Chapter Two: Approaches to Morality / Ethics

2.1Meta-ethics

Suppose I am debating with a friend the question whether or not we ought to give to famine relief, whether or not we are morally obliged to give to famine relief. The sorts of questions philosophers raise about this kind of debate fall roughly into two groups. First, there are first order questions about which party in the debate, if any, is right, and why. Then, there are second order questions about what the parties in the debate are doing when they engage in it. Roughly, the first order questions are the province of normative ethics, and the second order questions are the province of metaethics. As one recent writer puts it:

In metaethics, we are concerned not with questions which are the province of normative ethics like 'Should I give to famine relief?' or 'Should I return the wallet I found in the street?' but with questions about questions like these.

Meta-ethics tries to answer question, such as:

- What does —good, right, or —justice‖ mean?
- What makes something good or right?
- Is moral realism true? Is morality irreducible, cognitive, or overriding?
- Do intrinsic values exist?

2.2 Normative Ethics

We are not just agents in morality; we are also spectators, advisers, instructors, judges, and critics.

Still, in all of these capacities our primary question is this: how may or should we decide or determine what is morally right for a certain agent (oneself or another,

possibly a group or a whole society) to do, or what he morally ought to do, in a certain situation?

Normative ethics;

- Offers theories or accounts of the best way to live. These theories evaluate actions in a systematic way, i.e., they may focus on outcomes or duties or motivation as a means of justifying human conduct.
- Includes ethical theories or approaches such as utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, principlism, narrative ethics and feminist ethics.

Normative ethics poses questions of the following kind:

- Are there general principles or rules that we could follow which distinguish between right and wrong? Or:
- Are there virtues and/or relationships that we can nurture, in order to behave well?

2.1.1 Teleological Ethics (Consequentialist)

It is referred as "***the end justifies the means***". It believes in purpose, ends or goals of an action. It stress that the consequences of an action determines the morality or immorality of a given action. Which means an action is judged as right or wrong depending on what happens because of it.

Moral philosophers have offered us a variety of alternative standards. But their general views have been of two sorts:

(1) **Teleological**: says that the basic or ultimate standard of what is morally right or wrong is non-moral value. That is, brought into being must be to the comparative amount of good produced. An act ought to be done if and only if it is intended to produce a greater balance of good over evil than any available alternative. ***Consequentialist have often been***
   - ***hedonists***: identifying the good with pleasure and evil with pain
   - **Non-hedonists**: identifying the good with power, knowledge, self-realization, perfection etc

(2) **deontological theories**: says that the right, the obligatory, and the morally good are wholly a function of what is non-morally good. They assert that there are other considerations---certain features of the act itself other than the value it brings into existence, for example, the fact that it keeps a promise, is just, or is commanded by God or by the state.

Teleologists differ on the question of whose good it is that one ought to try to promote:

(1) **Ethical egoism**: holds that one is always to do what will promote at least his/her great a balance of good over evil for him/her in the long run as any alternative would, and wrong if it does not. This view was held by Epicurus, Hobbes, and Nietzsche, among others. Ethical egoism is a theory that advocates egoism as a moral rule.
(2) **Psychological Egoism**: The main argument that has been used as a basis for ethical egoism is a psychological one, an argument from human nature. This means that "self-love" is the only basic "principle" in human nature. It means that "ego-satisfaction" is the final aim of all activity or that "the pleasure principle" is the basic "drive" in every individual.
(3) **Ethical universalism**, or usually called utilitarianism: takes the position that the ultimate end is the greatest general good. Ethical egoism has generally presupposed what is called psychological egoism -- that each of us is always seeking his own greatest good, whether this is conceived of as pleasure, happiness, knowledge, power, self-realization, or a mixed life.

In dealing with this ethical theory;

(1) That the desire for one's own good presupposes or builds upon the existence of more basic desires for food, fame, sex, etc. If we did not have any of these "primary appetites," we would not have any good to be concerned about.

(2) It follows, that the object of these basic desires is not one's own welfare; it is food, fame, sex, etc., as the case may be. One's own good is not the object of all of one's desires but only of one of them, self- love.

(3) That in some cases the object of a basic desire is something for oneself. But there is no necessity about this; the object may be something for someone else. In other words, there may be altruistic impulses. There may also be a desire to do the right as such. Whether there are such desires or not is a question of empirical fact.

Generally, Egoistic and particularistic consequentialism only takes into consideration how the consequences of an act will affect oneself or a given group – e.g. one's family, fellow citizens/compatriots, class or race. Moral rightness depends on the consequences for an individual agent or a limited group.

Utilitarianism: Producing the best consequences

That action is best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers.

- One principle often given to guide action is “Let your conscience be your guide.”
- Another principle urged on us is “Do whatever is most loving”; Love is surely a wonderful value.
- A third principle often given to guide our moral actions is the Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Egoism is teleological ethics narrowed to the agent himself or herself. Unlike ethical egoism, utilitarianism is a universal teleological system. It calls for the maximization of goodness in society—that is, the greatest goodness for the greatest number—and not merely the good of the agent

(a) **Classic Utilitarianism**: As a formal ethical theory, the seeds of utilitarianism were sewn by the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (342–270 BCE), who stated that “pleasure is the goal that nature has ordained for us; it is also the standard by which we judge everything good.” According to this view, rightness and wrongness are determined by pleasure or pain that something produces. Epicurus’s theory inspired a series of eighteenth-century philosophers who emphasized the notion of general happiness—that is, the pleasing consequences of actions that impact others and not just the individual. The classical expressions of utilitarianism appear in the writings of two English philosophers and social reformers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. They were the nonreligious ancestors of the twentieth-century secular humanists, optimistic about human nature and our ability to solve our problems without recourse to God. Engaged in a struggle for legal as well as moral reform, they were impatient with the rule-bound character of law and morality in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Great Britain and tried to make the law serve human needs and interests.

Jeremy Bentham: Quantity over Quality

There are two main features of utilitarianism, both of which Bentham articulated:

- The consequentialist principle (or its teleological aspect): states that the rightness or wrongness of an act is determined by the goodness or badness of the results that flow from it. It is the end, not the means that counts; the end justifies the means. and

- The utility principle (or its hedonic aspect): states that the only thing that is good in itself is some specific type of state (for example, pleasure, happiness, welfare).

There is something appealing about Bentham's utilitarianism. It is simple in that there is only one principle to apply: Maximize pleasure and minimize suffering. It is commonsensical in that we think that morality really is about reducing suffering and promoting benevolence. It is scientific: Simply make quantitative measurements and apply the principle impartially, giving no special treatment to ourselves or to anyone else because of race, gender, personal relationship, or religion.

John Stuart Mill: Quality over Quantity

It was to meet these sorts of objections and save utilitarianism from the charge of being a pig philosophy that Bentham's successor, John Stuart Mill, sought to distinguish happiness from mere sensual pleasure. His version of the theory is often called eudaimonistic utilitarianism (from the Greek eudaimonia, meaning "happiness"). He defines happiness in terms of certain types of higher-order pleasures or satisfactions such as intellectual, aesthetic, and social enjoyments, as well as in terms of minimal suffering. That is, there are two types of pleasures. The lower, or elementary, include eating, drinking, sexuality, resting, and sensuous titillation. The higher include high culture, scientific knowledge, intellectuality, and creativity. Although the lower pleasures are more intensely gratifying, they also lead to pain when overindulged in. The higher pleasures tend to be more long term, continuous, and gradual.

Mill argued that the higher, or more refined, pleasures are superior to the lower ones: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." Humans are the kind of creatures who require more to be truly happy. They want the lower pleasures, but they also want deep friendship, intellectual ability, culture, the ability to create and appreciate art, knowledge, and wisdom.

