moral. The real issue is not the legitimacy of the ethical stance. The real issue is what principles and actions best express that stance.

Nor is ethics philosophically bankrupt if it cannot persuade the radically unethical person to adopt its stance. If someone can witness pain, suffering, and injustice with indifference; if they care little for goodness or the well-being of others; if, in short, they are unmoved by ethical concerns, there is not much that can be said to persuade them. And not much that *needs* to be said. Ethical insensitivity and radical skepticism are stances that need as much (or more) justification as the ethical stance. The task is to deliberate about principles and norms with people who are *already* disposed to care about such matters.

Theorizing about ethics

We have described what it is to ethically engage the world. Across human history, this engagement has prompted theorizing about ethics. Theorizing develops the ethical impulse "already firmly planted in human experience."[6]

[6] Darwall, *Philosophical Ethics*, 8.

Theories explain the activity of ethics, advance certain principles as guides to action, and take positions on ethical questions.

In the rest of this chapter, we describe the major theories. Since the number of theories (and the variations on theories) is vast, we must be selective. We review those theories that have a major influence on media ethics. The aim is not to determine which theory is best or to master their technical aspects. The aim is to obtain an overview of the main theoretical options so we can use them to discuss media ethics. We start by explaining the relation of practice and theory, and by distinguishing between philosophical and applied ethics.

Practice and theory

Ethics is practical in intent, but theoretical in understanding. As noted, we reflect on our experiences, and reflection often leads us into the more abstract realms of theory, as we seek a deeper and more systematic view of the issues. Caught up in an ethical debate, we may ask: what types of statements are ethical statements anyway, and how do we justify them? Given a discussion of what promotes happiness, we may ask: but what is happiness for humans? Faced with conflicting moral views, we stand back and ask: which ethical view provides the best guidance, and why? These questions can have practical import. In many cases, our implicit or explicit theoretical assumptions affect what we judge to be ethical and how we should act.

In the circle of experience and reflection, practice and theory both play an important part, and they inevitably interact. Theory and practice, in ethics or elsewhere, are not separate spheres of life: a sphere of ideas isolated from the world, and a practical world hostile to ideas. There is almost no theoretical reflection where some amount of practical thinking does not intrude; and no sphere of practical thinking devoid of theory. Our thinking is like a rope of tightly compressed theoretical and practical strands that are difficult to untangle. A good deal of our theoretical thinking, such as our view of what constitutes justice or freedom, is influenced by how such views would work in practice. Practical problems, such as how to dig a train tunnel under a river, have theoretical aspects. Many professions, such as medicine, combine intimately the theoretical and the practical. In academia, we study a practical activity theoretically, or study a theory practically by examining its applications.

The theoretical-practical distinction, then, is a matter of degree. Some thinking is more practical or more theoretical than other forms of thinking. The difference is (a) the dominant interest of the thinking and (b) the types of reasons it uses. Practical problems are addressed to us as agents. The dominant interest is what to do. How can we solve a problem or achieve a goal? Theoretical problems are addressed to us as knowers. The dominant interest is what is true, or what to believe, and how to explain some phenomenon. For example, we want to know, theoretically, how sub-atomic forces explain the observable features of ordinary objects, or how certain genes predispose someone to skin cancer. Practical problems are resolved by developing the right practice. Theoretical problems are solved by coming to the right (or true) belief. Theoretical reasons are "reasons for believing" which support a proposition, while practical reasons are "reasons for acting" and support an action.[7]

Ethics is practical because both its dominant interest and its reasons are practical. It seeks reasons for doing action *x*, not theoretical reasons for believing *y*. But ethics is not anti-theory. It is not so practical as to be averse to the careful analysis of ideas, to the raising of technical points, or to questions of principle. The purpose of theorizing is to illuminate our ethical experience, examine its tensions, expose assumptions, construct new principles, and improve our ethical responses. There is no saying, in advance, how theoretical or arcane our thinking must become to sort out an ethical issue. We should follow our thinking wherever it leads. To insist on a practical "anchor" for ethics is not to question the value of theory; it is to remind us that ethical theorizing should be grounded in practical questions.

Theorizing in ethics can be divided into two groups:

Philosophical ethics: includes (a) the nature of ethical statements and the meaning of ethical concepts; (b) how we know, or come to agree on, ethical statements, plus their objectivity; (c) the purpose(s) of ethics given certain theories of society and human nature; and (d) the history of ethics.

Applied ethics: includes (a) criteria of right and wrong; the supreme principle(s) of ethics; (b) lower-level principles that guide how we should act in particular enterprises and professions; (c) how

[7] Audi, *Practical Reasoning and Ethical Decision*, 1–2.

principles apply to specific issues; and (d) methods of reasoning.[8] As I will explain, applied ethics is divided into two parts: general normative theories about what principles and values should guide us in life; and a more specific "framework ethics" that focuses on codes of ethics for professions and other significant enterprises in society.

Philosophical ethics (or "meta-ethics") is called "philosophical" because it studies ethics at a high level of generality and detachment. We step outside the daily activity of making ethical judgments and examine (and explain) the activity of making ethical judgments. We adopt the view of an external observer who analyzes ethics as a social, psychological, and linguistic phenomenon. For example, if I stumble upon a wallet on my walk to work, I think to myself, "I ought to return the wallet to the owner." I engage in practical ethical thinking to arrive at a conclusion for action. This is applied ethics, not philosophical ethics. I adopt the view of philosophical ethics to this experience if I step back and ask, for example, what "ought" means in such judgments. What is the source of such feelings of duty to return the wallet? What do I mean when I say returning the wallet is the right thing to do?

In contrast, applied ethics is just that – *applied*. It seeks practical conclusions about the right thing to do and to marshal reasons for doing it. It is interested in identifying duties, rights, and practical principles for guiding action. In applied ethics, we work within ethics. We engage ethical situations and issues, directly. We do not step outside and observe ethics as a human phenomenon. To the contrary, we are actors who do ethics with a dominant practical interest. We argue for the application of certain ethical principles in controversial cases. In applied ethics, we ask such questions as, "did I do the wrong thing when I refused to give money to famine relief?" or "is euthanasia morally justifiable if the dying person is in extreme pain?"

Theories in applied ethics are not abstract theories focused on what "good" or "right" means, or why humans have constructed ethical systems. A "theory" in applied ethics is a general view about what actually *is* good

[8] This categorization is close to other schemes, such as the distinction between meta-ethics, normative ethics, and practical ethics, in LaFollette, *Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, 1–3; and the division of ethics into meta-ethics and normative ethics, as in Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 1–2.

or right or virtuous, in general or in a domain of life. Typically, an applied ethics theory has a distinct view of the three great themes of ethics – what the good life consists of, what is right (or what justice requires), and what the virtues are. Typically, an applied ethics theory advances a view of how these themes are related and which is the most important aspect of ethical life. An applied ethics theory also must explain what its perspective means for leading issues. For instance, where does utilitarianism, communitarian ethics, or Christian ethics stand on such issues as animal rights, our obligations to future generations, or a just immigration policy? The application of theory is crucial for applied ethics. Values such as respect for life, friendship, or happiness, can be so abstract that we need to see how people apply these values to identify where we agree or disagree. After all, both the Quakers and the mafia agree on the value of friendship.[9]

We have already mentioned examples of applied theories, such as utilitarianism, which takes the good as the fundamental aspect of ethics. It declares that the greatest good is the greatest amount of happiness for all. On this basis, utilitarianism takes a wide array of positions on the moral issues of the day. To be sure, any applied theory such as utilitarianism contains philosophical reflections on the meaning of "good" and the objectivity of ethics. But the overwhelming intent of applied theories is practical.

Given this general understanding of the philosophical/applied distinction, we can now be more specific about the area that we are most concerned with in this book – applied ethics. As mentioned, applied ethics has two divisions, general and specific: (1) normative ethics in general, which deals with general theories about what things are valuable, good, and right, what principles should belong to our general morality, and how they apply to our decisions and actions; (2) framework ethics: the development, critique, and application of specific frameworks of principles, such as codes of ethics for the professions. Frameworks are sets of related principles that together govern an entire type of activity, e.g. the code of ethics for physicians or journalists. Framework ethics, of course, does not stand on its own. Applied ethics engages in both normative and framework ethics to study the practice of professions to help nurses, public servants, journalists, and others. Part of the analysis of these frameworks is to examine

[9] Lukes, *Moral Relativism*, 123.

whether they are consistent with the more general theories of normative ethics, such as utilitarianism.

Framework ethics asks about the validity, coherence, interpretation, and adequacy of the framework, as well as the validity of specific principles. For example, in journalism we can question whether the existing professional code of ethics is adequate for changes happening in journalism, where citizen journalists become increasingly important. Or we can question a specific principle such as the doctrine of news objectivity. Framework ethics is focused not on the justification of the framework of principles, but on how the principles apply to situations to yield judgments about what to do. For example, if we accept objectivity as a principle of news reporting, what does it entail for the coverage of my country's military actions? The professions use framework ethics to question their principles and to study the dilemmas and tough "judgment-calls" specific to their domains. For example, how much information should a doctor provide a seriously ill patient about their disease? How should a health organization inform female patients that their breast cancer tests were botched by pathologists? What is "informed consent" in a business contract? If a financial adviser owns stock in a company, should he promote that company to clients?[10]

Philosophical ethics

Philosophical ethics asks three large questions. What are we saying when we speak ethically? How do we justify what we say? What is the purpose

[10] My term "framework ethics" is non-standard but overall my category scheme captures the essential distinctions made by other schemes. Historically, philosophers have used a variety of terms to capture these differences. For example, the term "philosophical ethics" is used by Darwall, in his *Philosophical Ethics*. Darwall notes that philosophical ethics can be called "meta-ethics" or "critical ethics" or "analytic ethics." See Darwall, "How Should Ethics Relate to Philosophy?" 19. One popular category scheme divides theories into "metaethics," "normative ethics," and "practical ethics." See LaFollette's *Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, and his *Ethics in Practice*. On my scheme, philosophical ethics is meta-ethics. I prefer "philosophical ethics" because it covers a variety of approaches to understanding ethics. My second category, "applied ethics" contains normative ethics, as traditionally understood. I add "framework ethics" to applied ethics to bring out an important area of theorizing for this book – the analysis of professional ethics. Despite this deviance from the usual nomenclature, my scheme captures the main distinctions between philosophizing about ethics, constructing normative theories, and doing ethics in specific areas such as the professions.

of ethics? Theories can be categorized according to which question they ask and how they answer it.

What are we saying?

Philosophical ethics begins with the analysis of ethical language. What are we saying when we assert that something is right, cruel or shameful? What does "ought" mean when we say "you ought to tell her the truth"? What sort of statement is "torture is intolerable"? Are ethical judgments a type of factual statement? Consider this: when we make ethical statements, such as "John has a duty to keep his promise," "reducing harm is the greatest good," and "ethical people are honest, truthful and kind," are we attempting to describe something about John or about people in general? If I say "the hallway door is closed" I describe the door, ascribing an objective feature – being closed – to an object. Is this what we are doing when we say "Mary is good"? Are we describing Mary by ascribing a property to her – being good? If we say "to cause unnecessary pain to anyone is bad" are we stating (or describing) a fact about the world, perhaps a special kind of fact, a moral fact?

This view of ethical judgments as factual descriptions may strike us as improbable. After all, we use many types of statements for purposes other than to describe. The imperative "close the door" is uttered to prompt someone to act, not to describe the door. "I love the sublime music of Mozart" expresses one's love of the composer's work; it is not uttered to describe the music. Perhaps, then, ethical judgments are more like imperatives to do something or subjective expressions of emotion about what I like or dislike. Maybe ethical statements are not meant to describe anything at all.

Theories about the language of ethics can be categorized depending on how they answer these questions. The main rival theories are *descriptivism* and *non-descriptivism*. A theory is descriptive if it contends that ethical statements describe actions or objects in some factual or objective manner, and they are true when their descriptions are true to these moral facts. A theory is non-descriptive if it denies this view and attributes some other function to ethical language.

Our decision to be descriptivist or non-descriptivist will affect whether we believe ethics is factual or non-factual; true or false; objective or subjective. For descriptivists, if ethical statements do *not* describe anything in

the world, they cannot be true or false. There must be a moral property or fact corresponding to "good," "right," or "duty" that determines whether the ethical statement is true or false. My ethical statement can only be true if it correctly corresponds to the way the world is, in the same way that my statement about the size of the moon is only true if it corresponds to the way the moon is. Otherwise, ethical statements are false. To deny the factuality of moral statements commits one to the position that they only express subjective feelings or relative opinions. This view is sometimes called "moral realism" because it believes that ethical statements describe what is real, beyond my subjective feelings and emotions. Moral realism takes moral claims literally, as claims that "purport to describe the moral properties of people, actions, and institutions."[11]

Descriptivism can take many forms. One view is naturalism: terms like "good" refer to natural things such as moral emotions, pleasure (or the satisfaction of my preferences), or the maximization of utility. If goodness is pleasure, then to say that an action is good is to say it creates pleasure. It is factual and descriptive. I describe an objective feature of that action. Another view is non-naturalism, which believes that ethical terms such as "morally good" refer to a special moral property of "goodness" that is indefinable and therefore not reducible to natural properties such as pleasure.[12]

Despite their differences, all descriptivists argue that it is clear that ethical judgments describe things. All we have to do is look at how we normally use ethical language. When I say that John is honest, I ascribe the property of "honesty" to him. The statement is true or false depending on whether John has that property or not, apart from how I feel about it. When I say an action is wrong I am saying it has certain properties, such as causing harmful consequences, which make it wrong. When I say Mary is a good person I ground my judgment in objective features of Mary such as her kindness to strangers. To say "Mary is a good person" is to describe her in a way similar to "my Honda is a good car." To say, "*x* is right" is similar in form to "*x* is red." Both ethical and empirical judgments are true by virtue of properties in the world. We also say things like, "it is just a *fact* that torturing babies for pleasure is wrong." We say that helping

[11] Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 7.

[12] Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 21.

Mary in distress is *really* good. This suggests that we are describing something. Moreover, if an ethical disagreement is not over a property or fact, then what is it about? If ethics is only about expressing our feelings, then how can we rationally discuss differences in feelings and attitudes? Why debate at all in ethics, why reason and inquire, if we don't think it will get us closer to the truth? There must be something we can be right or wrong about. For realists, there are correct answers in ethics and discussion is to "discover what these objective facts are."[13]

Non-descriptivism rejects this descriptive (or realist) way of understanding ethical language. It holds that ethical statements are not made true by things external to my mind because ethical language is not descriptive, or not primarily descriptive. Descriptivists are mistaken about how ethical language functions. The strongest version of non-descriptivism argues that you are simply in error if you think ethical statements describe anything.[14] You are in the grip of the "descriptive fallacy."[15] Ethical language does not seek to describe or represent the world at all.

What *is* the function of ethical language then? Most non-descriptivists agree that the function of ethical language is to project our values, emotions, and practical attitudes onto actions and objects. There are two main theories. The primary function of ethical language is (1) to express my approval of some action. This is called *expressivism*. Or it is (2) to prescribe some action, not to describe it. This is *prescriptivism*. For (1) and (2) ethical language is not literally true or false, in the realist sense of corresponding to an external fact or property. Instead, the purpose of ethical language is to guide conduct by indicating what we approve of and by commending it to others, so as to influence their behavior. Expressivism holds that ethical judgments such as "*x* is good" express my positive feelings toward and my approval of *x*, while "*x* is bad" expresses my negative feelings and disapproval.[16] Prescriptivism holds that ethical judgments are not descriptions in the indicative form, "*x* is P," but prescriptions in the imperative form, "do *x*." Ethical statements are value judgments that typically take

[13] Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 9.

[14] On "error" theory, see Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.

[15] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 3, and Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 67.

