

Normative ethics have historically been partitioned into three approaches: virtue theories, duty-based theories, and consequentialist theories. Most of our cases will appeal to one, if not multiple, of the principles housed within these approaches. It is true that to effectively appeal to these principles, you need to know what they entail, so short of a full semester's moral philosophy class, I want to at least provide you a) a small amount of history with which to contextualize the principle, b) an articulation of the principle itself that would be serviceable in a round, c) a quintessential example that unambiguously highlights the principle's upside, and d) a damning objection or counterexample. Once we have discussed these three approaches at length, I will give you a brief description (largely just definitions) of some of the other popular justifications provided in an IEB round.

I. Virtue ethics

- a. Virtue ethics is the most classical approach of the three, having its roots in the works of Aristotle. Aristotle was a student of Plato, who was himself the student of Socrates. His predecessors, and their pondering how "one ought to live" undeniably influenced Aristotle's virtue ethics which centers around qualities necessary to living "a good life". These qualities he called virtues and were defined to be means between extremes. For instance, courage – one of the cardinal virtues – is the mean between the extremes of cowardice and foolhardy ambition. Notably, these means are not arithmetic in the sense that they are equidistant from the two extremes (in the above example courage is much nearer foolhardy than it is cowardice), instead it is just a more moderate version of each extreme.
- b. An appeal to virtue ethics then is really an appeal to certain qualities that the user views would be conducive to living a good life – to being virtuous. This appeal should be specific – it should list the precise virtue and why it is conducive to living a good life. Often this latter explanation can involve explaining what extremes this virtue is the mean between.
- c. For instance, if we condemn a person for abandoning long-standing plans with a friend, we might justify this condemnation by appealing to the virtue of loyalty as a mean between the extremes of blind adherence and undependable. In short, any notion of the good life – whatever it may entail – will include friends that are loyal to one another.
- d. There are two main critiques of virtue ethics: 1) the virtues can conceivably conflict with each other, and 2) it invites case-specific subjectivity as to whether an action is properly virtuous.
 - i. For instance, courage and patience are both virtues, but we can imagine a scenario where these come into direct conflict. For instance, what about a coworker insulting a friend in front of me? Courage may demand that I am willing to immediately confront this coworker in an outspoken fashion. On the other hand, patience may demand that even if I do confront the coworker, it be in a more deferent manner. How are we to prioritize one over the other?

- ii. Even when virtues do not conflict, we may still have some disagreement as to what constitutes a virtue in a given context. For instance, humility is a virtue that is widely agreed upon. However, though I may interpret this as a being a virtue dictating personality and manner of speech, another may insist that this informs how one ought to dress. Who is right? Can we both be right? Virtue ethics doesn't really tell us.

II. Duty-Based (Deontology)

- a. When most people think about morality, this is the type of morality they imagine. They conjure up a list of rules and regulations that one must abide by, even if they don't particularly like it, because it is what is demanded of right action. Put another way, morality confers duties on its practitioners. Deontology tries to systematically delimit the boundaries of these duties. Importantly, often times these duties care more about a person's intentions than they do consequences. Potentially the most well-known Deontological Framework was Kant's Categorical Imperative.
- b. There are actually two *formulations* of the Categorical Imperative. They are really just two sides to the same coin, but it could be useful to know each and apply them specifically.
 - i. The first is the universal law imperative. This argues that an action is unjust if it could not be universalized, or applied to all other moral agents, without contraction.
 - ii. The second is the "ends not means" imperative. For Kant, all humans have rationality which instills them with dignity and that dignity ensures that we are not mere tools. More carefully, an action is unjust if it treats a moral agent as a *mere* means to an end rather than an end in and of itself.
- c. Kant's famous prohibition against lying (or purposeful deception of any type) can be defended by each of these. On the one hand, it is logically impossible to universalize purposeful deception. Since deception hinges on another's believing us at our word, if everyone starts deceiving to the point where public trust is eroded, deception becomes self-defeating. On the other hand, purposefully deceiving another uses them as a mere means to your own end (likely manipulating their beliefs) rather than recognizing them as an end.
- d. The main problem with the Categorical Imperative is that it is categorical! It has no work arounds or special cases when it can be ignored. This leads to the famous thought experiment of a murder at the door. Here, a murder is on the loose and his would-be victim comes to seek asylum at your front door. You willingly oblige and hide them in an upstairs closet. However, fifteen minutes later, the murder shows up at the door asking if you know the whereabouts of the victim. Most have the strong conviction that we must lie to protect the welfare of the victim and because we owe very little in the way of honesty to such a loathsome murder. However, Kantians are compelled to tell the murder precisely where the victim was hidden because one cannot universalize deceit

even for some commendable alternative motive. This rigidity is deeply troubling and plagues much of strict Kantian Deontology.

