

# Philosophy 1100 – Introduction to Ethics

## Lecture 5 – Three Different Types of Ethical Theories

### 1. Evaluative Judgments Concerning States of Affairs, Actions, and Character

(1) States of affairs as good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Examples: pleasure, pain, knowledge, friendship.

Intrinsic value versus instrumental value. Good in itself versus good as a means to something else.

(2) Actions as morally permissible, morally obligatory, or morally wrong. Also actions as morally admirable, even if not morally obligatory.

Rights as concerned with judgments of the moral status of actions.

(3) Traits of character that are desirable or undesirable. Virtues and vices.

### 2. Are Some of these Types of Judgments More Fundamental than Others?

(a) Can judgments of the first type be reduced to judgments of the second type? Illustration of such a reduction: To say that something is good is to say that one ought to bring such things about, or that one ought not to destroy them.

(b) Can judgments of the second type be reduced to judgments of the first type? Illustration of such a reduction: To say that some type of action is right is to say that it stands in a certain relation to the production of good things.

(c) Can judgments of the third type be reduced to judgments of the second type? Illustration of such a reduction: To say that a trait of character is desirable is to say that it involves a disposition to perform right actions, or to refrain from performing wrong actions.

(d) Can judgments of the second type be reduced to judgments of the third type? Illustration of such a reduction: To say that A is a type of action that is morally wrong is to say that there is some virtuous character trait, V, such that a person who possessed character trait V would be disposed not to perform an action of type A.

### 3. Three Main Types of Ethical Theory: Consequentialist Theories, Deontological Theories, and Virtue Theories

Different views as to which type of ethical statement is the most fundamental give rise to different sorts of ethical theories.

## (1) Consequentialist Theories

Consequentialist theories maintain that the fundamental ethical judgments involve claims about what states of affairs are intrinsically good and intrinsically bad. The idea then is that an action's being wrong can be analyzed in terms of its not being the action that, among those that are open to one, produces the best balance of good effects over bad effects.

### A Famous Consequentialist Theory: Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism comes in different versions. Some versions maintain that the only thing that is intrinsically good, or good in itself, is pleasure, and the only thing that is intrinsically bad is pain. Other versions of utilitarianism maintain that happiness is intrinsically good, and unhappiness intrinsically bad, and that happiness and unhappiness are a matter of more than simply the balance of pleasure over pain in one's life - either because pleasures may also differ with respect to "quality", or because what matters is the extent to which one's desires are satisfied, and not the quantity of pleasure that results.

Given an account of what states are intrinsically good and what states are intrinsically bad, the utilitarian claims that the rightness of an action is related to the good or badness of its consequences. Though here, too, there is a split between two rather different approaches - referred to as act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. The former maintains that the rightness and wrongness of an action is a matter of how the consequences of the action compare with the consequences of the other actions that the person could have performed: the right action is the one with the best consequences, the best balance of good effects over bad effects. The latter, in contrast, maintains that the consideration of consequences is relevant, not in choosing an individual action, but in deciding upon moral rules. The correct moral rules are those rules that are such that if people follow them, the best consequences will result overall, over the long term. The right action to perform in a given situation, accordingly, is not the action that will have the best consequences in that situation: the right action, rather, is the action that conforms to the moral rules that are the best moral rules - in the sense just explained.

## (2) Deontological Theories

Deontological theories maintain that statements about what one ought to do cannot be explained in terms of statements about the goodness and badness of consequences. In support of this claim, advocates of deontological approaches often argue that individuals have rights, and that it is wrong to violate those rights simply on the grounds that doing so will lead to a better balance of good states of affairs over bad states of affairs.

### A Possible Argument for Deontological Theories, and Against Consequentialist Theories: The case of the doctor with the five patients who need organs, and the single healthy patient.

Suppose that a doctor – call her Mary – is stranded on a desert island, and that she has five patients who need various organ transplants if they are to live: one needs a heart transplant, one a liver transplant, one a lungs transplant, one a

kidney transplant, and one a pancreas transplant. Unfortunately, no organs are available, so it looks as if Mary cannot do anything to save her five patients. But then it occurs to her that she has a healthy patient, and that that person could be a source of the needed organs. So Mary kills the healthy patient, and uses that person's organs to save the lives of the five patients who would otherwise die.

Did Mary act wrongly or not? If she did, then it would seem that at least act consequentialist positions must be false, since Mary by choosing to kill one patient to save five, chose the action with the better consequences.

### Question 1

Did Mary do something wrong when she killed the healthy patient in order to save the five other patients who needed transplants in order to live?

- A. Definitely not.
- B. I don't think that she acted wrongly.
- C. Either I'm uncertain what to think here, or I prefer to pass on this question.
- D. I'm inclined to think that what Mary did was wrong.
- E. What Mary did was clearly wrong.

### Comments on the Answers to Question 1

My prediction was that there would be quite heavy support for D and E.

If that prediction was right, that provides support for the conclusion that most people have intuitions that conflict with consequentialism.

Later this semester, however, we'll consider some related issues, and my expectation is that we will find that many people have intuitions on those related issues that aren't easy to fit together with their intuitions on the question just considered.

The upshot is that there is some question whether people have completely consistent views in this area.

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To return to the characterization of deontological theories, such moral theories generally feel that some or all of the following concepts are of ethical importance: (a) the idea of individual rights; (b) the idea that someone deserves, or does not deserve something; (c) the idea of fairness; (d) the idea of a reasonably equitable distribution.

(a) has been illustrated by the case of the doctor, but could be illustrated by many other cases as well. Consider, for example, massive redistribution of the world's wealth. Or consider factory farming in the raising of chickens.

For (b), consider the case of deciding who should get a TV set that is to be given away: a friendly grandmother, or a mass murderer. (Suppose that it would give the murderer more happiness than the grandmother.)

For (c) and (d), consider a parent who consistently gives nicer presents to one of her children than she gives to the others. (Again, we can suppose that more happiness is produced by this way of doing things.)

### **(3) Virtue Theories**

The distinction between virtue theories and deontological theories does not seem as great as that between either of these theories, on the one hand, and consequentialist theories on the other. For it would seem that for any moral rule, one can postulate a corresponding, virtuous trait of character, and vice versa, and if that can be done, then the implications of a given virtue theory with regard to what one ought to do will coincide with the implications of the corresponding deontological theory.

### **Concluding Historical Comment**

The ethical theories associated with most religions - and certainly with standard versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - have been deontological theories. If one wants to find examples of virtue theories, it is primarily to the Greeks that one must turn. Finally, consequentialist theories are a relatively recent development. The development of utilitarianism is due to Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Bentham entered Oxford at the age of 12, and graduated at the age of 15, and then went on to study law. Rather than practicing law, however, he worked on the tasks of developing a better legal system, and of reforming both criminal and civil law. His work had a very great impact upon legal theory. Bentham's approach to ethics was then both adopted, and modified, by many philosophers. Two of the earliest were James Mill (1773-1836), and his son, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). The latter is the author of Utilitarianism, certainly the best-known exposition of utilitarianism, and still widely read today.