PUTTING ETHICAL THEORY TO WORK

In this lesson, we'll be looking at four historically important approaches to ethics, and how these approaches can help you become a better ethical decision-maker. By the end of lesson, you should be able to answer the following:

1. What exactly is **consequentialism** or **utilitarianism?** How does this differ from **ethical egoism,** with which its sometimes mistaken?
2. What is **deontology,** and how does it differ from consequentialism? What's the big deal about Kant's **categorical imperative?**
3. What is **virtue ethics,** and its close relative, **natural law theory?** How does one become more virtuous?
4. How does the **social contract tradition** approach ethics? What are the advantages of this approach? The disadvantages?
5. Besides ethical theory, what else does one need to consider when attempting to resolve an ethical dilemma?

It's important to remember that the ethical theories we'll be leaning about today are intended to be *tools* to help you make better decisions. So, you don't (necessarily) need to think that a particular theory gets "everything right" in order to make good use of it. Instead, you'll want to consider which sorts of approaches work best in which sorts of situations, what the limitations of each approach is, and how the different approaches can be combined to make good decisions.
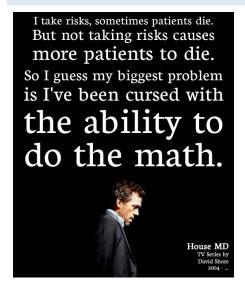
ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING: AN OVERVIEW

While the ethical theories we'll be learning about have intimidating sounding names, the basic ideas behind them should be familiar to nearly everyone, regardless of culture, religion, etc. The basic ideas are as follows:

1. An ethical action is one that, in the long run, do as much good (for as many people) as possible. My happiness isn't any more important than anyone else's. (**Consequentialism)**
2. An ethical action should respect other people's general rights as human beings, and their more specific rights as my clients, family members, coworkers, etc. It's wrong to use force or deception to achieve my goals**. (deontology)**
3. An ethical action should reflect the sort of person I want to be. People aren't born "good" or "bad," but become so by repeatedly practicing good/bad actions. **(Virtue ethics).**
4. An ethical action follows the sorts of rules that everyone would *agree* to follow, if they were allowed to choose without fear or bias. Ethics is, in essence, a sort of agreement to "play by the rules." **(Social contract theory).**

In what follows, we'll be looking at each of these approaches in a little more detail.

CONSEQUENTIALISM: THINKING LONG-TERM

I take risks, sometimes patients die. But not taking risks causes more patients to die. So I guess my biggest problem is I've been cursed with the ability to do the math.

House MD
TV Series by
David Shore
2004 - …

Consequentialism holds that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends only on the consequences. Historically, the most influential version of consequentialism is **utilitarianism** which states that an action is morally right if and only if it maximizes happiness, and minimizes suffering, for everyone affected by the action. Utilitarians are, in some circumstances, will to sacrifice the few to save the many. So, for example, a utilitarian would likely be willing to kill one innocent person to save 20 people.

Advantages: Consequentialism in probably the simplest ethical theory, and it can serve as a good "baseline" theory, since almost everyone (regardless of religion, culture, etc.) will agree that things like happiness and suffering matter. Consequentialism also does a good job with "big picture" social issues, where it tries to balance **efficiency** (the more stuff we can produce, the better off we will be) and **equality** (as a rule of thumb, relatively equal distributions make people happier than

highly unequal ones). For this reason, consequentialism plays a major role in public policy as it regards healthcare, economics, business, etc.

Disadvantages: While consequentialism is a simple theory, it can be tough to apply in practice, since it requires we make long-term predictions about the effects of our actions. Many critics have also argued that it is too demanding (i.e., it requires we devote our lives to helping the worst off, since this is what "maximizes happiness") and that it lead us to treat others unjustly (when we sacrifice someone "for the greater good"). While many critics think that consequentialism captures *part* of what it means to behave ethically, they argue that it also leaves something fundamental out.

