

## INTRODUCTION TO ETHICAL THEORY

### I. Levels of Talk about Ethics:

- A. **Descriptive Ethics:** Descriptive ethics is concerned with *describing* either in a very concrete way, or in an abstract, theoretical way, the moral beliefs, opinions and values of individuals or social groups. Claims in descriptive ethics are not about what *is* right or wrong (good or bad) but what *is thought* right or wrong (good or bad).
- B. **Normative Ethics:** Normative ethics concerns what is right or wrong (good or bad), either in a concrete case or at some level of abstraction. Ordinary moral judgments, like the judgment that lying is morally wrong, are claims of normative ethics, as are normative ethical theories. If people's moral beliefs *could* be wrong (as it seems they certainly can be), then normative ethics is logically independent of descriptive ethics.

### II. Normative Ethics:

Normative ethical theory (NET) is the branch of philosophy concerned with formulating and evaluating theories of moral rightness and moral goodness. Such theories attempt to state the features in virtue of which morally right actions are morally right and morally good states of affairs are morally good. NET is to be distinguished from descriptive ethical theory, which is an anthropological/sociological study concerning the moral beliefs and practices of individuals and cultures (the mores of a society), and metaethics, which concerns the meaning of moral language. NET has two parts:

- A. **Theory of Value (Theory of the Good):** This branch concerns the moral evaluation of people, states of affairs, character traits, etc. as *good* or *bad* (or better or worse). It doesn't directly answer the question of how one should act.
- B. **Theory of Obligation (Theory of the Right):** This branch concerns the moral evaluation of actions as *right* or *wrong*, *obligatory*, *permissible* or *forbidden*.

### III. Types of Normative Ethical Theories:

Normative Ethical Theories are most frequently classified according to their theory of obligation. The distinction between deontological and consequentialist theories is usually cited as the fundamental distinction here. It is not. The most fundamental distinction is between *axiological* theories on the one hand and *deontological* distinctions on the other. The classification should proceed as follows:

- A. **Axiological Theories of Obligation:** These theories hold that considerations of rightness or wrongness (permissibility/impermissibility, etc.) depend entirely on considerations of goodness. But not all axiological theories hold that it is the goodness of consequences that matters. For example, some hold that it is the goodness of the intentions of the agent that determine the rightness of the action.
  - 1. **Consequentialism:** The most popular form of axiological theories is consequentialism, which holds simply that the rightness or wrongness (etc.) of actions depends *entirely* on the moral value (goodness) of the *consequences*. Typically, consequentialist views are comparative in the sense that the rightness of an action depends on the value of its consequences compared with the value of the consequences of alternatives available. For distinctions within consequentialism, see below.
- B. **Deontological Theories of Obligation:** These theories hold that the moral rightness or wrongness (etc.) of actions does not depend *entirely* on considerations of goodness. (It follows, of course, that such theories hold that the rightness of an action does not depend entirely on the value of the consequences of that action.) One example of a deontological theory is Divine Command Theory; another is the theory that "whatever *feels* right to you *is* right for you".

### IV. Types of Consequentialism:

Consequentialist theories are classified according both to their theories of obligation and their theories of value.

#### A. Consequentialist Theories of Obligation:

- 1. **Egoism:** The egoist holds that the rightness of actions is determined solely by the value of the consequences that affect the agent of the action. Effects on others are, if relevant at all, only indirectly relevant because of effects they have on the agent.

2. **Group Chauvinism:** The group chauvinist holds that the rightness of actions is determined solely by the value of the consequences for some group (usually defined in relation to the agent—e.g., *her* race, *her* sex, *her* religious group) which is a proper subset of those affected by the action.
  3. **Universalistic Consequentialism:** This view, clearly the most popular among moral theorists, holds that the rightness of actions is determined by the value of the consequences for *all* affected by the action.
- B. Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic (Instrumental) Value:** To understand the consequentialist theories, it is necessary to understand the distinction between intrinsic value and extrinsic (or instrumental) value.
1. **Intrinsic Value:** A thing has intrinsic value if it is valuable in itself—apart from any other considerations, including considerations of its effects.
  2. **Extrinsic Value:** A thing has extrinsic value in virtue of its capacity to produce something of value—ultimately, something of intrinsic value. (All chains of extrinsic value terminate in something of intrinsic value.)
- C. Consequentialist Theories of Value:** Strictly speaking there are no *consequentialist* theories of value. Consequentialism has to do with the theory of obligation. The correct way to head this section is: ‘Theories of Value Frequently Held by Consequentialists’:
1. **Hedonism:** The Hedonist holds that what has intrinsic value is pleasure and this is all that has intrinsic value. The value of other things is always dependent on their tendency to produce pleasure.
  2. **Eudaimonism:** The Eudaimonist holds that what has intrinsic value is happiness and that this is the only thing with intrinsic value. Happiness is to be distinguished from pleasure in ways that eudaimonists disagree about. Typically, it is taken to involve not merely sensations but self-development, a sense of self-worth, etc.
  3. **Desire Satisfaction:** This relatively new theory of value is influenced by developments in economics.
    - a) This theory is sometimes described as holding that it is the satisfaction of desires that has intrinsic value (and to be the only thing which does).
      - (1) If this were the correct interpretation of Desire Satisfaction Theories, then we should inculcate in our children, ourselves and others easily satisfied desires so as to maximize the satisfaction of desires. We should do this even if it is contrary to our present desires.
    - b) Desire Satisfaction Theories actually hold that what is of intrinsic value is whatever is intrinsically desired.

## V. Types of Deontological Theory:

- A. Act Theories:** Act-based deontological theories hold that the rightness or wrongness of actions is not dependent on any rule or general principle of rightness or wrongness.
- B. Rule Theories**
1. **Single-Rule Theories:** Single-rule deontological theories assert that the moral rightness or wrongness (or neutrality) of all actions is determined *ultimately* by a single moral rule. To be plausible, this rule would have to be very general, perhaps something like the “Golden Rule”: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
  2. **Multiple-Rule Theories:** