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The Varieties of Ethical Theories

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by

Richard T. Hull, Ph.D.

There are two fundamental types of ethical theory: those based on the notion of choosing one's actions so as to maximize the value or values to be expected as consequences of those actions (called consequentialist or teleological theories [from the Greek *telos*, meaning aim or purpose]; and those based on the notion of choosing one's actions according to standards of duty or obligation that refer not to consequences but to the nature of actions and the motives that are held by those performing them (called deontological theories [from the Greek *deon*, meaning that which is necessary or binding]). We will consider each type more fully and give specific instances of each type as illustrations.

I. Teleological theories: hold that an action is morally right either if a person's doing it brings about the best attainable consequences in the situation, or if the action is of a kind which would have the best attainable consequences if everyone did it in that sort of situation. It is the goodness or badness of the consequences of actions alone that makes them right or wrong, rather than anything intrinsically good or bad about the actions themselves. Thus, on this view, there would be no universal moral prohibition against deliberately killing another human if so doing would produce a greater balance of good over evil than any other course of action open at that time. Because these theories usually involve the notion of utility in producing good consequences, they are often called utilitarian theories.

A. Utilitarian theories have three parts: a theory of value, a principle of utility, and a decision procedure.

1. There are several theories of value held by individuals who have been called Utilitarians.

a. Hedonism: equates good with pleasure, bad or evil with pain.

b. Eudamonism: equates good with happiness, bad or evil with unhappiness.

c. Agathism: views good as an indefinable, intrinsic feature of various situations and states, evil as either an indefinable, intrinsic feature of other situations and states, or simply as the absence of good.

d. Agapeism: equates good with love, bad with hate.

e. Values pluralism: holds that there are many goods, including pleasure

and happiness, but also knowledge, friendship, love, and so forth. These may or may not be viewed as differing in importance or priority.

The philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill were hedonists; Aristotle and Paul Kurtz are characterized as eudamonists; the British philosopher G. E. Moore was an agathist; the theologian and ethicist Joseph Fletcher (author of *Situation Ethics*) is an agapist; and Plato, Nicolai Hartmann, and G. E. Moore were pluralists (Moore because he thought that beauty, aesthetic experience, knowledge, and personal affection were goods because each exhibits the property of intrinsic goodness). Bentham and the Mills differed over whether all pleasures were qualitatively the same: Bentham thought so, the Mills did not.

2. Principle of (Universal) Utility: an act is right if it brings about the greatest increase in the world of consequential good of all the alternative actions available, or the least increase in evil consequences of all the alternatives. This utility value is, in theory, a function of all the consequences of the act, direct and indirect, not merely those that one can foresee. But in practice one is enjoined to choose that act that has the best foreseeable balance of good over evil as one's *prima facie* obligation. If one's calculations show accurately that there are two possible courses of action either one of which will have greater utility than any third alternative, but which are equal in such value to each other, they are both permissible and the choice between them is not a moral matter. In these calculations, one weighs the good and bad of all persons equally, giving no preference to any individual or group.
3. Decision Procedure: The third part of utilitarian theories has to do with how the judgment is made that a particular act is of relative maximum utility or relative minimum disutility. Utilitarian theories divide into two types over this issue: act utilitarian theories and rule utilitarian theories.
 - a. An act utilitarian theory holds that the utilitarian principle of utility is to be applied to particular situations. We must find out for each alternative possible act in the situation what its net utility function is. The right act is then defined as the one that has greater net utility than any other alternative. To do any of these other alternatives would be wrong because to do any of them would not be to maximize the balance of positive over negative value in the world, and a person's duty is always to do that which has such maximization as its consequence. Act utilitarianism is sometimes called situation ethics.
 - b. A rule utilitarian theory holds that we are generally, if not always, to tell what to do in particular situations by appeal to a rule like that of truth-telling, rather than by asking what particular action will have the best consequences in the particular circumstances. These rules are to be determined by a retrospective calculation of which possible rules have the greatest net utility. Thus, it may be right to obey a rule like telling the truth because it is so useful to have the rule, even when in a few individual situations telling the truth may not in fact lead to the best consequences. A rule utilitarian is prepared to revise his or her rules in the light of experiences, incorporating as exceptions those types of

situation in which acting in according with the simple truth-telling rule leads regularly to worse consequences than not (e.g., a modification allowing “white lies”). Rule utilitarians reject the situation-by-situation calculations of act utilitarians because they doubt our ability to predict accurately the consequences of our actions in an efficient and reliable manner; they hold that experience may be most reliably and usefully encapsulated into general rules, and that a better long-run result will be achieved by following rules than by situational calculations.

