

Examining Different Ethical Systems

In this session we will be focusing on two very different normative ethical systems known as *utilitarianism* and *ethical formalism*. Utilitarianism and formalism are often contrasted with one another based on the general type of ethical system each exemplifies. Utilitarianism is a *teleological* ethical system. The word teleological comes from the ancient Greek *telos*, meaning end or purpose. Formalism on the other hand is a *deontological* ethical system. Deontology comes from the Greek word *deon*, meaning duty. One system is concerned with ends, while the other is concerned with duty.

A teleological, or consequentialist theory holds that an action is morally right either if a person's doing it brings about good consequences, or if the action is of a kind which, if everyone did it, would have good consequences. The consequences of one's conduct are the ultimate basis for any judgment about the rightness or wrongness of that conduct. In either case, ultimately it is the goodness or badness of the end result of actions that make them right or wrong. In a consequentialist ethical system, the test of right and wrong actions consists in applying a standard of value to the consequences of the actions. If the consequences of someone's doing a particular action fulfill the standard of value, then the action is therefore right.

A deontological theory holds that an action is right if it accords with a moral rule, wrong if it violates such a rule. Moral rules are based on an ultimate principle of duty which, in contrast to teleological ethics, does not specify an end or purpose or consequence whose furtherance makes actions right. In a deontological ethical system the consequences of one's actions play no role in determining if the action is right or wrong. Deontologists hold that it is not the goodness or badness of the consequences of an action that make it right or wrong, but the *kind* of action it is. A person's motivation for acting play a big role in these ethical systems; if a person performs an act with good end results, but with the wrong intentions, that act has no moral worth.

Utilitarianism received its classical formulation in the writings of the late 18th, early 19th century British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill; these philosophers are known as *utilitarian's*. The basic concept of utilitarian ethics is, as the name suggests, the idea of utility; an act is right if it is useful in bringing about a *desirable* or *good* end, or an end that has *intrinsic* value. Utilitarian's ascribe to the Principle of Utility, what John Stuart Mill called "the greatest good for the greatest number". The difference between intrinsic and non-intrinsic or *derivative* values is as follows.

An intrinsic value is something valued for its own sake, and it is contrasted with an instrumental value. An instrumental, or derivative value, is something to be valued not as an

end in itself but as a means to other ends. As an example we can take the concept of 'health' and the act of going to the dentist. Health is an intrinsic value because it is an end worth pursuing for its own sake; the human organism will live a happier life in general if it is healthy, therefore health is worth pursuing for no other reason than to be healthy. Going to the dentist on the other hand is an action most people do not value for its own sake. Most people find a visit to the dentist office uncomfortable or even scary, and they would not go if they did not value it as a means to some other end, namely having healthy teeth (an intrinsic value). A visit to the dentist *derives* its value from the ability to promote the non-derivative or intrinsic value of having healthy teeth.

Classical utilitarian's such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill held "pleasure" and "happiness" to be the standard of intrinsic value by which the goodness of an actions consequences are judged. If an act brings about the maximum utility (pleasure, or happiness) to *everyone* affected (including the person acting) by the action, it is the proper course to take (utilitarianism is thus contrasted with altruism, which takes *only* the others wellbeing into account and *not* the person acting). Basically a utilitarian acts according to what will bring about the greatest amount of happiness to everyone involved. So what could go wrong?

Some common criticisms to utilitarianism are as follows. It is impossible to do the calculation of utility required by utilitarianism because the true consequences of an action are inherently unknowable. Philosopher Daniel Dennett describes this as the *Three Mile Island* effect. The Three Mile Island accident was a partial nuclear meltdown that occurred in 1979 in one of the nuclear reactors in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania. It was the worst accident in U.S. commercial nuclear power plant history. While the accident exposed many to harmful radiation and cost over \$1 billion to clean up (which would lead classical utilitarian's to say it is bad), Dennett points out that not only is it impossible to assign a precise utility value to the incident, it is impossible to know whether, ultimately, the near-meltdown that occurred was a good or bad thing. He suggests that it would have been a good thing if plant operators learned lessons that prevented future serious incidents