[16] Ayer says statements of value are not significant in a literal sense "but are simply expressions of emotion, which can be neither true nor false, Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 103.

the form of imperatives or commands, such as "do not murder." In making an ethical statement, I am not expressing my attitude toward an action. I am prescribing. I am saying that you ought to do some action, or not do it. R. M. Hare, who developed prescriptivism as a theory, argued that a descriptive sentence such as "the door is shut" tells us something is the case. It differs from the imperative, "shut the door," which is not used to tell someone what is the case. It is used to tell someone "to make something the case."[17] On Hare's view, ethics consists of our most basic and universal prescriptions.

Some forms of non-descriptivism depend on a distinction between the descriptive and the ethical meaning of a statement. It is the latter that makes ethical language distinct. Charles Stevenson was one of the first to forcefully argue for the view that words had an "emotive" sense in addition to a descriptive sense. The emotive power of a word was its causal ability to "evoke or directly express attitudes, as distinct from describing them."[18] This is the ethical meaning of a sentence. For non-descriptivism, ethical statements such as "Mary is good" or "do not kill," have a factual element. When I say "Mary is a good person," I can be describing her on one level. If asked why I think she is good, I can describe several of her features, such as her kindness, her honesty, etc. But, for non-descriptivists, simply naming these features does not make the sentence an ethical assertion. It only becomes an ethical assertion when I *also* implicitly or explicitly commend such features to others. I project my moral attitudes onto the action. This act of valuing and commending, with its public purposes of teaching and influencing others, is the emotive sense. To express these values and emotions is the function of ethical language.

The challenge for non-descriptivists is to show how the expression of feelings or attitudes, or the issuing of prescriptions, can have a rational and objective basis. If I say "I hate *x*" or "do *x*" and you reply, "but I love x," or "do not do *x*," what is left for ethics to discuss?

How do I know what I say?

Asking about the meaning of ethical language leads to epistemological questions about how to justify ethical statements. There are three possible

[17] Hare, *The Language of Morals*, 5. [18] Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, 33.

justifications: metaphysics, tradition, or rationality. I can ground my beliefs metaphysically by appealing to some source of authority that transcends the world and is beyond natural human faculties. Appeal to religion is one metaphysical approach. To justify my ethical beliefs I may cite the authority of the commands of God. Also, I can ground my beliefs on social customs and traditions. What is right or wrong is what the tradition of my family, ethnic group, or culture says is right or wrong. I may argue that traditional values have served my community for many years and therefore deserve respect. Without traditional values, individuals act in selfish ways against the common good.

Finally, I can ground my beliefs on rationality and experience. This option is sometimes called "naturalism" since it regards ethics to be grounded in natural human experiences, capacities, and needs. It does not ground ethics on a transcendent authority, and it subjects cultural traditions to the test of human experience. An ethical belief is valid or true because one can provide reasons from logic and experience.

It is possible that ethical beliefs could find support from two or all three approaches. My rational belief in the principle of equal respect for all humans may be supported by my community's traditions and by my religion.

Naturalistic theories stress either direct or indirect methods of validating ethical beliefs. Direct theories claim that humans can directly apprehend certain ethical principles and judgments to be correct, by simply and directly examining the ideas contained in the belief. Principles such as "torturing is wrong" do not need a long argument to be shown true. They are not inferences from other things I know.[19] Its "wrongness" is directly evident to me when I consider what is involved in the idea of torture, somewhat in the same way that I know that a triangle's three angles total 180 degrees by reflecting on my idea of a triangle. I may say that I "intuit" that an act of racial discrimination is wrong in the same way that I directly perceive that an object is red, or has a rectangular shape. Intuitions operate in many areas of our lives. On this view, most people hold many ethical beliefs to be obvious or self-evident. Who doesn't intuit that debilitating pain is bad? One knows that one should keep one's promise to Tom by reflecting on what is involved in the act of promising. The philosophical

[19] McMahan, "Moral Intuition," 93–94.

formulation of this view is called *intuitionism* and it has been put forward in different forms by major ethicists such as Henry Sidgwick, G. E. Moore, and W. D. Ross. Intuition is a form of descriptivism. Ethical judgments describe what we intuit. Intuitions are "non-inferential cognitions," that is, they are not inferred from, or justified by reference to, other beliefs and judgments.[20] Ross thought that, through intuition, we see that we have a number of basic duties by simply reflecting on the type of action in question. I intuit duties of fidelity (honesty and promise-keeping), justice, gratitude, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-injury.[21] Ross did not think that intuition was a method sufficient for all of ethics. Intuitions grounded our identification of basic duties, but other methods and considerations had to be used for determining our actual duty in a given case.

Intuitionism is controversial. Critics question the nature of this intuition, and whether it assumes, improbably, that humans have a special moral "sense." Some argue that to say "I intuit that *x* is wrong" tells us no more than "*x* is wrong." Intuitions, it is also objected, are just the product of my upbringing and can be biased. In the seventeenth century, slavery did not strike a good number of people as obviously wrong. We need to reason about our intuitions.[22] Defenders of intuitions reply that a principle is intuitively known to be true by those who properly understand it. Intuitions are not necessarily obvious to all people, or it may take time. Intuitions compel my belief when we consider them with a proper understanding. They are self-evident to "an intelligent and unbiased mind."[23]

Indirect theories deny that there are direct ways of justifying what we say ethically since everything we know is indirectly apprehended through a process of interpretation and reasoning. At best, humans know ethical beliefs by using both direct and indirect methods of justification, for example, some combination of intuitions and forms of reasoning. Some indirect ethicists are what we could call "holists." They believe that an ethical conclusion follows from balancing a wide variety of factors such

[20] Audi, *The Good in the Right*, 5. [21] Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 21.

[22] Peter Singer says intuitions are likely derived from "discarded religious systems, from warped views of sex and bodily functions" or from customs once necessary for the survival of a group but no longer needed. Singer, "Sidgwick and Reflective Equilibrium," 516.

[23] Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 229.

as intuitions about what is good or right, facts about humans and the situation in question, expected consequences, our basic values and emotions, and the weighing of conflicting general principles. We will explore holistic reasoning in the media in the next chapter. For now, we can note the holistic reasoning that occurred when we imagined ourselves to be deliberating about Dorothy's health care. Our mind sought to balance a range of moral intuitions, facts about Dorothy, consequences for all of the people involved, various options and concern for the rights of Dorothy but also the duties of the health provider. A proper ethical judgment on what to do in this situation cannot simply or directly be intuited. Instead, the judgment is arrived at in an indirect manner, using a variety of forms of reasoning.

Other indirect ethicists are what we might call "monists." To put it roughly, they think the process of justification is simpler and clearer than the holistic process. Monists think that ethical conclusions can be inferred in a fairly direct fashion from one (hence, "monistic") supreme principle. Utilitarianism is monistic in spirit because it uses one supreme principle, the principle of utility, to infer whether an action is good or bad, or which of several possible actions is the best option. To decide what is to be done, we calculate whether the action will produce the greatest amount of utility, or at least as much utility as any other action. Ethical judgments about actions follow as a deduction from the supreme principle of utility. Utilitarianism does not employ a holistic form of reasoning that balances a plurality of values and principles. Instead, it employs one form of reasoning – the calculation of utility. It calculates how various options of action promote utility.

Other philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, put forward a fairly direct method of ethical justification. Kant uses a method that formalizes the idea, noted above, of being willing to universalize my actions. For Kant, an action is ethically justified if it follows a rule or "maxim" that is consistent with the one great principle of ethics, the "categorical imperative." The imperative tells us to will only those acts that we could recommend to all other rational beings in similar situations.

Another form of indirect theory is found in approaches to ethics that stress agreement among interested parties. One variant of this view is that we come to know what we ought to do by considering whether the act can be justified by principles that all interested parties could fairly and

reasonably *agree* to. This is usually a form of non-descriptivism and tends towards holistic reasoning. Ethical judgments do not describe ethical facts. They express those norms that we agree should govern our interactions. One such view is *contract* theory, or *contractualism*, which thinks that what is "right," "obligatory," or "wrong" in any domain of society is determined by principles that define a reasonable co-operative framework. An action is right or wrong "if the act accords with, or violates principles that are, or would be, the object of a suitable agreement between equals."[24] In other words, an ethical principle is justified if it can be derived from an agreement which meets certain conditions such as an equal and fair participation by all participants.

