

A TYPOLOGY OF MORAL THEORIES¹

An adequate moral theory will give us answers to at least two different sorts of moral questions. The first concern the moral evaluation of agents, states of affairs, intentions, relationships, etc. as good or bad, valuable, neutral or disvaluable. These questions are addressed by a theory of value (sometimes called 'a theory of the good'). The second kind concern the moral evaluation of actions as right or wrong, required, optional or forbidden. These are addressed by a theory of obligation (sometimes called 'a theory of right'). The fundamental distinction among moral theories concerns the way in which they relate these two different "sub-theories": axiological theories (more properly called 'axiologically-based theories') hold that considerations of rightness are determined entirely by considerations of value, whereas deontological theories hold other factors to be relevant as well.² (A pure deontological theory would hold that considerations of value are never relevant to deontic judgments, but the term is not restricted to this pure form.)

This way of taxonomizing moral theories will surprise those who have become accustomed to taking the fundamental distinction to concern the relationship between rightness and consequences: they will draw the line between 'consequentialist' theories which hold rightness to depend entirely on consequences, and 'deontological' theories which deny this. But this will not do as an interesting distinction. While a moral theory consisting only of a fundamental prohibition on killing is a paradigm of a purely deontological theory, it determines permissibility by appeal to the consequences of an action: for example, the act of firing a gun is prohibited if it has the consequence of killing a person.

This problem is rectified by understanding consequentialism as the view that the permissibility of action is determined entirely by the moral value of the consequences, for paradigmatic deontological theories do not allow this. (Whatever negative value is attached to violation of the prohibition on killing, for example, a theory that said to maximize value would allow killing in order to prevent more killing in the future. Such a theory would not be deontological.) However, to draw the fundamental distinction between theories that determine rightness entirely by the value of the consequences and those that do not has an odd consequence. It leaves theories that determine rightness by appealing only to considerations of value, but to the value of features other than consequences, within the scope of deontological theories. It makes no

¹The taxonomy endorsed here is, with changes too minor to mention, one that Peter Vallentyne presents and defends in his doctoral dissertation, *The Teleological/Deontological Distinction*, (University of Pittsburgh: 1984).

²Deontological theories need not be deontologically-based in the sense that axiological theories are axiologically-based. They may, for example hold merely that axiology and deontology are (to some degree) independent of one another. Such a view need not base any other part of morality on deontology.

distinction between theories holding that there are factors other than value that determine rightness and those theories holding that, while it is not the value of consequences alone that determine rightness, there are no factors other than value that determine rightness.

In order to mark the above distinction perspicuously, we take the fundamental distinction in moral theories to be between axiological and deontological theories as defined above. Within axiological theories, we draw the distinction between consequentialist theories and non-consequentialist axiological theories. Consequentialism holds that the permissibility of an action is a function of the goodness (value) of the consequences of that action (typically in comparison with that of the consequences of alternative actions) and that it is in virtue of having this relationship to the goodness of the consequences that permissible actions are permissible. It is not committed to any specific theory of value nor, therefore, to any particular way of ranking states of affairs. All it requires is a theory of value that ranks outcomes (consequences). Utilitarianism is, of course, the obvious example of a consequentialist theory. An example of a non-consequentialist axiological theory would be one holding that the rightness of an action is determined entirely by the goodness of the character trait manifested by the agent in performing the action.

There are certain features of the typology so far proposed that will strike some as odd, if not downright wrong. For example, on the account of ‘consequentialism’ offered, rule utilitarianism (and its cousins, generalized utilitarianism, practice utilitarianism etc.) will turn out not to be consequentialist theories. Indeed, rule consequentialism generally will not be species of consequentialism. This nomenclature is at variance with what is still common usage in text books,³ but for reasons that will become clearer later it seems to cut moral theory at the joints and to provide a taxonomy that is more suited to the debates of today. The price of this is the acceptance of the result that not all theories normally classified as utilitarian are consequentialist.

Like its consequentialist species, the genus of axiological theories is not committed to any specific theory of value. The thesis of axiology itself is one about the *relation* between rightness and goodness (obligation and value), not one about the nature or structure of goodness (value). A full axiological moral theory, though, must commit itself on a variety of issues concerning the specific relationship between obligation and value and the nature and structure of value. It will be helpful in future discussion to be aware of some of the varieties of axiological theories.