Mill is clearly pushing the boundaries of the concept of "pleasure" by emphasizing higher qualities such as knowledge, intelligence, freedom, friendship, love, and health. In fact, one might even say that his litmus test for happiness really has little to do with actual pleasure and more to do with a non-hedonic cultivated state of mind.

Act- And Rule-Utilitarianism: There are two classical types of utilitarianism: act- and rule-utilitarianism. In applying the principle of utility, act-utilitarians, such as Bentham, say that ideally we ought to apply the principle to all of the alternatives open to us at any given moment. We may define act-utilitarianism in this way: Act-utilitarianism argues that an act is right if and only if it results in as much good as any available alternative. One practical problem with act-utilitarianism is that we cannot do the necessary calculations to determine which act is the correct one in each case, for often we must act spontaneously and quickly. So rules of thumb are of practical importance.

Rule-utilitarianism: An act is right if and only if it is required by a rule that is itself a member of a set of rules whose acceptance would lead to greater utility for society than any available alternative. Human beings are rule-following creatures. We learn by adhering to the rules of a given subject, whether it is speaking a language, driving a car, dancing, writing an essay, rock climbing, or cooking. We want to have a set of actionguiding rules by which to live. The act-utilitarian rule, to do the act that maximizes utility, is too general for most purposes.

The Strengths of Utilitarianism:

Utilitarianism has three very positive features:

The first s**trength** is that it is a single principle, an absolute system with a potential answer for every situation: Do what will promote the most utility!

Second strength is that utilitarianism seems to get to the substance of morality. It is not merely a formal system that simply sets forth broad guidelines for choosing principles but offers no principles—such as the guideline —Do whatever you can universalize.

A third strength is that it is particularly well suited to address the problem of posterity—namely, why we should preserve scarce natural resources for the betterment of future generations of humans that do not yet exist.

Criticism of Utilitarianism:

The first set of problems occurs in the very formulation of utilitarianism: The greatest happiness for the greatest number.‖ Notice that we have two ―greatest‖ things in this formula: ―happiness‖ and ―number.‖ Whenever we have two variables, we invite problems of determining which of the variables to rank first when they seem to conflict.

Another crucial problem with utilitarianism is that it seems to require a superhuman ability to look into the future and survey a mind-boggling array of consequences of actions. Of course, we normally do not know the long-term consequences of our actions because life is too complex and the consequences go on into the indefinite future.

Altruism

In altruism an action is right if the consequences of that action are favorable to all except the actor. Butler argued that we have an inherent psychological capacity to show benevolence to others. This view is called psychological altruism and maintains that at least some of our actions are motivated by instinctive benevolence.

Psychological altruism holds that all human action is necessarily other centered and other motivated. A parallel analysis of psychological altruism results in opposing conclusions to psychological egoism, and again arguably the theory is just as closed as psychological egoism.

Altruists are people who act so as to increase other people‘s pleasure. They will act for the sake of someone else even if it decreases their own pleasure and causes themselves pain.

We can differentiate egoistic and altruistic desires in the following way:

Egoism: One‘s desire is egoistic if (and only if) it concerns (what one perceives to be) the benefit of oneself and not anyone else. In the contrary, one‘s desire is altruistic if (and only if) it concerns (what one perceives to be) the benefit of at least someone other than oneself. **Altruism**: reject the theory of psychological egoism and argue instead that humans are instinctively benevolent. And instinctive benevolence, they argue, is the feature of our human nature which is the basis of our altruistic moral obligations

Deontological Ethics (Non- Consequentialist)

It is referred as —***the means justifies the end***‖. It is coined as —deontics‖. This is a theory that the rightness or wrongness of moral action is determined, at least partly with reference to formal rules of conduct rather than consequences or result of an action. It is an emphasis on the intentions, motives, moral principles or performance of duty rather than results, as the sign of right action/morality and immorality. It is a duty based and according to this theory, the consequences or results of our action have nothing to do with their rightness or wrongness.