In modern ethical theory, ethics as fair agreement has been developed by major writers such as John Rawls, Thomas Scanlon, and Jurgen Habermas. Impartial reasoning means we are able to justify to *others* our norms, our policies, and our reasons for acting. Justification is an open and fair dialogue among all parties. For Scanlon, I have to argue in terms that people, with similar moral motivations, "could not reasonably reject."[25] On this view, ethics is based not on religion or a common conception of life. We construct our ethics through a process of deliberation. Hence, ethical judgments as agreed-upon rules are better referred to as "reasonable," "fair," and "useful and appropriate," rather than literally true or false.[26]

Objectivity and relativism

Theories of meaning and justification have implications for one of the most difficult and enduring disputes: whether ethics is objective or subjective, absolute or relative. The dispute goes back to the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece where some philosophers, particularly a group called the sophists, argued that the laws of nature were universal but the rules of society, because they were man-made, were not. They were relative to society.

[24] Darwall, *Contractarianism/Contractualism*,1.

[25] Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 5.

[26] Habermas puts forward a "discourse morality" of equal respect and "solidaristic responsibility for everybody." Habermas argues that, in ethics, we don't project ourselves by imagination into the place of others. Instead, we participate in an actual dialogue with others, where all parties get to give their reasons. Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 33.

In a famous passage, Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, describes how Darius the Great, King of Persia, encountered Greeks, who cremated their dead fathers and Callatiae Indians, who were said to eat them. The Greeks were appalled at the practice of eating parents; the Indians were appalled at the burning of their bodies.[27] Plato began Western philosophy by responding to the challenge of relativism. He gave himself the task of showing that objective knowledge about society and human nature was possible and should replace the shifting, relative opinions of most people. Today's ethical relativism is more often described as "cultural relativism," originating in studies of differing cultures by anthropologists and sociologists.

Objectivity has played a large part in the ethics of modern journalism. Here too journalists have disagreed not only on whether news journalism could be objective but also what "objective reporting" means.[28] Two senses of objectivity have dominated the discussion. One sense is "ontological objectivity." To be ontologically objective, a belief must correctly describe or correspond to the way the world is. It must refer to some actually existing object or state of affairs and it must truly describe certain properties of an object or state of affairs, such as size or mass. My belief that there is a flock of pink flamingos in my bedroom is not objective because it is due to my imagination or my dreaming. My belief that there is a yellow tree in my backyard is not objective because the tree is actually dark brown. This is the sense of objectivity in which many moral realists claim that ethical judgments are descriptive and objective.

A second sense is "epistemic objectivity" or "methodological objectivity." On this view, we may struggle to know what is true, or what corresponds to reality; but we can still understand objectivity as good methods and correct norms of inquiry. My beliefs are objective to the extent that they are formed and tested by rigorous methods that detect bias, reduce error, and test for evidence and logic. In science, the hypothesis that a group of genes in the brain is causally related to Parkinson's disease is tested for plausibility and objectivity by studying the methods it used, and by seeing if it meets objective standards of evidence. As we will see, a story in journalism is "epistemically objective" if its claims are based on

[27] Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book Three, Chapter 38, Section 3, 185–186.

[28] For journalism objectivity see Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*.

the best possible journalistic methods for gathering data, collaborating facts, checking a diversity of sources, and so on. Objectivity in this methodological sense does not guarantee truth. In the end, my hypothesis or journalism story may prove to be false.

Descriptivists argue that ethics is either ontologically objective or relative. If "good" means what I or some group think is good, or what I or a group approve, then ethical norms are relative to how we think about them. Also, intuitionism appears to be committed to ontological objectivity because the agent intuits that some action is objectively right or wrong, and that judgment is not relative to culture or individual beliefs. In contrast, Kant thought that ethics was, in our terms, not ontologically objective but epistemically objective, because proper ethical reasoning followed a strict method for testing rules, a method that held for all rational beings. The method was based on principles that were universal and obligatory for all rational beings. Finally, if you think that "good" refers to utility, then ethics is objective because we test our judgments according to an external criterion, utility.

Opposed to objectivity is relativism. Relativism holds that all beliefs are true or valid relative to a background theory or culture. Moreover, there are no impartial criteria to judge that a background theory or culture is better than another. David Wong writes: "Radical relativists hold that any morality is as true or as justified as any other."[29] Moderate relativists deny that there is any single true morality but also hold that some moralities are truer or more justified than others. Ethical relativism says that ethical beliefs are true or valid relative to the ethical values of a group or culture and that there are no objective criteria to decide whether one set of values is better than another.

Since there are many forms of relativism we need to be clear which sense of relativism is being discussed. For Plato and others, the relativism that needs to be opposed is "status" relativism, not "circumstantial" relativism.[30] Circumstantial relativism says that what we ought to do depends on, and must be relativized to, the relevant circumstances of the action. This view is not controversial since it is only common sense to say

[29] Wong, "Moral Relativism," 541.

[30] See the distinction between status and circumstantial relativism in Audi, *Moral Value and Human Diversity*, 25–26.

that how we apply principles should take circumstances into account. For example, normally we ought not to slap people vigorously but if someone groggy from sleeping pills must wake up or die, you may be obligated to slap the person, repeatedly. The form of relativism that is controversial is status relativism, which says the justification of the principles themselves are relative to custom or society. The validity of the principle not to slap people unnecessarily (or any other ethical principle) depends on society. There are no universally binding principles. There are no objective principles, where "objective" means justification not relative to society but binding for all societies.[31] For circumstantial relativism, the application of principles is relative to circumstances; for status relativism, their justification is relative to circumstances.

The first assumption of ethical relativism, that cultures in different times and places have different ethical rules and values, seems true. Seventeenth-century England believed slavery was correct; twentieth-century England does not. Today, our culture would question female circumcision in tribal countries; other cultures would not. Our society places more value on individual freedom and egalitarian social structures than cultures that value a caste system, or a strict social hierarchy. Ethical differences also exist among groups within cultures.

However, ethical relativism is not *just* the observation that different groups hold different ethical beliefs. Why not? Because non-relativists can agree that there is a plurality of ethical beliefs and systems. In fact, philosophers have known for centuries that ethical values differed among cultures but most of them did not conclude that relativism was true. One reason was a belief in a God who prescribed ethical norms, absolutely, even if some humans refused to accept them. But there were non-religious reasons. There are ways of explaining the differences in belief that are consistent with objectivity. The fact that you and I disagree whether the world is round doesn't mean there is no correct objective answer. The fact that people differ on the causes of climate change doesn't mean there isn't a correct causal view. The fact that there are different beliefs about any topic proves nothing.

Moreover, non-relativists may argue that differences in practices and ethical beliefs may be variations on underlying objective principles embraced by all cultures. It may be that all cultures agree on general

[31] *Ibid*., 25.

ethical values such as a respect for life, truth, and non-violence, but they differ on how they practice those values. Therefore the relativist must show that there are substantial ethical differences that can't be reduced to variations of universal principles. The relativist must justify her claim that there are no cross-cultural criteria for evaluating ethical beliefs. The relativist must also explain how relativism is consistent with the engaged stance of applied ethics. Relativism is a thesis of philosophical ethics, not applied ethics. It is the result of adopting the disengaged stance of philosophical ethics. The relativist steps back from ethics and observes the differences among ethical systems. She concludes that ethical rules are relative to different systems. The problem, however, is whether individuals can maintain relativism when they return to applied ethics – when they return to doing ethics and have to argue for the correctness of a judgment or norm, or criticize someone's actions. How can I hold that ethical beliefs are relative yet firmly criticize someone's ethical actions, especially someone who belongs to another group or subscribes to a different moral system? Another problem is whether relativism favors a non-critical form of traditionalism. If I think ethical views are relative and no view is better than any other view, why bother to critically assess and improve ethics? What does "improve" mean if ethics is relative? Why not follow the norms that prevail in my culture?