A Common Confusion—Egoism v. Utilitarianism: When people first hear that utilitarians care only about "happiness," they sometimes think that is a *selfish* theory, which justifies doing whatever you want. Nothing could be further from the truth. Utilitarians (unlike egoists) care about *everyone's* happiness, and not merely your happiness. In fact, one common criticism of utilitarianism is that it is far too demanding, since it seems to require that people donate massive amounts to alleviate poverty (since your loss of happiness will be more than made up for by the happiness this would bring to other).

Example: Dr. Gregory House (the lead character of the TV show *House MD*) is a great example of a consequentialist. For those who haven't watched the show, he is a brilliant physician who cares about exactly one thing: curing the patient. In pursuit of this goal, he regularly lies to patients, breaks into their houses, breaks hospital rules and regulations, mistreats his staff, and so on. He thus demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of consequentialism: he gets "results," but only by doing things that other people find intuitively "wrong." House also illustrates a danger with consequentialist thinking: it can be tougher than it looks. House's brilliance ensures that the vast majority of his seemingly immoral gambles "pay off," and end up saving lives. However, in real life, there are all too many consequentialists who only *think* they are as brilliant as House, but actually make decisions that *harm* people.

DEONTOLOGY: FOLLOW THE RULES

Deontology holds that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on factors besides (or in addition to) the consequences. So, for example, some deontologists hold that it is *always* wrong to kill an innocent person, even if this was the only way to save ten other innocent people. Simple versions of deontology include things like the **Golden Rule** ("treat others as you would like to be treated") or rules such as the Ten Commandments (don't murder, steal, etc.). In academic philosophy, the most influential version of deontology is due to Immanuel Kant, whose **categorical imperative** requires that we do NOT treat people as "mere means" for our own purposes, but always as "ends in themselves" (who have their *own* desires, interests, and life plans). Among other things, Kant argued that this forbids our deceiving or tricking people, or using force to make them go along with our plans.

Advantages: Deontology does a good job of accounting for the importance of certain agent-specific **duties** (parents have a "duty" to care for their *own* children) and **rights** (innocent people have a "right" not to be unjustly killed) that consequentialism sometimes seems to overlook. In comparison to consequentialism, deontology can be relatively easy to apply in practice, since it doesn't require that we try to make predictions about the distant future. Finally, depending on which version of deontology is adopted, the theory may be less demanding, and leave more room for us to do things in our life other than worry about morality.

Disadvantages: In comparison to consequentialism (which doesn't leave much room for interpretation, though the right thing to do will obviously vary according to one's particular situation), there are a large number of deontological theories, and these vary radically according to culture and religion of those who defend them. So, for example, some deontological theories hold that we

have almost *no* duties to help strangers ("the rich have no duty to give money to poor"), while others (such as most religious versions of deontology) hold that we have much stronger obligations in this regard. A committed deontologist will need to give an argument why her particular version of deontology should be preferred to others—the mere fact that it "feels right" to her (and to people like her) obviously won't count for much.

A Common Confusion—Deontologists and Consequences. Pure deontologists like Kant argue that the consequences of an actions are *completely irrelevant* to judging it's rightness or wrongness. People often find this counterintuitive, since we tend to think that actions like lying or killing are wrong, at least in part, because of how they affect others (lies might lead the person lied to to make a bad decision, killing leads to a person being dead). Kant argues this is a bad approach, however, since the effects of our actions almost always depend on factors outside of our control.

Example: Why Superman Doesn't Kill. A staple scene in many action movies gives the hero of the movie a chance to kill the (temporarily defenseless) villain, which the hero refuses to take, because it would "make them just like the villain." So, for example, Superman refuses to kill Lex Luther, even though it would be easy for him to do so, and Lex will *obviously* do bad things if he isn't killed. According to a consequentialist, this sort of thinking is absurd—after all, the hero has every reason to believe that, if the villain manages to escapes (which is always a possibility), they will inevitably kill a large number of people. However, the deontologist feels that there are some rules—such as "don't kill a defenseless person"—that simply cannot be broken, regardless of how bad the long-term consequences may be.