The distinctions drawn below fall into two categories: those based on the deontic aspects of axiological theories, and those based on the theory of value incorporated into the axiological theory. Axiological theories are goodness-based theories, holding that rightness depends solely on considerations of goodness; but there are various ways in which rightness could depend on goodness. That is to say, two axiological theories could hold identical theories of value and disagree on the deontic evaluation of actions—the evaluation of them as right or wrong, permissible or impermissible, etc. Such theories differ in their deontic component. In addition to such differences, axiological theories may differ in their theory of value, so that two theories may base rightness on goodness in the exact same way but hold different theories of

³Baruch Brody’s introductory book, *Ethics and Its Applications*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) is an exception in this regard.

value. Some of the following distinctions can arise in either the deontic theory or the theory of value depending on the theory. For example, a theory holding that the rightness of actions depends entirely on the intrinsic value of the experiences produced by that action may hold this on the grounds that it is only experiences that have intrinsic value, in which case the experiential aspect is located in its theory of value, or on the grounds that it is only the intrinsic value of experiences that is relevant to moral rightness, in which case the experiential aspect is located in the deontic portion of the theory.

Comparative vs. Noncomparative: An axiological theory can determine the rightness of actions in virtue of considerations of goodness somehow associated with that act either in comparison with the goodness associated with alternative action or without regard to such comparisons. Standard forms of act utilitarianism are comparative—making the permissibility of actions depend on the value of the consequences of that action *relative* to the value of the consequences of other available actions. A version of act-utilitarianism that held that actions are permissible just in case their consequences are not bad, would be noncomparative. (Such a theory is, of course, committed to a measure of value that is stronger in at least one respect than mere ordinality.) The distinction between comparative and noncomparative axiological theories is a distinction in the deontic aspect of the theory; that is, it has to do with the way in which the theory relates rightness to goodness. It is not, like some of the distinctions to follow, a distinction between types of theories of value that might be included in a full axiological theory.

Maximizing vs. Nonmaximizing: If a theory is comparative, it may hold that an action is permissible just in case the value associated with that action is at least as great as that associated with any alternative action. Such a theory is a maximizing axiological theory. Nonmaximizing (comparative) axiological theories will deem permissible actions that do not have this property. They may uniquely select some action that does not have at least as much value associated with it as some alternative or, more plausibly, allow a variety of actions with unequal value associated with them. Standard act consequentialism is the most familiar form of a maximizing axiological theory. It holds that an action is morally permissible if, and only if, its consequences are at least as good as any alternative action's. Because this leads to the appearance (at least) of an overly demanding moral theory,⁴ some have preferred a satisficing consequentialism⁵ or some other version that allows an agent to deviate from the impartially best alternative.⁶ The cost of this moral leeway is the loss of the simple intuition that does so much to motivate consequentialism: the intuition that the point of the moral evaluation of actions (as right or wrong) is to guide action to the best outcome. Like the previous distinction between comparative and noncomparative theories, the distinction between maximizing and nonmaximizing theories concerns the deontic aspect of axiological theories; it is not a distinction between various theories of value.

⁴See Kagan, Shelly, *The Limits of Morality*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

⁵See, for example, Michael Slote's *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

⁶E.g., Samuel Scheffler's *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

Varieties of Viewpoints: Axiological theories may base the permissibility of actions on goodness as viewed from different vantage points. *Egoism* bases the permissibility of actions on goodness from the agent's point of view. *Group Chauvinism* bases the permissibility of actions on goodness from the point of view of some group (usually one associated with the agent—his family, his religion, his tribe, his race, etc.). *Universalism* bases the permissibility of actions on goodness impartially viewed—from the point of view of the universe as a whole. Axiological theories may mix viewpoints;⁷ a theory that holds that an action is required if it maximizes overall goodness without diminishing goodness from the agent's point of view is a *mixed* theory.

Organic vs. Individualistic: *Individualistic* theories take rightness to be a function of individual goodness. Perhaps the clearest instance of individualist axiology is Benthamite utilitarianism, in which the permissibility of an action is a function of the sum of individual utility produced by it in relation to that produced by alternative actions. Some have held, though, that while obligation is a function of overall value, overall value is not a function of individual value. Such a theory, typically labeled 'holism' or 'organicism', holds that there is organic value—value that is not simply a function of individual goodness. Egalitarians may hold that equality is a value quite independent of any benefit to any individual.