B. Individualistic theories can best be defined in contrast to utilitarian ones. Whereas in the latter my duty is to seek everyone’s good, counting my own as only one good of no greater importance than anyone else’s, in individualistic theories my duty is to seek my own good exclusively, or at least primarily. If my own good is best served by seeking the good of others, then that becomes my duty as well, but only derivatively, as conducive to my own well-being. Individualistic theories differ from utilitarian ones over the Principle of (Universal) Utility. Their range of values and decision procedures is the same, but instead of the utilitarian’s principle of universal utility, they hold:

2A. The Principle of (Individual) Utility: an act is right if it brings about the greatest amount of consequential good possible among the alternatives, or the least amount of consequential evil possible among the alternatives, for the agent, the one doing the act. One’s own pleasure or happiness (or whatever) is to count higher than anyone else’s, unless one has identified another’s good with his own.

Prominent individualists include Epicurus, Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Nietzsche (individualists are frequently called egoists).

Consequentialist calculations can become rather complicated, particularly for act utilitarians and act individualists. For, one must take into account at any given decision point all the possible consequences of one’s contemplated action, and must make allowances for the likelihood, or probability, of each. Thus, even if one had a quantifiable value (such as amount of pleasure), one would have to determine which alternative action to choose by multiplying the value quantity associated with each possible consequence of each alternative act by the likelihood of obtaining that consequence given doing that act, then adding the results together algebraically to obtain the net expected value of the act; this result is then compared with the net expected value of the alternative acts one could choose to do in the situation. The one with the greatest expected value is the alternative action one ought to choose.

A fundamental criticism of utilitarian theories is that they do not offer an obvious way of deciding between distributions of good consequences, some of which are just and some of which are unjust. That is, although the good of two persons is to be calculated, equally, provided those goods are equally strong, if it turns out that we can, say, visit disaster on a few and thereby achieve an equal or greater amount of pleasure in toto (say, because others are enabled by witnessing these disasters on television to find their own lives more tolerable as a result), some unjust distributions seem not capable of being ruled out by the theory. As an example, it

was a widely shared belief that enlightened slavery in the antebellum South provided a greater quantity of pleasure or happiness in toto than would have been possible if black slaves had been left free in Africa, or had been freed to work in the factories of the North (See James Michener's *Chesapeake* for some of these arguments). One finds similar arguments in opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment proposal, and this type of argument has been given to support the view that the state's obligation is to provide only custodial care for the retarded and mentally ill. (See my "Autonomy, Personhood, and the Right to Psychiatric Treatment"). For those who oppose slavery as unjust and morally impermissible, this argument, if sound in its psychological assumptions, would amount to a refutation of utilitarianism; for those who favored slavery, given the psychological assumptions, it showed what a good theory utilitarianism was. And for utilitarians who opposed slavery, it gave grounds for suspecting the psychological assumptions.

A fundamental criticism of individualistic theories, particularly those what are explicitly egoistic ones, is that they cannot be taken to provide a coherent account of what ethical behavior is for everyone. For example, consider just two individuals, each egoists: it is best for the first if the second always considers the wants of the first before his own; likewise, it is better for the second if the first always considers the wants of the second before his own. Suppose there is just enough food available for one person to eat his fill and not go hungry. The ethical thing for the first person to do, from his point of view, is to take it all for himself; from his point of view, the ethical thing for the second person to do is to let him have the food. But exactly the reverse holds for the second person: from his point of view, the ethical thing for him to do is to take the food; the ethical thing for the first person to do is to let him have it. Thus on this account, the first individual ought and ought not to take the food; he ought and ought not to let the other person have it; and similar contradictions are implied for the second person.

There are, of course, defenses against these criticisms that have been developed by proponents of utilitarianism and of egoism. There are also modifications of each view that can be made so as to avoid the contradictory conclusions, but at the expense of weakening the "purity" of the position. Since our aim is chiefly exposition, let us pass on to the other main type of ethical theory, deontological ethics.

II. Deontological theories: hold that an action is morally right if it is required by duty, or permitted by duty and not in conflict with any other action required by another duty. Deontologists are frequently also absolutists, but some deontologists do hold that what is morally right in a given situation may differ from what is morally right in any other given situation. What deontologists are united in is their opposition to purely consequentialist moral thinking; some even hold that a morally wrong may have entirely good consequences, and a morally right on entirely bad consequences.

There are similar differences between act and rule deontologists as between act and rule utilitarians.