Utilitarianism ignores justice. Since the greatest *common* good is the goal of utilitarianism, this allows for *individual* rights to be ignored. Take for instance if you have 5 terminally ill hospital patients who are each in need of a different organ (heart, liver, kidney, etc.) to save their lives, and you have 1 "donor" who has all the organs the others need and happens to be a perfect 'match' for the others. According to utilitarianism, since saving 5 lives is 'worth' more than saving 1 (it will bring about the greatest amount of happiness), the correct course of action is to sacrifice the individual to save the many. Another common criticism is that it ignores personal relationships, for instance if sacrificing your child will bring about the greatest common good, then it is the 'right' thing to do, end of story.

In contrast with the consequentialism of the utilitarian's, let's look at deontological systems. To illustrate the difference between teleological systems (such as utilitarianism) and deontological ones (such as ethical formalism), let's take the example telling a lie about someone at work, and getting them fired because of it. According to utilitarianism, the action *telling a lie*, cannot be known to be right or wrong until the consequences of that action are understood (someone getting fired). A deontological system, on the other hand, applies moral rules to action types and judges the rightness or wrongness of a particular action according to how it falls under the rules. So we can tell whether the act in question is right or wrong independently of our knowing whether its consequences are good or bad. In the case of lying about a coworker, telling a lie is a *type of action* that is always wrong, it does not matter what the consequences are.

The 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant had a profound influence on philosophy, in particular moral philosophy. In his book *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant states that the ultimate criterion for the validity of moral rules must be "pure", or made *a priori*, free of any empirical considerations. This means that you should be able to determine the rightness or wrongness of an action independent of any particular details, or consideration as to the consequences.

Kant in his *Principles*, has what he calls "three propositions of morality". The first proposition describes what kind of motive or reason for acting an individual must have to be properly called a morally good person. The person of good will not only acts in accordance with duty, he acts for the sake of duty. This means that his sole motive for doing what is right is his recognition of the fact that it is the right thing to do. He does what is right just because it is right, and for no other reason. Take for instance someone saving a drowning child, if the person saves the child *because* he wants the praise and recognition of others, then the act has no moral worth, even if the child is saved.

Kant's second proposition of morality is an attack on utilitarianism, it describes the moral worth or value of the good will. Because the good will has such unconditional worth, its value cannot depend on the bringing about of any ends or purpose. Kant is not interested in instrumental value; he is looking for *unconditional* value. Kant is famous for saying that we should treat each other as ends in ourselves, and never as means only. So in other words we should not use people, but instead value their individuality.

The third proposition of morality describes the inner attitude that governs a person's state of mind when he is motivated by a good will. The attitude is not that of kindness, benevolence, or love; for these have to do with a person's inclinations, not with the will to do ones duty. So you do not right actions because they make you feel better, you do them because you obey the Moral Law. Kant believed in the superiority of reason over the emotions and human desires.

Kant is famous for his central philosophical concept of the *categorical imperative*. According to Kant, human beings simply occupy a special place in creation, and morality can be summed up in one ultimate commandment of reason, or imperative, from which all duties and obligations derive. This commandment is “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law”. This means that for every action you take, you should stop and ask yourself “would I want everyone in the world to act this way if placed in a similar circumstance?”. The implications for the imperative are huge.

Some common criticisms of Kant’s ethics are that the formula for universal law is not very practical, and either provides no meaningful answer or gives an obviously wrong answer to moral dilemmas. Take for example someone hiding Jewish people in their house in Nazi Germany and the Nazi’s asking the person if they are hiding someone. According to Kant’s ethics it is always wrong to lie, so the right action would be to give up the people you are hiding, even if it results in their deaths. Another criticism of Kant’s ethics is that because they place such emphasis on the ability to reason, they ignore the needs of non-human animals, who Kant considered animals as mere things not deserving of moral status.