

THREE KINDS OF NORMATIVE THEORY

Hello, everyone. We're going to spend most of our time looking at specific cases of human conduct—the kinds of decisions people make in the concrete situations they face from day-to-day. Early on, however, it is helpful to take a broad, general look at the structure of ethical thinking, providing a context within which we can pursue our application of moral theories to "real life."

So, in the most general sense, what's involved in cases of human behavior that we might wish to evaluate? Well, somebody does something that has some result. There are three things included here: Who we are, what we do, and what happens. First, there is a person or agent, someone is capable of making a deliberate decision about what to do. Then there's the action that person performs, the deed itself. And, finally, that action leads to an outcome, some change in the world, for better or for worse. Normative theories—that is, philosophical accounts of the foundation for judgments about what is right and what is wrong—each fall into one of three categories as it places its evaluative emphasis on just one of these three basic features of the situation.

So, first, deontological theories maintain that certain actions simply are right (or wrong) in and of themselves. We are duty-bound to do certain things (and not to do certain others) just because such actions are instances of moral rules that we are obliged to obey. This leaves open the question of where the rules come from and there are several alternatives. We will use this as our example here, enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant who argued that as rational agents, we all figure this out for ourselves, recognizing an obligation to do only what can reasonably be applied as a universal law of respect for the dignity of humanity, with no room for exceptions. According to Kant, right actions are always intended to treat humanity as an end, never as a means.

Now, the nice thing about this approach to ethics is that it claims to provide perfect certainty about what we should do. There's no need to fret about how things might turn out or even to consider how my actions affect other people. So long as I follow the rules, I'm doing the right thing. It might get tricky if the rules disagree with each other, creating conflicting duties, but most theories, including Kant's, offer some way of discerning which actions are more obligatory than others. The bigger problem in practical life is that deontological theories often seem to be rigid and absolute: there's no "wiggle room" here for adjusting our actions to the specific circumstances, and, at least some of the time, strictly following the accepted rules can have disastrous consequences.

So then, the second type of normative theory focuses instead on the outcomes of human conduct. What matters most for a teleological or consequentialist theory is how everything turns out in the long run, whether the world becomes a better or a worse place because of what we do. On this view, what makes actions right or wrong is nothing other than the good or bad that those actions produce. During the nineteenth century, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill defended utilitarian ethics, a version consequentialism according to which actions are right just when they tend to produce more pleasure and less pain in the lives of everyone who is affected by them. We should always do whatever will result in the greatest happiness of the greatest number of sentient beings everywhere.

This approach has some clear advantages. Who wouldn't want to make the world a better place? And since everybody can observe what really happens as a result of our actions, there is at least some hope of arriving at a public consensus about right and wrong. What's more, we have greater flexibility in our decision-making here, always keeping an eye out for how things will turn out. But that can be a problem, too. According to this

view, we are obliged to calculate the likely effects of our actions, and the truth is that we aren't very good at predicting what's going to happen in the future. Sometimes we have to wait a long time to see the long-term consequences, and according to a consequentialist, until then, we won't know for sure whether or not we did well.

Finally, the third kind of theory is Virtue Ethics, which places all of the emphasis on the moral agent, that is, the individual human being who performs the actions to be evaluated. The goal of life on this view is to become a good person, one who habitually acts in ways that express excellence or virtue in every aspect. The traits of character we develop are what really count for moral judgment. We'll look at this approach more closely later in the course, with Aristotle's view that each of us should aim at self-sufficiency through careful practice of moderation in all things.

This way of thinking about moral decisions nicely encourages us to see ourselves as engaged in the continuing task of becoming better people, even if we occasionally make mistakes. Effective education can contribute to our progress by promoting the formation of good habits, and of course we are entirely responsible for what we make of ourselves. Of course, each of us may have a different notion of what personal qualities make someone virtuous, and that's in the wrong hands could make it easy for selfish individuals to look out only for themselves with disregard for the welfare of everyone else.

So, then, these are the three types of normative theory—deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics. Each of them offers some insight into the evaluation of human conduct, and most of us, at one time the other, make use of each of the three approaches. That is, when we are faced with a moral decision, we tend to take into account what duty requires of us, how things are likely to turn out, and what will make us better people. Much of the time, these three ways of looking at things converge on a single course of action, which we can then pursue confidently. But in tough cases and in the phase of moral disagreement, it's very helpful if everyone discussing the issue holds clearly in mind exactly which of the three approaches to ethics is being applied.

Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](#).