Aggregative vs. Non-aggregative: Individualist axiological theories may either aggregate individual goodness or not. *Aggregative* theories determine the permissibility of actions by trading off the good of some individual or group against that of another. Theories that direct us to maximize the *sum* of individual utilities are aggregative. *Strongly (Fully) aggregative* theories set no lower bounds on the goodness of each group or individual. The theories just mentioned are strongly aggregative. *Weakly (Partially) aggregative* theories set some lower bounds on the goodness of each group or individual. Theories which impose a "utility floor" (by, for example, directing us to maximize the sum of individual utility subject to each person receiving at least a certain minimum amount) are weakly (or partially) aggregative. The "utility floor" could either be determined absolutely or in relation to the utilities of others. *Non-aggregative* theories do not allow trade-offs between the goodness of various individuals or groups. For example, a theory holding that an action is permissible just in case there is no Pareto superior alternative or one holding that an action is permissible just in case it is Pareto superior to the present state, is non-aggregative.

Subjective vs. Non-subjective Values: It is common to distinguish among individualist theories of value according to whether they are fully subjective, partly subjective or not subjective at all. The first holds that what is of individual value to an agent is *entirely* dependent on subjective conative states of the agent, the second holds that individual value is partly determined by subjective conative states, and the third holds that such states of the agent are irrelevant to the determination of individual value. Examples of the first are familiar to us now in the form of desire satisfaction theories and their cousins. Rather than telling us what things are valuable, these theories tell us what subjective states of agents *determine* what is valuable. They hold not that the state of affairs of a desire being satisfied is valuable but that a state of affairs is valuable if it satisfies a desire that actually exists. The former would give us a reason to encourage easily satisfied desires in order to maximize desire satisfaction. But desire satisfaction theories that are actually advocated do not

⁷For example, see Scheffler's "hybrid theory" in *The Rejection of Consequentialism, op.cit.*

recommend this. Rather, they take desires as they are (or will be) and hold that these determine what is good.

To the extent that a theory is non-subjective, it will not delegate determination of the good to subjective states of agents. It will instead give a substantive theory of the good. Classical hedonism is an example of a fully objective theory of value. Pleasure, it holds, is intrinsically valuable, and it is so regardless of the subjective cognitive states of any agent.

Pluralistic conceptions of the good are often a mixture of subjective and non-subjective theories. Mill's eudaimonism (which is probably better thought of as pluralistic despite its nominal monism afforded by Mill's use of the term 'happiness') holds that there are elements of an agent's good that are valuable apart from the agent desiring them as well as elements that depend on such desire.

Experiential vs. Nonexperiential: Axiological theories may adopt theories of value that assign value only to states of affairs that are experiences of some conscious entity. Such theories of value are *experiential*. Bentham's hedonism is a paradigm case, but some pluralistic theories are also experiential, assigning intrinsic value to a variety of experiences. Alternatively, the theory of value adopted by an axiological theory may assign value to some states of affairs that are not experiences of anyone. Such *nonexperiential* theories include, most prominently now, preference-satisfaction theories of value—for the satisfaction of a preference is not the satisfaction of a person and need not be experienced by anyone.⁸

The Object of Value: Axiological theories may make the permissibility of an act depend on the goodness of the action itself, that of the consequences of the action, the character displayed in the performance of the action, or some other feature of, or related to, the act. Examples of theories in this last, catch-all category include those that base the permissibility of action on the goodness of *expected* outcomes or *rationaly expectable* outcomes or the consequences that *would* result if some condition were met (for example, were everyone to act in a relevantly similar way).

Direct vs. Indirect Axiology: Axiological theories may base the permissibility of action directly on goodness or indirectly on it by, for example, determining permissibility by appeal to correct rules and determining the correctness of rules by appeal solely to considerations of goodness.

Different Conceptions of Outcomes: There are a variety of ways in which axiological theories that base obligation on the goodness of outcomes can understand the notion of an outcome. *World Scenario* theories hold that the outcome of an action is the most complete state of affairs that would be the case if the action were performed. *Future* theories hold that the outcome of an action is the most complete state of affairs not pertaining to the past or present that would be the case if the action were performed. *Augmented Future* theories hold that the outcome of an action is the most complete state of affairs not pertaining to the past that would be the case if the action were performed. *Consequence* theories hold that outcome of an action is the most complete entirely avoidable state of affairs that would be realized if the action were

⁸An interesting discussion of experiential vs. nonexperiential theories of value is in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974), pp. 42-45.

performed.⁹ *Diminished Consequence* theories hold that the outcome of an action is the most complete entirely avoidable state of affairs not pertaining to the present (or the past) that would be realized if the action were performed.