Performance of One's own Duty: The 17th century German philosopher Samuel Pufendorf, who classified dozens of duties under three headings: duties to God, duties to oneself and duties to others!

Duties towards God, he argued that there are two kinds:
(1) Theoretical duty to know the existence and nature of God,
(2) Practical duty to both inwardly and outwardly worship God.
Duties towards oneself; these are also of two sorts:

(1) duties of the soul, which involve developing one's skills and talents,
(2) (2) duties of the body, which involve not harming our bodies, as we might through gluttony or drunkenness, and not killing oneself.

Duties towards others; Pufendorf divides these between absolute duties, which are universally binding on people, and conditional duties, which are the result of contracts between people.
Absolute duties are of three sorts : (1) avoid wronging others; (2) treat people as equals, and (3) promote the good of others.
Conditional duties involve various types of agreements; the principal one of which is the duty is to keep one's promises.

The Divine Command Theory

According to divine command theory (DCT), ethical principles are simply the commands of God. They derive their validity from God's commanding them, and they mean —commanded by God.‖ Without God, there would be no universally valid morality. We can analyze the DCT into three separate theses:

1. Morality (that is, rightness and wrongness) originates with God
2. Moral rightness simply means —willed by God, and moral wrongness means —being against the will of God.
3. Because morality essentially is based on divine will, not on independently existing reasons for action, no further reasons for action are necessary.

Problems with the Divine Command Theory: there are two problems with the DCT that need to be faced by those who hold it.

1. DCT would seem to make the attribution of ―goodness‖ to God redundant. When we say ―God is good, ‖ we think we are ascribing a property to God; but if good simply means ―what God commands or wills, ‖ then we are not attributing any property to God. Our statement ―God is good‖ merely means ―God does whatever he wills to do or ―God practices what he preaches.
2. DCT is that it seems to make morality into some-thing arbitrary. If God's decree is the sole arbiter of right and wrong, it would seem to be logically possible for such heinous acts as rape, killing of the innocent for the fun of it, and gratuitous cruelty to become morally good actions— if God suddenly decided to command us to do these things

Rights Theory

A second duty-based approach to ethics is rights theory. Most generally, a "right" is a justified claim against another person's behavior - such as my right to not be harmed by you. Rights and duties are related in such a way that the rights of one person imply the duties of another person.

The most influential early account of rights theory is that of 17th century British philosopher John Locke, who argued that the laws of nature mandate that we should not harm anyone's life, health, liberty or possessions. For Locke, these are our natural rights, given to us by God. Following Locke, the United States Declaration of Independence authored by Thomas Jefferson recognizes three foundational rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Jefferson and others rights theorists maintained that we deduce other more specific rights from these, including the rights of property, movement, speech, and religious expression.

There are four features traditionally associated with moral rights.

- First, rights are natural insofar as they are not invented or created by governments.
- Second, they are universal insofar as they do not change from country to country.
- Third, they are equal in the sense that rights are the same for all people, irrespective of gender, race, or handicap.

- Fourth, they are inalienable which means that I cannot hand over my rights to another person, such as by selling myself into slavery.

Kant's Categorical Imperative

The name of the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is identified with the moral theory known as deontology. Kant was adamantly opposed to the idea that the outcome of an action could determine its moral worth. For deontologists, it is not consequences which determine the rightness or wrongness of an act, but, rather, the intention of the person who carries out the act. Deontologists maintain that there are some moral obligations which are absolutely binding, no matter what consequences are produced.

Kant's duty-based theory is emphasizes a single principle of duty. Kant agreed that we have moral duties to oneself and others, such as developing one's talents, and keeping our promises to others. However, Kant argued that there is a more foundational principle of duty that encompasses our particular duties. It is a single, self-evident principle of reason that he calls the —categorical imperative.