- i. A more recent complication with Kant's framework is his deriving dignity from rationality which seems to exclude large swathes of moral agents, such as lower non-human animals.

III. Consequentialism

- a. The consequentialist's viewpoint is seemingly very simple (and that simplicity can be appealing). Consequences determine the justifiability of an action. Otherwise put, an action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favorable than unfavorable. Consequentialist theories became popular in the 18th century by philosophers who wanted a quick way to morally assess an action by appealing to experience, rather than by appealing to gut intuitions or long lists of questionable duties. In fact, the most attractive feature of consequentialism is that it appeals to publicly observable consequences of actions. The single most popular subtype of consequentialism is utilitarianism. This was advanced, in slightly different forms by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.
- b. Utilitarianism, at a broad level, holds that what is moral is whatever promotes utility (normally defined as some form of pleasure while discouraging pain) for the greatest number of people. However, Bentham and Mill differed slightly in their versions of utilitarianism. Bentham argued for *act-utilitarianism* whereby the consequences were judged on a case-by-case bases from the results of an action. Unlike act utilitarianism, which weighs the consequences of each particular action, rule-utilitarianism offers a litmus test only for the morality of moral rules, such as "stealing is wrong." Adopting a rule against theft clearly has more favorable consequences than unfavorable consequences for everyone.
- c. Therefore, utilitarianism would allow us to condemn the disloyal friend on account of the despair it may cause a moral agent. Likewise, it allows for a rule permitting the deception of a murder because in most cases this deception will result in a better outcome than truthfulness.
- d. Objections
 - i. A callous calculation
 - 1. Aging violinist -- Here a once prolific yet not aging violinist is brought into the hospital for a routine procedure. While anesthetized, five altruistic world leaders arrive at the hospital for emergency surgery -- each needing a different internal organ. If we compare the public service able to be advanced by these individuals a striking disparity arises. The violinist certainly was once able to boast adding musical value to their listeners lives, but insofar as they are now past their prime, it is unlikely that they can function in even that capacity anymore. By contrast five world leaders with altruist ambitions are capable of affecting immense change at a global scale. The critique here is that the staunch utilitarian would be forced to say ``scrap the violinist for

parts to save the world leaders, as this would ostensibly maximize global pleasure and minimize pain". Yet this injury to what we view as a basic human right -- the right not to be unwillingly sacrificed and used (even for the greater good) -- seems an affront to our ethical sensibilities. It seems that utilitarianism can be too callous.

2. Happiness pump – If it were possible to foist all the world's complications and pains on one individual and thereby allow the remaining 7 billion some-odd individuals to live in perfect bliss, utilitarianism would again seemingly justify this.
 - ii. Moral Luck – People can unintentionally produce good outcomes, but utilitarianism would be forced to commend people who are just bad at being bad.

So what about the other moral theories (principles)? Again, I won't go into as much detail here, but we likely will appeal to some subset of these throughout the semester. Of course, if you have questions, feel free to pull me aside!

- 1) Rawls's Veil of Ignorance – Imagine stripping yourself of all identifying characteristics – race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, political and religious affiliations. Behind such a veil of ignorance, Rawls argues that we would be in the most just place to decide on equitable treatment of others. It is worth noting that this was originally written in a text aimed at discussing distributive justice (how best to allocate goods in a fair society), but we may appeal to the intuition in more broad contexts. It is also worth being aware that Rawls himself believes that most people, when placed behind the Veil, would protect the most vulnerable in society because this could conceivably be anyone when we are behind the Veil. Therefore, when we apply this principle, it is normally in a "walk a mile in another's shoes" type style.
- 2) Autonomy and the Harm Principle – The principle of autonomy holds that rational moral agents should be able to determine their own actions within reasonable constraints. This constraint is the harm principle which states that autonomy is checked when the would-be exercise of that autonomy would result in objective harm to another moral agent. Otherwise put, "your right to swing your first stops at my nose".
 - a. Fully informed consent usually goes hand in hand with principles of autonomy and harm
- 3) Nonmaleficence/Beneficence – the duty to do no harm, and the *stronger* obligation towards charity or "good"
- 4) Social Contract Theory – Participants in a society agree (either tacitly or otherwise) to forfeit some of their liberties in exchange for the benefits of organized society. Various versions exist.