The relatively complex typology of axiological theories just offered is valuable in helping one to understand that there are many specific choices any axiological theory must make. The possible axiological theories are diverse and differ in substantial and interesting ways. By detailing the various options, we underscore the range of axiological theories. Furthermore, by listing a theory's competitors, we give some indication of the challenges that lie in store for each proposed axiological theory. It would be helpful to have a similar typology for deontological theories. Unfortunately, what we shall offer is considerably impoverished in comparison to the preceding.

Deontological theories deny that deontic judgments (judgments of actions as right, wrong, permissible, obligatory, impermissible, etc.) are entirely dependent on axiological judgments. This could be for one of two reasons. First, it could be that deontic judgments are not entirely a function of axiological judgments. That is, it could be that two situations could be identical in all axiological respects and yet differ in deontic respects. For example, if simple hedonism were a correct and comprehensive theory of value, one might hold a deontological theory, insisting that the permissibility of action is related to features other than the amount or distribution of pleasure. That is, one might hold, two situations could be identical with respect to pleasure but differ with respect to the permissibility of action. Alternatively, a deontologist might hold that while it is not possible for two situations to be identical with respect to value and differ with respect to the permissibility of action. She could concede that deontic judgments are functions of axiological ones. Her deontology is, nevertheless, sufficiently secured if she holds that the deontic judgments do not depend for their truth on the axiological ones. Axiological judgments may entail deontic judgments precisely because they presuppose them and are dependent for their truth on them. Thus, one could hold that two situations that are alike in their axiological respects must be alike in their deontic respects as well precisely because of the special dependency that axiology has on deontology. Such a position is clearly a deontological theory.¹⁰

⁹I follow Peter Vallentyne in here calling this state of affairs the 'consequence' of an action. This is for purposes of distinguishing various conceptions of outcomes only. I do not mean to limit the range of *consequentialist* theories to those that base the permissibility of action on the goodness of consequences in this narrower sense. In the definition of 'consequentialism' I use 'consequences' synonymously with 'outcomes' here.

¹⁰In fact, only this latter form should be considered a deontologically-based theory. The first version holds that axiological and deontological judgments are independent—it begins with two bases. Perhaps, strictly speaking, theories that hold deontic and axiological judgments to be independent should not be called 'deontological', but there is no need, here, to speak strictly in this respect. We follow the convention of treating the dual-based theories as being deontological—that is, we use 'deontological' to mean *non-axiological*.

Act vs. Rule Deontology: Deontological theories may hold the permissibility of individual actions to depend on their compliance with general rules of conduct. The explanation of why a prohibited action has this status is that it violates some correct moral rule. Act-deontological theories, on the other hand, hold that the deontic status of actions is not dependent on their status *vis-à-vis* moral rules.

Single vs. Multiple Rule Deontology: Some rule-based deontological theories are presented as holding that there is a single fundamental moral rule. Others appear to offer a number of fundamental moral rules. So long as there is no privileged way of counting rules it seems that theories usually classified as multiple rules theories are mere terminological variants of a corresponding single rule theory. Thus the deontological theory holding that there are two fundamental rules of morality, “Don’t lie” and “Don’t cheat”, appears not to be interestingly different from one holding that there is only one fundamental moral rule, “Don’t lie or cheat”. The motivation for presenting theories as multiple-rule theories rather than single-rule theories has to do largely with problems of moral reasoning and potential conflicts between rules.

Absolute vs. Overrideable Rule Deontology: Rule theorists may hold that some or all of the moral rules in their theory are absolute in the sense that no permissible action violates them. Alternatively, it may be held that some or all moral rules are overrideable either for the sake of compliance with other rules or for the sake of promoting value. Allowing deontological rules to be overridden in order to promote value may be seen as a concession to consequentialism, but it is not capitulation. There is a significant difference between a theory that allows moral rules to be overridden to secure great goods or to avoid “catastrophic moral horror”¹¹ and one that deems permissible all value maximizing actions.

¹¹The phrase is Robert Nozick’s. See *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974), p. 30n. Nozick defends a rule deontology but is silent on whether the rules he discusses are absolute or overrideable.