The objectivist and the relativist portray each other as promoting undesirable and even dangerous doctrines. Relativism is associated with nihilism and extreme skepticism, and a refusal to stand up to unethical practices in other cultures. People fear that relativism will undermine our confidence in cherished values, or leave us with no way to say what is right or wrong. Relativism seems to leave us without the ethical resources to say that Hitler (or some other tyrant) was objectively wrong in their abominable actions. Ethics, it seems, is all a matter of opinion. Relativists reply that objectivism leads to dogmatism and absolutism. Judging other cultures smacks of cultural arrogance or intolerance. Relativism urges tolerance and dialogue, and this is more in line with liberal democratic thought.

Why ethics?

The third question of philosophical ethics is why humans bother with ethics in the first place. Why did societies, over history, not "make do"

with law, etiquette, and prudence? One part of this question is a matter of evolutionary history. How and why did humans living in groups agree to co-operate and construct ethical rules? These questions link ethics to biology, history, and the social sciences. Another part of the question is normative, not historical. Assume that ethics can be used in many ways, for good or bad. For example, leaders can use the emotional force of ethical ideals for self-interested purposes. Ethics can be regarded as the rules that hypocritical people espouse publicly but privately ignore, to maintain social status and trust. The normative question is: to what end *should* ethics be used? What is the correct function for ethics, apart from hypocrisy and manipulation?

There are many normative views about the purpose of ethics. All agree that ethics seeks to guide conduct. But after that, views differ. Many of the views are on display at the dramatic opening of Plato's *The Republic*, where Socrates is challenged by his interlocutors to show that the just person is also a happy person. Participants argue that ethics is a sort of social contract. Others argue that "might is right," not love thy neighbor, is the real ethic that governs human relations. Others say ethics promotes social stability and was developed to protect the weak from the strong.[32] Another view, advanced by the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, is that norms and contracts must be enforced to raise humans from a state of war of "one against all" into a peaceful society, or civilization.[33]

Ethics as agreement, mentioned above, also has a distinct view of the function of ethics. Ethics, at its best, defines agreed-upon principles for fair, social co-operation among citizens, such as the principles of justice. Ethics allows humans to co-operate in society for mutual benefit. On this view, Hobbes was right to see society as a sort of contract among citizens. Humans construct and enforce rules so that society can exist. Rules help society to establish some degree of control, order, and reliability among human interactions. I can act with greater confidence if I know that other people will not steal, lie, murder, or arbitrarily break promises. Ethics is natural and necessary to humans as social creatures, and that is why ethics is an important part of society's normative sphere.

[32] Plato, *The Republic*, Book I and II, 3–52.

[33] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part One and Two.

Yet, for ethical contractualists, not just any contract will do. Many societies enforce rules that perpetuate an unjust social order. Ethics seeks to articulate and support norms that promote a fair society for the common good. We want ethics to function as a voice for the good and the right, and to work for the reduction of harm and evil. The most important function of ethics, then, is to help citizens question existing norms and construct better principles.

Applied ethics

We have outlined theories of philosophical ethics concerning what we say, how we know what we say, and why ethics is important in society. We move on to major theories in applied ethics, theories constructed as part of framework ethics. The three themes of ethics – the good, the right, and the virtuous – determine the types of applied theories. Framework theories come in three kinds: consequential (theories of the good), non-consequential (theories of the right), and virtue theories. Consequential theories articulate principles that define goodness and identify actions that promote the good; non-consequential theories articulate principles that say what is just and what is our duty. Such principles are intended to restrain the pursuit of our goods and personal interests. Virtue theories describe moral character and specify the virtues that individuals need to be ethical.

Consequential theories

"Consequentialism" refers to a group of theories that regard the pursuit of what is good in life, or the intrinsically valuable, as the primary ethical concept.[34] Realizing what is good in the world, through actions, is the aim of ethical people. That something is intrinsically good or contributes instrumentally to the good are the criteria for evaluating norms and actions.

[34] The term "consequentialism" was first used in Elizabeth Anscombe's article, "Modern Moral Philosophy," which appeared in the *Philosophy* journal in 1958.

Consequential theories define the good in terms of the *consequences* of actions, such as actions that promote a flourishing life for many citizens, or actions that result in an increase in pleasure or a reduction of pain. Consequentialism asks us to look to the expected results of our actions. We look to the "relevant effects" of our actions on the world.[35] As Frey writes, "an act is right if its consequences are at least as good as those of any alternative."[36] On some versions of consequentialism, I am ethically obligated not only to bring about some good consequences but to "maximize" – that is, to bring about the best consequences, or the greatest amount of good. By stressing results, consequential theories come under the broad umbrella of "teleological" ethical theories, because *telos* is Greek for end or goal.

Reasonable forms of consequentialist theories do not exclude other considerations as irrelevant to the evaluation of action. A consequentialist can allow that, in a situation, one should look at other things than the overall good produced. One can consider whether promises have been made, whether any rights will be violated, and whether the action is just. Yet a consequentialist will insist that, in the end, these features are to be valued insofar as they bring about good consequences. In some cases, promises will have to be broken or rights violated to bring about desired consequences. Ultimately, acts are right or wrong by virtue of the goodness or badness of their consequences.

Consequential theories differ according to their different notions of what is good, and how it should be pursued. Consequential theories can be "narrow" or "wide" in what they count as consequences. Narrow consequentialist theories argue that good consequences can be reduced to one type of thing, e.g. pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Other theories think "good" is a composite of different things, such as pleasure, friendship, achievement, wealth, and the development of human capacities.

There are two types of consequential theories depending on whether we evaluate particular acts or types of acts. Act-consequentialism evaluates the consequences of particular acts. Specific acts are good or right if they have the best consequences or bring about the best state of affairs. An act-consequentialist approach asks: what would be the consequences if I did not keep my promise on *this* occasion? What would be the consequences if

[35] Pettit, *Consequentialism*, xiii. [36] Frey, "Act-Utilitarianism," 165.

I spoke truthfully in *this* situation? What are the consequences of my helping or not helping *this* person today?

Rule-consequentialism considers the consequences of people following certain types of actions. They follow general rules that say certain types of actions should be done or avoided. We inquire whether an act falls under a general ethical rule, such as to speak the truth or to keep promises. Then we consider the consequences of people following that rule. Specific actions are good and ethically required not because they have good consequences. They are good and ethically required because they "spring from a set of rules that have the best consequences."[37]

Why change the topic from particular acts to types of actions? Why move from what is right in this specific circumstance to what is right according to general rules? To take a trivial example, imagine that you walk across your neighbor's newly seeded lawn to save yourself time on a walk to the grocery store. The neighbor sees you and is angry. When you point out that you did very little harm, the neighbor responds: "but what if everyone did that?" For the rule-consequentialist, this response is valid and it tells us something about this approach to ethics. Ethics is about following rules for the overall, common good. It is about the consequences of many people acting in certain ways. From traffic laws to ethical principles, we do not usually evaluate actions by calculating the consequences of specific acts. Instead we usually estimate the impact of most people following certain rules. If I carry out a "U-turn" with my car in a "no U-Turn" zone, the maneuver may be convenient for me and cause no problems on this occasion. But it could become dangerous if many people started making U-turns on the highway.

There are more serious examples than U-turns. In ethics, breaking a promise in *this* situation may appear to be ethically allowed. But from a rule-consequentialist perspective, it is wrong because it violates a general rule against promise-breaking. Rather than ask, "what if everyone made a U-Turn as they pleased?" we ask, "what if everyone broke the general rule to keep promises whenever it was convenient to them?" To take another example, a student may use act-utilitarian reasons to justify cheating on a test. Cheating promoted his utility, it had good consequences. No one noticed his cheating, so what harm was done? In this

[37] LaFollette, "Introduction," in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, 7.

case, there are more good consequences than bad consequences. Rule-utilitarians would ask, "What if everyone did that?" They would argue that we evaluate not specific acts of cheating but the consequences of many people keeping or breaking rules. Systematic violation of the rule of not cheating undermines not only the long-term integrity of the persons involved but also the academic system of testing. Because the consequences of many people breaking the rule are bad, the individual act of cheating is bad.

