ETHICAL THEORIES

**CONSEQUENTIALISM**

An action that brings about more benefit than harm is good, while an action that causes more harm than benefit is not. The most famous version of this theory is Utilitarianism.

Although there are references to this idea in the works of ancient philosopher Epicurus, it’s closely associated with English philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

Bentham’s theory of utilitarianism focussed on which actions were most likely to make people happy. If happiness was the experience of pleasure without pain, the most ethical actions were ones that caused the most possible happiness and the least possible pain.

He even developed a calculator to work out which actions were better or worse – the ‘felicific calculus’. Because it counted every person’s pleasure or pain as the same, regardless of age, wealth, race, etc. utilitarianism could be seen as a radically egalitarian philosophy.

Bentham’s views are most closely aligned with act utilitarianism.  This basic form of consequentialism holds an action as ethical if and only if it produces more beneficial/pleasure-causing outcomes than negative/pain-causing ones. Whenever we are faced with a decision, an act consequentialist will expect us to ask that question.

John Stuart Mill, a student of Bentham’s, disagreed. He believed it was too difficult for a society to run if it had to consider the specific costs/benefits of every single action. How could we have speeding laws, for example, if it would sometimes be ethical to break the speed limit?

Instead, Mill believed we should figure out which set of rules would create the most happiness over an extended period of time and then apply those in every situation. This was his theory of rule utilitarianism.

According to this theory, it would be unethical for you to speed on an empty street at two o’clock in the morning. Even if nobody would be hurt, our speeding laws mean less people are harmed *overall.* Keeping to those rules ensures that.

Consequentialism is an attractive ethical approach because it provides clear and practical guidance – at least in situations where outcomes are easy to predict. The theory is also impartial. By asking us to maximise benefit for the largest number of people (or, for Peter Singer and other preference utilitarians, any creature who has preferences), we set aside our personal biases and self-interest to benefit others.

One problem with the theory is that it can be hard to measure different benefits to decide which one is morally preferable. Is it better to give my money to charity or spend it studying medicine so I can save lives? Consequentialism can struggle to compare different moral values.

The other concern people express is the tendency of consequentialism to use ‘ends justify the means’ logic. If all we are concerned with is getting good outcomes, this can seem to justify harming some people in order to benefit others. Is it ethical to allow some people to suffer so more people can live well?

**DEONTOLOGY**

The term deontology comes from the Greek word deon, meaning duty. The theory of deontology states we are morally obligated to act in accordance with a certain set of principles and rules regardless of outcome. In religious deontology, the principles derive from divine commandment so that under religious laws, we are morally obligated not to steal, lie, or cheat. Thus, deontological theories and duties have existed for many centuries. Immanuel Kant, the theory’s celebrated proponent, formulated the most influential form of a secular deontological moral theory in 1788. Unlike religious deontological theories, the rules (or maxims) in Kant’s deontological theory derive from human reason.

To better understand deontology, compare it to some opposing theories, such as utilitarianism, which says we have an obligation to take the course of action that achieves the most positive outcome or consequence. According the theory of utility, the best consequence is happiness/pleasure, because it is considered the absolute good. Consequentialism tells us we need to take into account the final consequence of our action, even if the act itself is not morally good.

Deontological theories differ from utilitarian theories in several key ways. The most notable difference is utilitarianism aims at a goal of greatest happiness (or the best consequence) and justifies any act that achieves that goal. Deontological theories hold that some acts are always wrong, even if the act leads to an admirable outcome. Actions in deontology are always judged independently of their outcome. An act can be morally bad but may unintentionally lead to a favorable outcome.

Kant is responsible for the most prominent and well-known form of deontological ethics. Kant’s moral theory is based on his view of the human being as having the unique capacity for rationality. No other animal possesses such a propensity for reasoned thought and action, and it is exactly this ability that requires human beings to act in accordance with and for the sake of moral law or duty. Kant believes human inclinations, emotions and consequences should play no role in moral action; therefore, the motivation behind an action must be based on obligation and well thought out before the action takes place. Morality should, in theory, provide people with a framework of rational rules that guide and prevent certain actions and are independent of personal intentions and desires.