A. Act deontologists hold that every judgment of moral obligation is completely particular (e.g., "In this situation I ought to tell the truth") and

that general maxims or rules (e.g., One ought always to tell the truth”) are unavailable, useless, or at best inductive generalizations from particular experiences. We must decide separately in each particular situation what is the right thing to do. Act deontologists differ over what they use or appeal to for making such judgments, but rules are out, and looking to the consequences to see what will promote the greatest balance of good over evil for oneself or the world is out.

1. Some act deontologists are intuitionists, holding that by becoming clear about the facts in a case we are enabled by a special faculty of moral intuition (sometimes identified with conscience) to perceive what is the appropriate or fitting action, to know what our duty is in the circumstances. Deontologists such as E. F. Carritt, H. A. Pritchard, and Samuel Butler have held such a view; something like it is also found in some Catholic thought.
 2. Some deontologists, like the Existentialist, hold that decision, rather than intuition, is central. One makes such choices in the awful knowledge of one’s freedom from determinants and guidelines, and thus in knowledge of one’s responsibility for the decision and its results. It is “bad faith” to attempt to shift this responsibility either to some rule (for one must decide on the rule and thus take responsibility for it) or to some utilitarian calculation (for one must make the calculation, and in so doing decide on what values to prefer as well as what probabilities to assign to their resulting from what alternative actions one might take). To reason according to rules or codes of ethics is to overlook the fact that humans live in a world otherwise void of sources of value and obligation, that they are, through their choices and decisions, authors of value and obligation (and even of themselves). Jean-Paul Sartre is a major exponent of this version.
 3. There is a religious version of act deontology as well. On this view the source of duty is the divine will, and what one ought to do in the particular situation is what God wills for one to do in that situation, as given directly or through an inspired mediator. An example of this view might be found in the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, his most beloved son. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his most beloved son. He prepared to do the awful thing, but was stopped in the nick of time by a contravening command. Before the second order it was his duty to kill his son; after, it was his duty not to kill his son. (See theological voluntarism, below, under Religious Rule Deontology.)
- B. Rule deontologists hold that there is a non-teleological standard of duty consisting in one or more rules; one’s duty in any situation consists in acting so as not to violate any of those rules. Usually the rule deontologist has in mind a set of rather specific rules, such as the Biblical 10 Commandments, each one saying that we ought always to act in a certain way in a certain context (a positive duty), or to refrain from acting in a certain way in a certain context (a negative duty) The major difficulty with such multiplicity of obligations is that situations sometimes generate a conflict between the duties, as when one’s mother or father asks one to lie or to steal, or as when the

physician must choose between preserving life and relieving suffering in a patient, where to do the latter of necessity involves shortening life. Some rule deontologists seek to avoid such conflicts by appealing to a single rule, such as the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you [in a similar situation if your positions were reversed]. Such general maxims may fail in concrete situations to determine our duties completely, and may not result in a rational agreement among all parties as to the morally correct course of action: such a result is often due to the ability of a situation to bear more than one description.

1. Religious rule deontology takes two forms: theological voluntarism, which holds that the standard of right and wrong is God's will (meaning that what ultimately determines whether an act is right or wrong is its being commanded or forbidden by God and nothing else); and what I will call theological revelationism, which holds that God only reveal moral law to a mankind otherwise incapable of knowing adequately what is right and wrong, but does not make it so by command. (Socrates, in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, asks: "Is something right because God commands it or does God command it because it is right?" Theological voluntarists opt for the former; theological revelationists hold with the latter.)
2. Immanuel Kant's rational rule deontology.
 - a. There are several features to be noted.
 - i. In contrast with teleological accounts for which the notion of value is primary and duty is derivative, Kant takes the notions of duty and of right and wrong as fundamental, and views valuational concepts as falling outside the sphere of ethics proper.
 - ii. Kant holds that the fundamental laws of morality are the same for every rational being, whether human or divine, since the ultimate criterion of rightness is deducible from the concept of a rational being as such. (Kant would have been a theological revelationist had he not thought that the human reason is capable of discovering moral law for itself.)
 - iii. Kant's theory doesn't give us a set of concrete rules like the 10 commandments, the way that the Law of Gravitation gives us the Laws of Planetary Motion. Rather, it consists in several formulations of formal tests for substantive rules of conduct (as logic provides tests for the validity of arguments without providing the arguments themselves. He is thus thought of as a formalist in ethics, as contrasted with others who list specific rules or duties.
 - b. The major points of Kant's theory are these:
 - i. Nothing is intrinsically good but a good will.
 - ii. A good will is one that habitually wills rightly.