Also, take for example the well-known ethical problem of the "free-loader" who cheats on social programs. For instance, Frank avoids, by cheating and other means, paying his proper share of taxes, or he obtains money from a social program to which he is not entitled. He can enjoy these benefits because other people follow the rules and contribute their fair share of taxes. Frank can argue, on act-utilitarian grounds, that his avoiding taxes increases his utility, and his cheating has no great effect on the sustainability of social programs. He is only one person. Rule-utilitarianism was constructed in part to try to meet such arguments. One can always argue for exceptions to any rule at any time by arguing that, in *this* case, no significant harm is done.

Another reason for rule-utilitarianism is that people do not have the time to stop and estimate the consequences of every action, and even if one has the time, it is difficult to predict the results of specific acts. So we rely on rules that past experience has shown have positive, long-term consequences.

Theories of consequentialism also differ according to *how much good* we are supposed to bring about. Some consequential theories require us to "maximize" the good for all in any situation. Other kinds of consequentialism are more modest. One kind is called "satisficing" consequentialism. "Satisficing" refers to aiming at a satisfactory result, which may not be optimum. Consider a simple example. A hotel manager discovers, late one evening, that a car has broken down outside his premises. The occupants of the car are a poor family who cannot afford a room or a meal in his hotel. The manager doesn't take the time to check all the available rooms. He does not give the family the best available room. Rather, he gives them a room for free, even though it may not be the best room. According to satisficing consequentialism, the manager has done the right thing and he is not required to take time to search for the best possible

room.[38] Why settle for "satisficing"? Because it is felt that the obligation to maximize is often too demanding. It may require people to act like saints and make great sacrifices. For example, if I am obligated to help others in developing countries so as to bring about the best possible results, doesn't that require an onerous effort on my part? Do I have to provide assistance to the point where I am damaged financially and cannot send my children to university? Isn't it more plausible to "satisfice" and provide a more modest amount of assistance?

The best-known form of consequentialism is utilitarianism. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill provided its classical formulation in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As noted above, utilitarianism defines good consequences as an increase in utility. For Bentham and Mill, "utility" referred to the pleasure or happiness produced by actions. More recently, utility has been defined as the satisfaction of desires or preferences. No matter what the definition of utility is, utilitarians agree that the right action is what increases utility more than if one didn't act, and increases utility at least as well as any other alternate action. In Mill's formulation, the principle upon which all of morality stands is "utility, or the greatest happiness principle," which "holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." Ethically, we are obligated to do whatever promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number. By happiness, Mill says he means pleasure, and the absence of pain, since pleasure and freedom from pain are "the only things desirable as ends."[39] However, Mill's use of "pleasure" is complex and contested. Mill does not define utility as the sheer quantity of bodily and sexual pleasures. He includes pleasures of a higher "quality" such as engaging in intellectual inquiry. For Mill, happiness includes a wide range of goods that make up a full and dignified life for humans.

Classical utilitarianism is a maximizing form of consequentialism. As Mill states, utilitarians aim to produce the greatest amount or "aggregate" of happiness. They aim to be fair and objective in calculating the expected utility. The utility of any group is no more important than the utility of any other group. Utilitarians impartially calculate the sum of expected utility

[38] Slote, "Satisficing Consequentialism," 361.

[39] Mill, "Utilitarianism,"68.

across all interested parties. Yet, despite these general instructions, how one calculates utility across individuals and groups is a notoriously difficult problem for utilitarianism. This is ironic since the utilitarian in the nineteenth century appealed to the calculus of pleasure to make ethics more empirical, more measureable, and more objective. Rather than appeal to subjective feelings, utilitarianism proposed a "scientific" approach of deciding what actions and social policies should be pursued by using (apparently) measurable phenomena such as pleasures and pains.

Was Mill an act- or rule-utilitarian? There is evidence for both views. Mill tells us to judge *actions* by their utility, which appears to be act-utilitarianism. But, Mill criticizes the "free-loader" who avoids paying taxes on rule-utilitarian grounds. On free speech, Mill employs rule-utilitarian thinking. The argument is broadly utilitarian. Individuals and society fair better when there is a significant degree of freedom of speech. The argument is also rule-utilitarian because Mills warns that we should not argue for restrictions of free speech on a case-by-case basis, as an act-utilitarian might do. It is always possible to say that, in this or that case, good consequences (or no significant harm) would come from restricting someone's free speech. But he says this undermines the principle. The only way to protect free speech is to protect the rule.

Mill, like other consequentialists, finds value in duties, rights, and justice. They encourage people to follow the rules of justice and to respect other people's interests. But rights and the principles of justice are not ethically fundamental. Utility is fundamental. Utility is the only thing that has non-instrumental value. Other ethical values are valuable because they promote utility.

Non-consequential theories

Consequentialism seems an obvious viewpoint for ethics, since we are accustomed to considering consequences when we make decisions. However, it does not take much thought to realize that a stress on consequences, especially the maximization of the overall good, may lead us to unethical actions, or require us to ignore other values. Non-consequential theories hold that what makes an act right is not its consequences. An act is right because it honors an obligation or fulfils a duty, even if fulfilling the duty has negative consequences, or sets back our interests.

Non-consequentialist theories are called "deontological theories" because "deon" is Greek for duty or what must be done.

We incur obligations in many ways. We incur a duty when we make promises, sign contracts, take on professional responsibilities, or occupy social roles like that of a parent. We saw that deontologists, such as W. D. Ross, argue that we can intuit basic moral obligations. Ross calls these obligations "prima facie" duties to indicate they have a moral force that needs to be considered before one acts. However, these duties can be overridden by other duties, given the circumstances. As noted, the doctor's duty to treat the injured overrides a promise to take a son to the movies.

Non-consequentialism responds to a worrisome tendency in consequential thinking. Whenever we set out to maximize good consequences or results, such as the good or the pleasure for ourselves or for all, there is a danger that arguments for the greater good will justify doing harm to some people. Similarly, to achieve certain consequences, we may justify breaking promises or overlooking the rights of minorities. All may be swept away in the desire to maximize the good of the greatest number.

For example, we may deny rights to homosexuals or place bans on certain types of marriage because those forms of life offend or repulse many people. Discrimination is justified consequentially. It creates the greatest amount of pleasure or happiness among the majority of people. In this manner, consequential thinking can support a "tyranny of the majority." Also, utopian thinking, which is often strongly consequentialist, can justify unethical actions and government programs. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the creation of a "happy" and perfectly ordered society justified whatever means were necessary. Our experience with fascism in the past century shows how unspeakable actions can be "justified" to create a totalitarian state.

In ethics classes, students are given examples that purport to test whether they are consequentialists or deontologists, including the famous trolley problem first introduced by Philippa Foot.[40] Here are three examples:

> *A runaway trolley is careering down the mainline track where it will soon hit and kill five people trapped on the track. A bystander can flip a switch that would divert the trolley onto a branch line track before it reaches the five. However, the trolley*

[40] See Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect."

would then hit and kill one person who is on the branch line track. Should the bystander flip the switch?

Five people in a hospital need organ transplants to survive. It would be possible to save them by killing a healthy patient and dividing his organs among them. Would it be right to do so?

You are a Jew during the Second World War. You and a large group of friends and family are hiding in a basement in Munich. Nazi soldiers are searching the neighborhood for Jews to send to death camps. An infant is ill and will not stop crying out loudly. If the infant continues to make such a noise, the soldiers will find your group. Would you be justified in suffocating the infant to death to prevent being discovered?

Overlook the hypothetical and simplistic nature of these examples. Consult your ethical intuitions. What is the right thing to do in each example? Some people think that if you would flip the switch, you are a consequentialist. If you think it is permissible to kill one person to save five on the trolley line but it is not permissible to kill a person to save five hospital patients, you have changed your ethical thinking. You have adopted a deontological mode that stresses the rights of the healthy patient.[41] The duty to do no harm to the ill patient overrides the possibility of doing good to other patients. If you think it is permissible to smother the infant, you have moved back to consequential thinking. These examples show how complex our reasoning can be, and how it contains both consequential and deontological elements which may conflict.

