**Ethical Theories**

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Ethical theories help us sort out our thinking and provide a coherent and justifiable basis for dealing with moral questions. They give us arguments and reasons for our moral judgements. As a result, they help us improve our ethical decision-making skills, or at least, avoid certain mistakes like neglecting relevant features of the problem or stating an opinion without justification.

There are many branches of ethical theories, one of which is consequentialism. Consequentialism teaches that regardless of the action, the only important thing is the consequence of the action. If it maximizes happiness in the community, then the action is morally right, and if it induces suffering in the community, then the action is morally wrong.

One of the prominent branches of consequentialism is utilitarianism.

## Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism was founded by Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarianism is based off of the Utility principle, which essentially states that our actions must generate the greatest amount of happiness amongst the largest number of people in the community. The actual action is irrelevant, even if the motives are ill. Notice that there are two parts to this, firstly the amount of happiness, and secondly the number of people it affects.

### Criticism

* One criticism is that pleasure is a difficult concept to define. It varies from person to person and cannot be compared between different people.
* Another criticism of the utilitarian principle is that justice is not evenly distributed under it. Certain goods like income or a good career is denied to certain groups of people.
* A third major criticism of the utilitarianism principle is that it is biased towards the majority. If some action causes pleasure amongst a large number of people while causing pain to a minority group, that action is morally justified by the utilitarianism principle.

For the third criticism, consider a situation where a person has a piece of equipment fallen on their leg, causing constant pain, but that equipment is being used to transmit a television show being watched by millions of people. According to utilitarian principle, the happiness of the millions of people outweighs the pain felt by the individual, and that person should be left to suffer until the end of the show. Following this thinking eventually leads to conclusions like preventing a trillion headaches is more valuable than saving someone’s life.

This sounds completely wrong, but we also need to acknowledge that we make trade-offs like this all the time. We raise speed limits to convenience a large number of people slightly in exchange for more accidents, we fund research into smaller diseases affecting a large number of people instead of research into a very rare, but severe disease and so on.

In response to this last criticism, the Freedom Principle, or the No Harm Principle, was proposed by John Stuart Mill. The Freedom Principle states that everyone is free to strive for their own happiness, as long as they are not denying others from doing the same.

### Act Versus Rule Utilitarianism

Consider a scenario where an engineer is asked to falsify some data on a report because providing the actual data would result in huge fines or even bankruptcy for the company. Under Bentham’s utilitarian principle, the engineer should falsify the data because doing so ensures the maximum happiness for members of his community, i.e. his co-workers. Essentially, the consequences of individual acts is being considered. Thus, Bentham’s utilitarian principle is called Act Utilitarianism.

Another branch of utilitarianism recognizes the existence of moral rules, if only because life would be complicated without them. This branch is called Rule Utilitarianism. It also prioritizes happiness, but not at the cost of our morals.

## Kantian Theory

Kantian theory is similar to rule utilitarianism. It recognizes that some actions are morally acceptable, even though they do not create happiness, and some actions that do maximize happiness are morally unacceptable.

Kantian theory follows from deontology, or duty ethics. According to deontology, an action is morally right if it is in agreement with some moral rule, a law, a norm or a principle, that is applicable in and of itself, regardless of the consequences. Further, those morals must be followed solely because it is the right thing to do, not because we will get some reward if we do it or some punishment if we do not. We must have the right motive for following the morals. Notice the contrast with utilitarianism here.

A core notion of the Kantian theory is that man should be autonomous, able to determine what is morally correct through their own reasoning. We should place a moral norm upon ourselves and obey it out of a sense of duty and respect to the norm. Essentially, we should act out of goodwill.

### Universality Principle

A basis for the Kantian theory is the universality principle. Essentially, it says that we should not act in such a way that, if everyone were to act in that way, it would begin to cause major problems in society.