VIRTUE ETHICS: BECOMING A BETTER PERSON

Virtue ethics holds that the right action is the one that a *virtuous person* would do in this situation. Where utilitarianism and deontology focus on "doing the right thing," virtue ethics focuses on "being a better person." In general, this means choosing a *role model* (who may or may not be a real person), and then *practicing* behaving like this person until we can do so consistently. Virtue ethics requires that we try to acquire a HABIT of DOING THE RIGHT THING for the RIGHT REASONS. So, for example, being an *honest* person (a virtue) requires that one tell the truth without second thought, and that we do so in manner appropriate to the situation (no telling three-year-olds that Santa isn't real). It also requires that we do so *because* we think the other person deserves to know and not because we are afraid of getting caught lying, or we want to get something out of the other person. Becoming honest is NOT something that can be done in a day (in fact, the first few times you tell the truth in a difficult situation, it will be pretty uncomfortable). However, the more one practices, the easier it will become.

Advantages: Virtue ethics may deal better with the nuance of personal relationships (parent-child, romantic, friendship, doctor-patient, etc.) than the other ethical theories, since it leaves quite a bit more "wiggle room" on how one ought to behave in a particular situation. It also helps to show *why* we should care about being ethical in the first place, and on how our social environment can shape our character, which is something the other theories don't talk much about. For virtue ethicists like Aristotle and Confucius, there was no clear disconnect between "what's good for me" and "what's good to others." For both theorists, the best way to lead a truly happy life is to practice being generous, courageous, honest, etc. And this, in turn, helps makes *other* people's lives better, and makes it much easier for *them* to be virtuous. (Short version: Virtuous individuals create a virtuous society, which then makes it easier for *more* people to be virtuous.)

Disadvantages: Consequentialists and deontologists often complain that virtue ethics is vague to the point of uselessness. So, for example, plenty of people through history have said they were trying to be more like the Buddha, Mohammed, or Jesus, but these people often had wildly different ideas of how one should behave. A similar problem concerns the choice of one's "role model" or one's decision about what particular character traits count as virtues or vices. Aristotle thought one should aim to be like a brave Greek warrior, Confucius like an honest, competent bureaucrat; and different religions have held up various gods, saints,

etc. Like deontology (and unlike consequentialism), there is simply no guarantee that one person's virtue ethics looks anything like another person's. An advocate of virtue ethics will need to provide reasons for thinking that his choice of role model is *correct*.

Common Misunderstandings. Other ethical theories tend to make a sharp distinction between two senses of leading a "good" life. On the one hand, a person might have a "good" life by being happy and successful; on the other hand, they might lead a "good" life by treating others well, and following the demands of morality. Virtue ethicists often argue that these two things are, at bottom, the same thing, given the way human biology, society, and psychology actually works. They think that true happiness (sometimes called **eudaimonia)** is only possible if one is generous, kind, brave, and so on. Virtue ethics is closely related to a number of other approaches to ethics, including **natural law theory** (which is often closely associated with the religious belief that humans have the natures they do because God made them this way) and **care ethics** (which identifies the most important virtue as that of *caring* for others).

Example: In the Harry Potter series, much of Harry's, Hermione's, and Ron's moral education at Hogwarts resembles virtue ethics. They have certain role models (Dumbledore, their teachers, the Weasley parents.) who they aspire to be like, and they are given frequent opportunities to *practice* the virtues they see in these people. In the beginning, the children occasionally make mistakes, and are given opportunities to try again. By the end of the series, they are capable of making complex, stressful moral decisions without outside help. By contrast, Voldemoort (the villain of the series) shows the opposite progression: he begins life by practicing minor misdeeds, which quickly becomes a habit. Over time, this habit of behaving viciously leads him to committing a number of serious crimes, for which he no longer feels any regret. Moreover, just as virtue ethics predicts, one's environment can make a big difference on how one turns out. It is (relatively) *easy* for the Weasley children to develop virtues, given the role models provided by their parents. By contrast, Draco Malfoy (the child of a Death Eater) finds it much more difficult. Finally, virtue ethicists would point out that the virtuous characters (even Snape!) seem to be happier than their selfish, cruel competitors.

