

An Overview of Moral Theory

The question of how best to lead a moral life is one of the foundational questions of philosophy. Moral philosophers have, over the years, formulated theories designed to help people make the best moral decisions. Historically, many moral theories have been developed by philosophers, including relativism, divine command theory and egoism. However, the three most widely accepted and therefore prominent moral theories are; deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics. A short background to each of these theories is provided below.

Deontology

Key Philosopher:

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Deontology might best be described as a 'duty' or 'rules' based ethical theory, as it considers that it is rules that bind individuals to their duties. The theory contends that moral duties are grounded formalistically in the logic of practical

reason, encapsulated in the so-called categorical imperative: 'Always act on the maxim that can be universalised for all rational beings'. Deontology as a moral theory is most closely associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant. His contention was that we are all rational human beings and therefore worthy of dignity and respect. Kant believed that there are features of actions that determine whether or not they are right based on a respect for other humans. Therefore, for Kant, moral worth comes not from the consequences that flow from it, but from the intention with which the act is done. What matters is doing the right thing, because it is right in itself and not because of another motive. Deontology is therefore based on the premise that people should do the right thing for the right reasons, as expressed in terms of duties.

One of the main attractions of deontology is that it seems in theory to be clear about what is right and what is wrong in any given situation. Furthermore, as we have a duty to always do what is right it provides a clear moral guide to what action is appropriate in any moral situation. Unlike utilitarianism, deontology does not advocate the ends

justifying the means as the theory provides a sound basis for the inherent value of doing the right thing simply for its own sake. Another attraction of the theory is that because on the whole, moral duties do not change, there is a greater sense of predictability about what is acceptable behaviour. Right and wrong do not vary according to the circumstance or any consideration of consequence. The Kantian version of deontology regards good intentions and motives as values in themselves, whatever the outcome of any particular action.

Deontology has also come in for its own share of criticism and is believed by many to be an imperfect guide to morality. Firstly, and perhaps chiefly, a criticism is that deontology is hard to apply in practice. Not all situations are governed by pre-existing rules and therefore, the doctrine does not provide moral guidance when no rules are present. Furthermore, there is no universal agreement on a single standard for morality as actions are always case specific and reliant on individual judgement. Utilitarianists would challenge deontologists insofar as the latter ignore the fact that the consequences of dutiful actions might cause pain and suffering and that

consequences must also be considered before any particular course of action is taken.

Utilitarianism

Key Philosophers:

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Up until the mid-1950s, and the revival of virtue ethics, utilitarianism was seen as the main rival to deontological moral theory. Utilitarianism is the best known variant of so-called consequentialist moral theories, i.e. theories that justify moral decisions purely in terms of their beneficial consequences, in the same way as a 'tree is known by its fruit'. Jeremy Bentham, an English moral philosopher, founded the doctrine of utilitarianism. Bentham believed that the highest principle of morality is to maximise happiness, to ensure that overall and on balance pleasure is greater than pain. Bentham believed that it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong. This has become known as 'the greatest happiness principle', in which the moral worth of an action is determined only by its resulting outcome. For Bentham, every moral

argument must implicitly draw on the idea of maximising happiness. Bentham endorsed a concept of 'utility', with utility being whatever produces happiness and prevents suffering. Therefore, doing the right thing is to do whatever increases the utility that will in turn increase happiness.

There are several perceived benefits of utilitarianism as a moral theory. Firstly, at the time of Bentham and Mill, moral philosophy was generally considered the enforcer of rules and duties. In contrast, utilitarianism is believed to be grounded in actual effects, as moral action is seen as a way of improving real lives, and as not dependent on the metaphysical assumptions of deontology. Utilitarianism also seems to offer rules for particular situations and provides a helpful guide for how to act in any given moral dilemma. In addition, the theory allows for exceptions to the rule when warranted by the outcome. This has led to a belief that utilitarianism reflects cause and effect reasoning in science, and is therefore not simply a theoretical ideal, but can also be empirically tested.

There are several well-known objections to Bentham's theory of utilitarianism. These include the notion that the doctrine

does not take into account individual rights, as it wrongly reduces morality to being measured on a single scale of pleasure and pain. It was also seen as a quantitative and reductionist approach to ethics. John Stuart Mill attempted to defend utilitarianism and recast it as a more humane and less calculating doctrine. Mill argued in his book '*On Liberty*', that people should be free to do what they want as long as they don't harm others. However, the most persistent criticism is that consequences are hard to predict and therefore hard to calculate. For example, good intentions do not always lead to good outcomes, and therefore good intentions might actually lead to actions that turn out to be morally wrong, as they ultimately have a bad consequence. Calculating or even predicting utility also becomes increasingly hard in situations that involve a number of people and a number of alternatives, which is often the case. Others have critiqued Utilitarianism because it requires people to put too much distance between themselves and their own desires or commitments and is therefore alienating. Finally, the notion that the ends always justify the means has also been widely critiqued.

Virtue Ethics

Key Philosopher:

Aristotle (384-322 BC)

Virtue Ethics has recently undergone a resurgence and been seen as a viable alternative to utilitarianism and deontology. Modern virtue ethics takes its inspiration from Aristotelian notions of character and virtue. The ancient roots of virtue ethics lie in the writings of Plato but are more significantly located in the philosophy of Aristotle. Several concepts central to the way Aristotle understood ethics are also important components of modern virtue ethical theory. These concepts are outlined by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* and include *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing), *arete* (excellence or virtue) and *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom). Each of these will now be discussed in turn.

Eudaimonia

Aristotle thought the supreme good for human beings is *eudaimonia*, which is traditionally translated as either *happiness* or *flourishing*. *Eudaimonia*, for Aristotle, should therefore be the goal of all human beings. To flourish is to live and act well. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle

sought to understand the nature of a flourishing life. In particular, what components make up such a life and what control, if any, an individual has over it. He rejected the view that flourishing was about a life of sensual pleasure or wealth. Instead, for Aristotle, a flourishing life is about contemplation and the possession and practice of the virtues.

Arete

The key to Aristotle's ethics and understanding of what it means to flourish is *arete*, often understood as excellence or virtue. Persons with a fully developed set of *arete* (guided by *phronesis*, see below) are persons of the highest moral effectiveness (so-called *phronimoi*); they have all the virtues for a good life. Aristotle believed that virtues were 'states of character' rather than passions or facilities. Aristotle believed that people should aspire to moral virtues and be educated for 'excellence of character'. Virtue, for Aristotle was found in the middle ground between a deficiency and an excess of appetite, passion or desire. This influential idea is often referred to as 'the doctrine of the mean'. An example that Aristotle himself gives of the mean is that of courage, insofar as too little fear might lead to

being foolhardy and too much fear to cowardliness. Aristotle believed that virtues are developed through habit and so there is a requirement for individuals to constantly practice them. He stated: 'we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones' and that 'the moral virtues are neither by nor contrary to nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit'.

***Phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom)**

A final important component of Aristotle's understanding of ethics, which forms a central part of modern day virtue ethics, is *phronesis*. Translations of *phronesis* have included, amongst others, practical reasoning, practical wisdom, good sense, moral discernment, moral insight, and prudence. Aristotle defines *phronesis* as a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with actions that are good or bad for a human being. As has been previously discussed, virtues are more than tendencies to act in certain predetermined ways; they are excellences of character, which involve getting things right. For Aristotle it is *phronesis* that helps individuals get things right, as practical or moral wisdom: it is what helps

individuals to make the right judgment in any given situation. Aristotle understood that the requirements of different virtues can bring about conflict because they sometimes point to different courses of action. For example, should one be honest or kind when faced with having to comment on a piece of clothing that someone else has chosen, and that is not particularly flattering? Should one be loyal or honest when one learns of a friend's wrongdoing? However, he also believed that such conflict is only apparent as it may be resolved by those possessed of practical wisdom. Therefore, a brave person exercises practical wisdom when he or she judges that a given situation merits fear and decides how to respond correctly. The coward, in contrast, exercises no practical wisdom as he or she perceives an unthreatening situation as dangerous. The development of practical wisdom comes with time and through practice, Aristotle believed that knowing the best course of action would eventually become second nature.

Like the other moral theories, virtue ethics has also been critiqued. One criticism leveled is that it does not provide an adequate guide to what action should be undertaken in specific circumstances. The

charge goes that although virtue ethics sounds like a useful theory, it falls down in practice. Virtue ethics, it has been argued, does not help people answer such questions as; what sorts of actions are morally permitted and which ones are not; and, what are the duties or rules of virtue ethics that can be used in specific moral situations? Another critique of virtue ethics comes from 'situationists' who deny the stability of character virtues and insist that moral or other responses are dependent on particular situations. They challenge Aristotle's view that being properly habituated makes it more likely that an individual will engage in the right behaviour, under the right circumstances, and for the right reasons. Aristotle's belief has led virtue ethicists to contend that having acquired particular virtues, it is likely that an individual will engage in virtuous activities. Situationists disagree with Aristotle's belief that character traits are firm and unchangeable, and suggest that there are forces that come in to play, which are dependent on the particularities of the moral dilemma. Their main critique is that there is no strong predictive link between any global personality or character construct and overt behaviour in real life situations.

Virtue Ethics and Character Education

Character Education, inspired by Aristotelian virtue ethics, is becoming increasingly popular both in Britain as well as globally. Features of such an approach include ensuring that schooling:

- i) prioritises the education of the virtues
- ii) encourages the development of practical wisdom
- iii) has its end goal in individual and societal flourishing