- iii. The rightness or wrongness of a volition depends wholly on its nature or motive, and not on its actual consequences or its intended consequences (except as the expectation of these is part of the motive).
- iv. There are two kinds of voluntary actions — those on impulse and those on principle. The former are done because of situation-dependent emotions or feelings, as when I stop on the highway to help a beautiful woman change a tire because I find her attractive and not because I am prepared to do it simply for anyone similarly in trouble. Kant held that an action cannot be morally right unless it is done on some general rule or principle which the agent accepts as binding on everyone in a similar situation.
- v. But the foregoing isn't a sufficient condition of rightness. There are two classes of rules of conduct: hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives. The former are prudential principles of conduct accepted simply as rules for gaining desired ends. If I am a utilitarian and accept the principle that lies ought not to be told, I do so because lies undermine confidence and thus reduce human happiness. My rule, then, depends on my desiring human happiness as an end of my actions; this is my ultimate motive for not lying. A categorical imperative would be one accepted on its own merits and not as a means for gaining some desired end. Kant held that an action is right if and only if it is done on a principle which is a categorical imperative, not contingent on one holding something as an end.
- vi. There are three formulations of what Kant calls "the Moral Law or the Supreme Principle of Morality" (but what he should have called "the Supreme Criterion for Categorical Imperatives" — for it is a second-order principle that states necessary and sufficient conditions that any first-order principle of conduct must have if it is to be a categorical imperative and if action determined by it is to be morally right):
 - a. It is necessary and sufficient that the maxim shall be such that anyone who accepts it as his or her principle of conduct can *consistently* will that everyone else should also make it their principle of conduct and act on it.
 - b. Treat every rational being, including yourself, always as an end and never as a means only.
 - c. A principle of conduct is morally binding on me if and only if I can regard it as a law which I impose on myself. (Kant means to eliminate cases where the principle is accepted merely on tradition or merely out of fear of catching Hell if one doesn't act in accordance with it.)

To illustrate, let us consider how a Kantian would deal with an impulse toward suicide. First, such a contemplated act has to be brought under a maxim, or categorical imperative, in order to see whether it can be justified as right. Such an

imperative might be, “Whenever life holds promise of more pain and suffering than one is prepared to endure, one ought to take one’s own life.” Kant then subjects this maxim to the various tests listed above. He finds that it violates b; to kill oneself in order to avoid pain and suffering is to treat oneself as a means to some other end and not as an end in itself. hence, the maxim doesn’t pass the supreme test, and the action that is contemplated is not morally right.

Or consider one who is thinking of telling a lie in order to gain an advantage in a business dealing. The maxim that such would seem to fall under might read, “Lie whenever it suits your interests.” This imperative, however, cannot be consistently willed as a principle of conduct for everyone, says Kant; for, if everyone were to adopt it, the advantage of lying would be lost since no one would take what anyone else did at face value where there might be a matter of significance (such as a loan) hanging in the balance. Such a maxim depends on not being universally accepted for its success, and this serves to disqualify it as a morally acceptable one.

Kant felt so strongly about his supreme principle that he even essayed a criticism of God in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God’s motive for first ordering Abraham to sacrifice Isaac appears to have been one of wanting to test Abraham’s loyalty to God in order to determine whether he would be a fit leader for the people of Israel. Kant thought that this involved a violation of the second formulation of the supreme principle, in that God was treating Abraham and Isaac as means to his own ends and not as ends in themselves.

Whether one finds that a disturbing feature of Kant’s ethics or not, many find the following to be most disquieting. Kant sees his ethic as applying to all, and only, rational beings. It was clear to him that non-human animals were not rational beings, so that the question of what our duties were in regards to them really couldn’t be decided within his ethic. But also, since babies, the insane, the comatose, the severely retarded are not rational beings, it looks equally like there is no basis in Kant’s ethic for limiting what we may do to such beings or for indicating what our positive obligations to them are. The best Kant could offer was admonition against cruelty to animals, on the grounds that it tends to lead to cruelty to humans.

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Contemporary ethical theories seem to involve either refinements of consequentialist ethics or of deontological ethics, or perhaps attempts to combine them into a hybrid theory that retains the best of each while appealing to the other to plug up the gaps. Richard Brandt has argued for what he calls Extended Rule utilitarianism, in which there is a special and additional commitment made to just distribution of benefits and disbenefits, so than an institution such as slavery cannot be justified on the grounds that the balance of good over evil is greater under it than without it. A similar conclusion is drawn by William Alston, who endorses both a principle of beneficence and a principle of justice as cornerstones of his ideal morality, with justice (roughly the second formulation of Kant’s supreme principle) being given priority in most cases of conflict.

At this point in such a lecture as this, it is usual for the speaker to declare himself or herself for one of the options that have been enumerated and described. I shall

decline to do so, for two reasons. First, my interest is in getting you to understand your own attitudes and those of others with whom you may disagree as expressions of theoretical traditions with long and noble histories, and with extensive bodies of literature in their support, rather than merely as expressions of curious, regrettable (if not noxious) personality traits. Second, I think there is value in both the struggle to come to grips with one's own moral intuitions and trying to ground them theoretically, and in the nagging suspicion that when all is said and done, there is no ultimate truth perceivable in ethics, no absolute right and wrong which one may grasp, and no attainable point at which one may justifiably sit back and quit worrying about ethical questions. Perhaps the most we can hope for in dealing with the perplexing questions of ethics are not final, but simply good and better answers.

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There follows a listing of a few sources of material that may be of use to those in medicine, and particularly psychiatry, in coming to deal with ethical issues.

Warren T. Reich, ed. *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* (four volumes). New York: The Free Press, 1978.

This monumental work contains close to 2000 pages of material written by some 285 contributors, covering concrete ethical and legal problems (the therapeutic relationship, codes of professional ethics, health care, socio-political problems in biomedicine, research, mental health and behavioral issues, sexuality, contraception, sterilization, abortion, genetics, death and dying, etc.); basic concepts and principles; ethical theories; religious traditions; historical perspectives; and other disciplines bearing on bioethics.

H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. and Stuart F. Spicker, eds. *Mental Health: Philosophical Perspectives*. Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1978.

Contains proceedings of the fourth trans-disciplinary Symposium on Philosophy and Medicine (Galveston, Texas, May 16-18, 1976), with sections devoted to American legal perspectives on insanity; conceptual presuppositions of mental illness and mental complaints; phenomenological and speculative views of mental illness; acting freely and acting in good health; the myth of mental illness; reappraising the concepts of mental health and disease.

James M. Humber and Robert F. Almeder, eds. *Biomedical Ethics and the Law*. New York: Plenum Press, 1976.

Contains numerous important selections on abortion; mental illness; human experimentation ; human genetics; and dying.

Tom L. Beauchamp and LeRoy Walters, eds. *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics*. Encino, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Col, 1978.

Contains selections on ethical theory and concepts; bioethics as a field of ethics; health and disease; patient's rights and professional responsibilities [including the opinion from *Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California*]; abortion; definition and determination of death; euthanasia and the prolongation of life; allocation of scarce medical resources; experimentation [both general issues and those centering on specific subject groups]; behavior control; and genetic intervention and reproductive technologies. particularly good in presenting opposing views fairly.

Robert M. Veatch, *Case Studies in Medical Ethics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977.

Contains 112 case studies, grouped around 13 issue areas: values in health and illness; responsibility for the decision; duty to patient and society; health care delivery; confidentiality; truth-telling; abortion, sterilization, and contraception; genetics, birth, and the biological revolution; transplantation, hemodialysis, and the allocation of scarce resources; psychiatry and the control of human behavior; experimentation on human beings; consent and the right to refuse treatment; death and dying.

The Hastings Center Studies, vol. 1, no. 3 (1973) "The Concept of Health"; vol. 2, no 1, (January 1974): "Controlling Behavior through Drugs."

The Hastings Center Report, now in its 9th volume; contains timely articles and case studies on issues involving society, ethics, and the life sciences.

Philosophy and Public Affairs, now in its 9th volume: contains articles on a wider range of issues, with occasional ones on mental health and mental illness.

The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy, now in its 4th volume; each issue is devoted to a special topic. Vol 1, no. 3: "Concepts of health and Disease"; vol. 2, no. 2: "Mind-Body Quandaries"; vol. 2, no 3: "mental Health."

Bibliography of Bioethics, ed. by LeRoy Walters, now in its 3rd volume. Provides citations to several hundred sources' materials in the general field; well-organized and easy to use.

Bioethics Digest, published monthly by Information Planning Associates, now in its 4th volume. Provides citations and abstracts of selected articles in books and journals in 9 areas.

The Hastings Center Bibliography of Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences, published annually by the Institute of Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences. Provides selected citations and partial annotations of books and articles, year by year, on the side general and specific areas of bioethics.