According to Kant, the moral worth of an action is determined by the human will, which is the only thing in the world that can be considered good without qualification. Good will is exercised by acting according to moral duty/law. Moral law consists of a set of maxims, which are categorical in nature – we are bound by duty to act in accordance with categorical imperatives.

**RELATIVITISM**

Cultures differ widely in their moral practices. As anthropologist Ruth Benedict illustrates in Patterns of Culture, diversity is evident even on those matters of morality where we would expect to agree:

We might suppose that in the matter of taking life all peoples would agree on condemnation. On the contrary, in the matter of homicide, it may be held that one kills by custom his two children, or that a husband has a right of life and death over his wife or that it is the duty of the child to kill his parents before they are old. It may be the case that those are killed who steal fowl, or who cut their upper teeth first, or who are born on Wednesday. Among some peoples, a person suffers torment at having caused an accidental death, among others, it is a matter of no consequence. Suicide may also be a light matter, the recourse of anyone who has suffered some slight rebuff, an act that constantly occurs in a tribe. It may be the highest and noblest act a wise man can perform. The very tale of it, on the other hand, may be a matter for incredulous mirth, and the act itself, impossible to conceive as human possibility. Or it may be a crime punishable by law, or regarded as a sin against the gods. (pp.45-46)

Other anthropologists point to a range of practices considered morally acceptable in some societies but condemned in others, including infanticide, genocide, polygamy, racism, sexism, and torture. Such differences may lead us to question whether there are any universal moral principles or whether morality is merely a matter of "cultural taste." Differences in moral practices across cultures raise an important issue in ethics -- the concept of "ethical relativism."

Ethical relativism is the theory that holds that morality is relative to the norms of one's culture. That is, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of the society in which it is practiced. The same action may be morally right in one society but be morally wrong in another. For the ethical relativist, there are no universal moral standards -- standards that can be universally applied to all peoples at all times. The only moral standards against which a society's practices can be judged are its own. If ethical relativism is correct, there can be no common framework for resolving moral disputes or for reaching agreement on ethical matters among members of different societies.

Most ethicists reject the theory of ethical relativism. Some claim that while the moral practices of societies may differ, the fundamental moral principles underlying these practices do not. For example, in some societies, killing one's parents after they reached a certain age was common practice, stemming from the belief that people were better off in the afterlife if they entered it while still physically active and vigorous. While such a practice would be condemned in our society, we would agree with these societies on the underlying moral principle -- the duty to care for parents. Societies, then, may differ in their application of fundamental moral principles but agree on the principles.

Also, it is argued, it may be the case that some moral beliefs are culturally relative whereas others are not. Certain practices, such as customs regarding dress and decency, may depend on local custom whereas other practices, such as slavery, torture, or political repression, may be governed by universal moral standards and judged wrong despite the many other differences that exist among cultures. Simply because some practices are relative does not mean that all practices are relative.

Other philosophers criticize ethical relativism because of its implications for individual moral beliefs. These philosophers assert that if the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on a society's norms, then it follows that one must obey the norms of one's society and to diverge from those norms is to act immorally. This means that if I am a member of a society that believes that racial or sexist practices are morally permissible, then I must accept those practices as morally right. But such a view promotes social conformity and leaves no room for moral reform or improvement in a society. Furthermore, members of the same society may hold different views on practices. In the United States, for example, a variety of moral opinions exists on matters ranging from animal experimentation to abortion. What constitutes right action when social consensus is lacking?

Perhaps the strongest argument against ethical relativism comes from those who assert that universal moral standards can exist even if some moral practices and beliefs vary among cultures. In other words, we can acknowledge cultural differences in moral practices and beliefs and still hold that some of these practices and beliefs are morally wrong. The practice of slavery in pre-Civil war U.S. society or the practice of apartheid in South Africa is wrong despite the beliefs of those societies. The treatment of the Jews in Nazi society is morally reprehensible regardless of the moral beliefs of Nazi society.

For these philosophers, ethics is an inquiry into right and wrong through a critical examination of the reasons underlying practices and beliefs. As a theory for justifying moral practices and beliefs, ethical relativism fails to recognize that some societies have better reasons for holding their views than others.

But even if the theory of ethical relativism is rejected, it must be acknowledged that the concept raises important issues. Ethical relativism reminds us that different societies have different moral beliefs and that our beliefs are deeply influenced by culture. It also encourages us to explore the reasons underlying beliefs that differ from our own, while challenging us to examine our reasons for the beliefs and values we hold.