There is another way to compare consequential and deontological thinking. We can think of consequential ethics as stressing goals and deontological ethics as stressing fair processes and restrictions on how we seek our goals. Suppose that a controversial far-right speaker is invited to speak on a university campus. He will speak against free speech, especially for those who would speak out for gay rights, abortion rights, and so on. The invitation sparks heated debate on whether the person should be allowed to speak. Deontologist Marcia Baron has analyzed this situation as such: if free speech is a goal, then one could construct a consequential argument for denying the advocate the freedom to speak. The speaker may have a detrimental effect on some people's beliefs about the value of free speech. Bad results could occur. A deontologist would approach the question as a

[41] McMahan, "Moral Intuition," 107.

matter of fair process and rights. Free speech is a right which means that all shall be allowed to speak, even those who deny the free speech principle. What is important is not some goal, or the results, but protecting the process – the right to free speech. Free speech in this case operates as a "side constraint" on our desire to achieve certain goals and results. It is a value not to be violated even if good is not maximized.[42] Another example: should you be truthful to your wife and tell her that you have had an affair with another woman? What should you say if she asks you? Consequentially, you can think about goals. At least one goal is maintaining trust and good relations with your wife. On these grounds, you might conclude that, considering the damage that the truth will do to that goal, it is permissible to lie and deny the affair. But if you think of telling the truth as not a goal but as a duty, as part of an ethical "contract" between you and your wife – a principle that can be honored and not weakened by the consideration of consequences – then lying to your wife is wrong.[43]

Ultimately, the primary difference between consequential and non-consequential theories is not that the former takes the consequences of actions into account, and the latter does not. Non-consequentialist theories are not "anti" consequences. As Rawls states: "All ethical doctrines worth our attention take consequences into account in judging rightness. One which did not would simply be irrational, crazy."[44]

Non-consequential theories respond to these concerns by arguing that pursuing the good is important, but the pursuit should not violate commitments to duty and justice. What is fundamental to ethics and the guidance of conduct is right relations among people. Duties to tell the truth, to help others in distress, to respect other humans as "ends in themselves," and to keep promises are not justified solely by appeal to consequences or utility but also by the more primary intention to act justly. Consequential thinking is not inherently wrong but it needs the restraint of deontological thinking to prevent abuses.

Another way to see the debate between consequentialists and non-consequentialists is as a debate over what is primary in constructing a moral system: basic rights (and obligations) or consequences. The deontologist says the former, the consequentialist the latter. For John Rawls, deontological

[42] Baron, "Kantian Ethics," 7.

[43] *Ibid*., 7. [44] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 30.

theories are best described in a negative manner. They are non-teleological. They do *not* make the maximization of good prior to the satisfaction of the principles of right and justice.[45] A deontological theory, according to Rawls, does not start with the priority of the good and then try to find a place for considerations of justice. Instead, it starts with the priority of right and then finds as much room as possible for the pursuit of goodness. This is the proper relationship between the good and the right.

Modern deontological theories derive from Kant.[46] His ethical theory argues for the priority of fulfilling our duties. Reason shows that certain duties are necessary and trump other considerations. How do I recognize what ethics requires? I should not begin by looking at what desires I want to satisfy or goods I would like to achieve. I do not consider what might bring me and others happiness. Instead I consider what is the right and dutiful thing to do – what follows the categorical imperative – and I pursue my good and aim at certain consequences insofar as it does not violate my prior commitment to do my duty.

I put aside partial thoughts about my advantage or happiness and start with an impartial, rational procedure. I ask what practical rule or "maxim" I propose to follow in a situation, such as "keep my promises unless they cause hardship to me." Then I ask whether I rationally and consistently can agree that such a rule should hold for all rational beings in similar circumstances. In other words, I try to make my maxim a universal ethical principle, as described earlier. This is a Kantian version of "what if everyone did that?" Kant believes that it is through this universalizing process that we see what our duty is and how that duty takes precedence over other considerations. For Kant, by following this rational procedure, I eliminate bias and partiality. I recognize the "supreme principle of morality" as the categorical imperative: "I ought to act in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law."[47]

[45] *Ibid*., 30.

[46] See Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Part I, Chapter II, Book I, 17–52; *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Part I on the doctrine of right, 9–42; and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Preface and Chapters 1 and 2, 55–113. Ironically, the term "deontology" in ethics derives from the title of an article by Bentham, the arch-utilitarian, entitled "Deontology together with a Table of the Springs of Action and Article on Utilitarianism," which addressed matters of private, interpersonal morality. See Postema, "Bentham's Utilitarianism," 28.

[47] Kant, *Groundwork*, 15.

Imagine that I am hard pressed for money and I need a loan from Mary. I consider lying to her about my ability to repay the loan quickly. So my maxim is "when hard-pressed for money or other benefits, it is permissible to lie to those who might help me." For Kant, I cannot make this maxim a universal moral law. Therefore the maxim violates the categorical imperative. Such actions are wrong. Kant thinks that the categorical imperative can be formulated in various ways. Reflecting on the respect owed to human beings, he provides a second formulation: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[48] Kant's imperative to respect humans as "ends in themselves" is an important deontological restraint on the pursuit of the good.

There are many difficulties with Kantian ethics, such as how to interpret the categorical imperative and how to universalize maxims. Putting that aside, Kant's notion of unconditional duties and of not using humans as only a "means," combined with the impartial evaluation of rules, has made his ethics a cornerstone of modern deontological theories. One misunderstanding of Kant is so pervasive that it needs to be noted. Kant does not say that humans should act without any regard for consequences or for one's happiness. Like Rawls, his argument is for the *primacy* of honoring one's duties and principles of justice. If I have satisfied my duties, I am "entitled to look round for happiness." Man is not expected to "renounce his natural aim of attaining happiness" but he must "abstract from such considerations as soon as the imperative of duty supervenes" and to make sure his motive is not influenced by a desire for his happiness.[49] Your first ethical concern is to do your duty, to act virtuously, and then see about your happiness. Ethics evaluates how the pursuit of good should be restrained by principles of justice.

Virtue theories

Virtue theories are interested in the third theme of ethics. Virtue theories take as their fundamental concern the development of moral character, the nature of the virtues, and how a virtuous person would make

[48] *Ibid*., 38.

[49] Kant, "On the Common Saying," 64–65.

practical decisions. Actions are correct or appropriate insofar as they flow from and are determined by someone of virtuous character. Virtues are strong and persistent dispositions, or character traits, to act in certain ways under certain conditions. The virtues include honesty, truthfulness, fairness, loyalty, benevolence, and compassion. Michael Slote says virtue ethics is about "what is noble or ignoble, admirable or deplorable, good or bad, rather than in terms of what is obligatory, permissible, or wrong." What is right or good is to be determined relative to the pursuit of virtue and excellence in life. Virtue ethics is "agent focused," not rule-focused. Combined with a focus on the inner life of agents, it is a distinct form of ethics.[50]

Virtue ethics is distinguished by its attitude towards consequential and deontological ethics. It is skeptical about deontological theories because it over-emphasizes rules. Rules have impact only if people are motivated to follow them. In addition, the model of ethical reasoning, as applying a principle to cases, is too formal. Practical reasoning is an informal matter of adjusting principles and maxims to complex situations for which there is no formula. One has to weigh and balance norms in a flexible manner, according to changing or uncertain conditions. Without a formula for decision-making, ethics needs the judgment of a virtuous person who has the right personality to discern the appropriate response to situations. It requires a virtuous person who is able to identify the wise, measured response that avoids extremes, and who has the character to carry out the measured response. On this view, wise discernment of the best course of action is not a matter of aggregating utility or of universalizing maxims. It is the all-too-human matter of making a judgment that flows from a person of reason and virtue.

Virtue theory, like deontological theory, worries about consequential thinking, since the pursuit of goods can compromise virtuous character. Yet virtue theory, unlike deontological theory, can be teleological. But it is a different form of teleological theory. Much of consequential theory aims at the promotion of different consequences that are only loosely related. One pursues certain goods as they become available. Or, consequentialists aim at one supreme but narrow good such as pleasure. Teleological virtue theory, drawing on ancient influences, seeks the good life as a

[50] Baron, Pettit, and Slote: *Three Methods of Ethics*, 177.

holistic ideal – the overall perfection of the human being through the development of key capacities and excellences. The goal is an ideal human life as a whole, not just the pursuit of good consequences. Virtues are not only instrumental. They are not just qualities of character that a person needs to flourish. A life of virtue is itself intrinsically good. Flourishing *is* a life devoted to excellence and virtue.

Ethical thought in this tradition derives from the virtue ethics of Plato and Aristotle. For Aristotle, the highest good for humans is a life of *eudaimonia* (or "happiness") which consists of flourishing in many areas of life. Flourishing is achieved by developing and living according to virtues, especially those virtues that have to do with the use of man's distinctive rational capacities. To have a well-developed soul, one needs to acquire virtues such as courage, temperance in desires, proper ambition, patience, truthfulness, friendliness, modesty, and righteousness.[51] The virtues are "excellences," or the perfection of various attitudes, skills, and capacities. Happiness is not pleasure, honor, or wealth. Humans achieve happiness in the act of developing capacities proper to a rational, social being like man. Happiness is the virtuous activity of soul.[52] For Aristotle, people must not only possess these virtues of character but exercise them so as to act correctly. The ideal is the development of a wise and integrated virtuous character. Practical reason integrates and brings a unity to the virtues. The good life is the life of a person who has rationally ordered his soul so that the virtues of justice and wisdom are not overruled by unruly desires.

In many cases, to have a virtue is to have a disposition to act that lies between two extreme dispositions that are non-virtues. For example, the virtue (or disposition) of courage lies between rashness and cowardice; the virtue of modesty lies between shyness and shamelessness. This is Aristotle's famous "doctrine of the mean" as a way to determine how to act. Aiming at the mean is part of a virtuous human.

Aristotle's mean is misunderstood as saying that to act ethically one must in any situation pick a mid-way point between two extremes of action. A sort of lukewarm compromise. This is an over-simplification of Aristotle. First, the virtues of Aristotle are traits of character, not types of actions. Second, virtue is not always a matter of finding a "mid-point" between extremes. Some dispositions, actions, and feelings don't have a

[51] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 104. [52] *Ibid*., 75.

mean because they refer to "depravities," such as malice or envy. Some actions such as adultery or murder are evil in themselves. They do not have a mean.[53]

A formalistic view of the doctrine of the mean distorts Aristotle's view of practical reason. Aristotle viewed practical reasoning as a non-formal process of weighing factors under conditions of uncertainty. As we will see in Chapter 2, reasoning in media ethics has this Aristotelian character. Practical reasoning is a process that needs to be guided by a wise, knowledgeable, and virtuous person. The virtuous person is able to discern the proper response, whether it be by finding the mean or by reasoning about the wisest course of action. Aristotle warned that, in ethics, we cannot expect the type of precision or certainty that we find in scientific reasoning. No principle can anticipate every situation. No formal procedure for determining the right judgment exists. Therefore, ethical thinking is more an art or skill than a science. It requires people to develop a context-bound sensitivity to moral distinctions and nuances.

We come to the end of our review of applied theories. Before we end this chapter, we need to note a possibility that may have occurred to the reader. Perhaps the debate as to which theme in ethics is primary is based on a misunderstanding. Some philosophers, for example, have drawn a hard line between a wide "ethics" of the good life, and a narrow and abstract "morality" of rules about what to do. The legal theorist, Ronald Dworkin, expressed this distinction as such: "Ethics includes convictions about which kinds of lives are good or bad for a person to lead, and morality includes principles about how a person should treat other people."[54]

However, perhaps we shouldn't regard ethics as a battleground for theories about the good, the right, and the virtuous. Maybe we shouldn't divide the topic into ethics and morality, as Dworkin does. Instead, perhaps we should regard these theories as identifying three equally important aspects of ethical experience. Therefore, we should evaluate actions by combining criteria from the three themes. Emile Durkheim, for example, thought that ethics always presents us with a dual aspect of duties and ends desired. "Moral reality always presents simultaneously these two aspects which cannot be isolated empirically," he wrote. "No act has ever been informed out of duty alone; it has always been necessary for it to

[53] *Ibid*., 102. [54] Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 485n1.

appear in some respect as good."[55] To this duality, we might add virtue, to form a triadic relationship.

In the next chapter, I argue for a holistic approach to ethical reasoning that seeks to integrate our ethical life by weighing and balancing criteria from all three themes of ethics. No one concept or standard of the good, right, or virtuous can be the sole guide. Audi calls this view "pluralistic universalism," where the broadest moral principle would "require optimizing happiness so far as possible without producing injustice or curtailing freedom."[56] I prefer to speak, like Rawls, of pursuing the good within the bounds of the right (or justice), and where the good and the right conflict, the latter takes priority. This view also includes virtue: this fundamental principle of the good in the right is to be internalized so that it becomes part of our ethical character. We exhibit ethical character by being disposed to act in accord with this principle.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained the basic idea of ethics, why ethics is distinct, the role of theorizing, and the types of theories. Ethics was portrayed as a natural and necessary human activity of constructing, critiquing, and enforcing norms to guide conduct. Ethics was not identified with a static code of absolute principles defended dogmatically. Ethics is practical. It starts from the lived experience of ethical doubt and plurality and then seeks integration and theoretical understanding. Ethics is the evolving and dynamic activity by which humans attempt to live an ethically good life. Ethics is a distinct area of society because of its impartial approach to its serious and distinctive subject matter.

The chapter then examined why people theorize about their ethical experience, and argued that theorizing should make sense of our ethical experience. Ethical theorizing was divided into two types, philosophical and applied. Applied ethics was divided, in turn, into framework and

[55] Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 45.

[56] Audi, *Moral Value and Human Diversity*, 17. Prior to reading Audi, I had separately come to an ethical position that is close to what he calls pluralistic universalism. I had published my ideas in works such as "Philosophical Foundations for Global Journalism Ethics" before Audi's *Moral Value and Human Diversity*. Also, Audi has elaborated on the Kantian-Rawls idea of the good in right in his earlier books.

pragmatic forms. The chapter reviewed theories in philosophical ethics according to the three questions of what we say, how to know what we say, and why we speak ethically in the first place. Among the theories we inspected were descriptivism, intuitionism, and relativism. In applied ethics we examined consequential, deontological, and virtue ethics.

I spent considerable time on ethical theories because it is essential preparation for media ethics. For example, many journalists use utilitarian arguments to justify the violation of privacy of story subjects. Critics use deontological notions of rights and obligations to argue for journalistic restraint. Even intuitionism, relativism, and objectivity play a part in practical discussions of media ethics.

We have acquired the first half of our ethical framework, the basic concepts of ethics. We are ready to acquire the second part. In the next chapter, we learn how to apply these ideas to understanding media ethics. We will develop a model of reasoning for complex problems in media ethics.

Questions for discussion

1. Before reading this chapter, what was your idea of ethics? Was it similar to or different from the definition of ethics in this chapter? Has reading the chapter altered your views of ethics, or not?
2. If ethics is an "activity" and is not a set of unchanging principles, then what is the value of principles in ethics?
3. Do ethical principles change, and can they be "invented"? If not, why not? If so, give some examples of change. How much have your own ethical values changed over recent years, and why?
4. In any major book store, there are "self-help" books that tell people how to live, how to be happy, how to be successful, how to achieve peace of mind, and so on. Do you agree with the view in this chapter that many of these books are *not* books on ethics?
5. How do you distinguish ethics from custom, or law, or prudential reasoning?
6. Do you agree that ethics is more basic than law? Are there aspects of ethics that make it different but are not mentioned in this chapter?

7. What do you think people mean when they say something is good or right? Using the definitions provided, are most people that you know descriptivists or non-descriptivists? What are *you* doing when you make ethical judgments?
8. How valid is relativism in ethics? If you accepted ethical relativism, would it make any difference in your life or your ethics? Would it mean that you shouldn't criticize people with different ethical beliefs?
9. Both relativism and absolutism are attacked as being dangerous to society, or praised as essential to a good society. Which is the correct view?
10. How do you answer the "trolley" example? Would you flip the switch? If you would, does that make you a consequentialist?