

## Moral Theory: What Is the Source of the Moral Worth of an Action?

This week we are considering three of the main theories of morality: virtue ethics (Aristotle); consequentialism, utilitarianism in particular (Bentham); and deontology (Kant). As was discussed in lecture, one general way of distinguishing these three moral theories is where they place the moral worth of an action. Virtue ethics attributes moral worth to the source of an action, specifically the character of the agent. Consequentialism attributes the moral worth of an action to its consequences. Deontology attributes the moral worth of an action in the act itself, independently of who performs the act or what its consequences are.

### *Virtue Ethics*

According to Aristotle in all our actions we should seek the good. The good is taken to have three distinguishing characteristics: it is desirable; it is desirable as an end in itself; and all other goods are desirable for its sake. (SEP) Aristotle argues that in all our actions we should seek happiness because happiness satisfies each of these criteria. Happiness is certainly desirable. Happiness is always sought as an end in itself, which is to say it is never sought as a means to something else. And all good things are sought as a means to happiness. Happiness is, therefore, the highest good.

Ethics, for Aristotle, is not a theoretical discipline but, rather, an empirical one. Thus, a means of studying happiness is required:

“Inasmuch as happiness is an activity of the soul in accord with complete or perfect virtue, it is necessary to consider virtue, as this will perhaps be the best way of studying happiness....” (170)

The problem, then, is in determining what virtue, or excellence, is.

The virtues, for Aristotle, are moral states of being. Virtue is associated with the character of a person, *i.e.* a person is virtuous in so far as she has a virtuous character.

What does it mean to have a virtuous character? And how does one acquire such a quality of character?

In what way are the requirements of an act to be virtuous particularly specific? What does this say about a virtuous character?

There is one crucially important thing that has not yet been specified: the definition of ‘virtue.’

How are the virtues defined? And, perhaps more importantly, how do we determine which acts are virtuous?

(Hint) There are two ways to determine what acts are virtuous: one requires observation, and the other involves an algorithm or recipe.

## *Consequentialism (Utilitarianism)*

Consequentialism measures the moral worth of an act according to the goodness or badness of its consequences. This requires a determination of what makes the consequences of an act good or bad. For utilitarianism this is accomplished by the principle of utility.

The principle of utility is the “principle that approves or disapproves of any action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.” (179) Putting it another way, the right act is that act which promotes the greatest happiness for all the people affected by the act.

*Utility*: a property of any object such that it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness and to prevent mischief, pain, evil or unhappiness to the person or group whose interest is concerned. (*ibid.*)

*Promotion of interest*: a thing promotes the interest of an individual when it adds to a person’s total pleasure, or (when it comes to the same thing) reduces their total pain. (*ibid.*)

What is the difference between utilitarianism and consequentialism?

Why is considering an act to be good or bad according to whether an individual is (or the individuals involved are) disposed to approve or disapprove of it not consistent with the principle of utility?

Since the happiness produced by an action is measured according to the degree to which it promotes *pleasure* and prevents pain, how does Bentham/Mill's conception of utilitarianism differ from the common definition of hedonism?

There are a variety of considerations that come into measuring the amount of pleasure or pain produced by an action. These are: intensity; duration; certainty or uncertainty of results; closeness or remoteness in time and place; how fruitful the action is; purity; extent in terms of the number of people affected; *etc.* An individual determines the right action by attaching (pleasure and pain) weights to the consequences of a possible action, adds these together, does the same for each possible action, and the act with the greatest total value attributed to its (possible) consequences is the right action.

What does this calculation procedure remind you of? (Think back to the first unit last term)

How does the variety of factors that are involved in determining whether an act is right or wrong cause problems, or what kinds of problems does this cause, for utilitarianism? How could Bentham respond to this problem?

## *Deontology*

A key point for Kant is that the only thing that is good without qualification is a Good Will. A good will, for Kant, is good by virtue of the volition, not by virtue of its ability to produce good effects. The quality of a will is important for Kant because the rightness or wrongness of an action is connected with an action being performed *from duty*, rather than ‘according to duty.’

Although this makes it appear that the moral worth of an action is determined by the motives of the agent, actually it is that an action performed from duty indicates something about the quality of the command of the will, which is connected directly to the act, not the motive. Hopefully this will become clearer as we go on.

For deontological theories of ethics in general, there are certain principles or rules that determine whether an act is right or wrong. They are principles or rules that are objective and must be followed. Kant calls such principles “commands of reason” or *imperatives*. Imperatives break down into two kinds: hypothetical; and categorical. The former are good because they are necessary as a means to something else. The categorically imperative acts would be those that are good in themselves without regard to any other end and, consequently, are objectively necessary for a rational will.

Prudent actions are always hypothetical because they pursue happiness—good consequences. Categorical imperatives are connected to the *form* of the act itself, which is why they are commanded by reason.

*The Categorical Imperative*: act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

You can consider ‘maxim’ to mean a “rule or principle of conduct.” (OED)

*Suicide*: maxim—from self-love I adopt it as a principle to shorten my life when its longer duration is likely to bring more evil than satisfaction. **Is it universalizable?**

*Promises*: maxim—when I think myself in want of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it even though I know that I can never do so. **Is this universalizable?**

*Development of talents*: maxim—if a person prefers to indulge in pleasure rather than to take pains to develop natural talents, then she should do so. **Is this universalizable?**

*Assisting the poor*: maxim—if I do not wish to help others when I can then I will not do so. **Is this universalizable?**

**How does Kant’s definition of the categorical imperative lead to difficulties in the determination of the moral status of particular acts?**

Kant looks for a formulation of the categorical imperative based on a “supreme practical principle.” The foundation of this principle is, for Kant, that rational nature exists as an end in itself. In the case of human beings, people are ends in themselves. This leads to

*The practical imperative:* act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in yourself or in others, in every case as an end and never only as a means.

Kant considers the practical imperative to be another formulation of, *i.e.* equivalent to, the categorical imperative discussed above. He later, in the same work, considers two other formulations. He takes all four to be equivalent, though he does not give a proof to this effect.