**HEDONISM**

The term "hedonism," from the Greek word ἡδονή (hēdonē) for pleasure, refers to several related theories about what is good for us, how we should behave, and what motivates us to behave in the way that we do. All hedonistic theories identify pleasure and pain as the only important elements of whatever phenomena they are designed to describe.  If hedonistic theories identified pleasure and pain as merely two important elements, instead of the only important elements of what they are describing, then they would not be nearly as unpopular as they all are. However, the claim that pleasure and pain are the only things of ultimate importance is what makes hedonism distinctive and philosophically interesting.

Philosophical hedonists tend to focus on hedonistic theories of value, and especially of well-being (the good life for the one living it). As a theory of value, hedonism states that all and only pleasure is intrinsically valuable and all and only pain is intrinsically not valuable. Hedonists usually define pleasure and pain broadly, such that both physical and mental phenomena are included. Thus, a gentle massage and recalling a fond memory are both considered to cause pleasure and stubbing a toe and hearing about the death of a loved one are both considered to cause pain. With pleasure and pain so defined, hedonism as a theory about what is valuable for us is intuitively appealing. Indeed, its appeal is evidenced by the fact that nearly all historical and contemporary treatments of well-being allocate at least some space for discussion of hedonism.  Unfortunately for hedonism, the discussions rarely endorse it and some even deplore its focus on pleasure.

**EMOTIVISM**

The English philosopher A.J. Ayer (1910 – 1989) and the American philosopher Charles Stevenson (1908 – 1979) developed a different version of subjectivism. **Emotivism** is a theory that claims that moral language or judgments: 1) are neither true or false; 2) express our emotions; and 3) try to influence others to agree with us. To better understand emotivism, consider the following statements:

The Earth is larger than Jupiter.  
The St. Louis Cardinals won the baseball World Series in 1964.

Both are declarative statements that are either true or false; both statements have cognitive content. Now consider the following:

Go Manchester United!  
Damn!

Both are exclamatory statements that are neither true nor false and have no cognitive content. They express emotions and try to influence others to share the emotion.

Emotivists believe that moral language expresses emotions and tries to influence others; it has no cognitive content. If I say homosexuality is evil, I’m just expressing my feeling that homosexuality is disgusting! I am expressing my emotions and, at the same time, trying to influence you to dislike homosexuality. The same analysis applies to any moral judgment. If I say that capital punishment is wrong, I’m just expressing my dislike for it and trying to get you to agree with me. I might as well have said capital punishment while shaking my head and rolling my eyes.  And if I say that Stalin or Cheney were bad men—which they were—I’m merely trying to get you to agree with what I’m really saying.

Now the difference between emotivism and personal relativism (subjectivism) is subtle. When personal relativists say Gandhi was a good man they report their view of Gandhi. And this report is true or false depending on whether they are telling the truth. But the emotivist claims there is no truth or falsity to moral judgments whatsoever! If I say I hate abortion—assuming I’m being sincere—then this expressed emotion is neither true nor false, it just is. In other words, the emotivist says that different moral judgments are just like differences in taste. I like carrots; you don’t. I like homosexuality; you don’t. But emotivists don’t consider moral judgments as reporting a speaker’s beliefs; they just express emotions. In the same way that cows moo, humans emote. Therefore, according to the emotivists, moral language has no factual content at all and thus cannot be true or false in any way. Now, why would one think that moral language is just a disguised emotional expression?

Ayer thought that moral language was meaningless because it couldn’t be verified. If I say that there’s a dollar on my desk, you know what I mean and you can verify or falsify my statement—you just go look. But if I say that lying is bad, how you could verify this? Where would you go to see that lying was bad? Ayer argued that statements that couldn’t be verified were meaningless. There is no meaning to propositions like abortion is immoral because there is no way to show these statements are true or false.

While Stevenson granted that moral language didn’t have factual or cognitive content, he argued that it had emotive meaning. Moral propositions aren’t true or false, but they aren’t meaningless either—moral language allows us to express emotions. Thus he could easily account for our differences regarding ethics—we have different emotions. And when we disagree, Stevenson said we have a disagreement in attitude. But reasons or arguments will not change other people’s attitudes.