### Reciprocity Principle

Another part of the Kantian theory is that we must value human beings in and of themselves, not because of the position they hold or what they can do for us. According to the reciprocity principle, we cannot use our employees as a means to achieving a larger profit, we must also ensure that they are enjoying their work and are happy working for us.

There may be scenarios where this aspect is not immediately obvious. For example, if a few employees are requested to submit design proposals, we cannot allow even a single person to submit their work after the deadline, according to Kantian theory, without a valid reason, since by giving the single person preferential treatment, we are using everyone else as a means to getting work done only. On the other hand, if we ask for everyone’s consent to allow a single person to submit their work after the deadline and everyone agrees to it, then it would be fine. In the latter case, we are giving value to everyone equally.

Further still under the reciprocity principle, we have to give everyone the right to express their opinions, as long as their opinions are morally guided. Anyone can say whatever they want, as long as what they say is not harmful or hurtful to other people or society in general.

### Criticism

A major criticism of the Kantian theory is that it is too rigid. For example, lying is completely forbidden under the Kantian theory, but of course, there are special situations where even lying should be morally justified, such as to save someone’s life.

Another criticism is that it ignores the conflicts between norms. For example, we may find ourselves with obligations to two separate parties at the same time, and the Kantian theory would tell us we need to uphold both obligations, which is simply not possible.

In response to this second shortcoming, William David Ross developed the pluralistic theory of moral obligations. He stated that good is situated in two levels, things that are good at first look, Prima Facie norms, and things that are good once we have taken everything into account, self-evident norms. In the case of two simultaneous obligations, both of which seem like the right thing to uphold at first, a.k.a. Prima Facie norms, we must make a decision in the end on which to uphold based on which has a higher priority, which would be the self-evident norm.

## Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics was proposed by Aristotle. According to virtue ethics, actions should not be judged based on the action itself or the consequences, but rather the virtue behind the action. Thus, courageous, loyal, honest, creative, etc. actions are giving the highest value. Essentially, regardless of what the action itself is, we should decide whether or not to do it based off of whether or not it is a virtuous thing to do.

The good part here is that a virtuous character can be grown. People who attempt to follow virtue ethics will perform virtuous acts, and thus develop a virtuous character over time. Of course, they have to identify and emulate other virtuous people, called moral exemplars, to do so. According to Aristotle, we are built with the ability to do this.

Virtue ethics was preached in Ancient Greece. Aristotle believed that the final goal of human action was to reach eudaimonia, which is a state of happiness and human flourishing. This does not refer to happiness of material things in the way that the utilitarian principle allows, but rather to the happiness felt due to human accomplishments, achieved over time through hard work.

### Importance of Equilibrium

Under virtue ethics, each moral virtue must be held at equilibrium, not straying to either extreme end, or vices as Aristotle put it. For example, courage is a virtue that must be balanced between cowardice and recklessness; generosity is a virtue that must be balanced between being a miser and spendthrift behaviour; pride is a virtue that must be balanced between giving in to everyone’s commands and being arrogant.

Essentially, the virtue depends on the context. Going to the aid of someone who is being mugged is courageous only if we actually have the ability to fight back against the mugger. It is reckless behaviour if we go to fight someone who is significantly larger than us without thinking. Instead, we should call for help.

This equilibrium also contributes to us having practical wisdom. A person who has practical wisdom does not throw a fist even if it may be justified, but tries to stop a fight; gives to charity, but does not give away everything they own; is proud of their work, but is not arrogant.

All of this may seem very vague. Afterall, how can we measure how virtuous someone is? What we can do is trust. We have to trust people who we believe are trying to be virtuous people, and trust that what they are doing the right thing. Of course, even this is not meant to be blind.

### Criticisms

One criticism of virtue ethics is that it does not actually tell us how to act, what is right and what is wrong. It only makes a comment on what characteristics a person should possess.

Another criticism is that virtues are not unconditionally good. As we discussed above, which acts are virtuous depends on the situation and context.