SOCIAL CONTRAST THEORY: FOLLOW THE RULES YOU AGREE TO

Social contract theory starts from the idea that ethics can be most usefully seen as a sort of agreement between rational people. So, for example, suppose that Bob and Belinda live on neighboring sheep farms, and don't especially like one another. All things being equal, Bob would like to steal Belinda's sheep and Belinda would like to steal Bob's. However, neither Bob nor Belinda likes lives living in continuous fear of having their own sheep stolen (or even worse, of being attacked or killed). So, they make an agreement that each will respect the property, and the life, of the other. This sort of idea explains why it is morally wrong to steal, lie, kill, and so on: on the whole, most of us would much prefer to live in a society whether these things aren't done to us. So, we shouldn't do them to others. Social contract theories emphasize that this "agreement" generally isn't explicitly given. Instead, it's "tacit," "implicit," or "hypothetical" agreement that comes as part of living in a society. The social contract theories of **Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacque Rousseau** played a major role in inspiring the democratic movements in the U.S., France, and Britain.

Advantages. Social contract theory draws a connection between abstract moral norms and the more concrete agreements and laws with which most of us are familiar. It also provides a helpful way for approaching ethical issues ("is this the sort of rule that a group of unbiased, rational people would actually agree to follow?"). Finally, it provides a helpful way of thinking about the source of *authority*. So, for example, social contract theory the *reason* political leaders have power is to use it on behalf of the citizens (since this is what the citizens would *agree* to). One might say something about the source of a CEO's authority (which derives from the owners and community), or even of the right to private property (which exists in order to enable an efficient allocation of goods and services).

Disadvantages: Critics have argued that the rational, self-interested people assumed by social contract theory fail to capture a lot of our moral lives. So, for example, it's unclear how social contract theory can take account of the interests of young children, animals, those with cognitive disabilities, and so on. It's also unclear how social contract theory might deal with the fact that people might have deeply different ideas of what counts as a "fair" society, or what rules ought to be agreed to. Historically, social contract theory has "left out" lots of people (slaves, women, Native Americans), on the ground that their preferences weren't "rational." While none of these are fatal objections, it's important to remember that a law/rule that seems perfectly rational to you might not seem so good to someone from a different background.

Example: In the *Hunger Games* books and movies, a tyrannical government places teens in isolated areas and forces them to fight each other to death. This resembles Thomas Hobbes' (a famous social contract theorist) description of the hypothetical **state of nature,** before people had made agreements to follow moral rules. The *Hunger Games* also provides an illustration of how contractarians see the *benefits* of behaving morally: it is only when the children (and later, the adults) agree to put aside their differences and fight their real enemy (the government) that they are able to make progress. However, they also point to problems with social contract theory. In particular, while contractarians might be right that people benefit *overall* from living in a society where people "follow the rules," it is nevertheless be the case that an rational individual can make him- or herself better off by breaking the rules, and harming others. This is especially true of powerful people, who can often "get away with it." So, near the conclusion of the books, Katniss (the heroine) discovers the leaders of the rebellion have engaged in many of the same sorts of immoral behaviors that the old leaders had done.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Suppose that you can distribute 10 points to represent how much of your personal "ethics" is captured by the following theories. You can give all 10 points to one theory, give 2 point to five theories, or whatever:
   a. _____ Concern about the long-term consequences of an action for everyone who might be affected by it (consequentialism).
   b. _____ Duties to respect and foster autonomy, and respect others as persons, and to respect their rights (deontology).
   c. _____ Behaving in the manner that a perfectly virtuous person would—ensuring that you do the right things for the right *reasons,* and consciously practicing so that this becomes easier over (virtue ethics).
   d. _____ Obeying the precepts of a particular religion, even in the case that you can't see any independent justification for these rules (divine command theory).
   e. _____ Doing what's best for you, even if you know this might harm others. (ethical egoism)
2. Based on the above results, give a more detailed description of how you make (different types of) ethical decisions? What are your strengths as an ethical decision-maker? Your weaknesses?
3. Do you think that studying ethics can help you improve your ethical decision-making in practical cases? Why or why not? In your answer, consider what sorts of experiences have helped you develop as an ethical thinker.

FOR FURTHER READING: ONLINE SOURCES

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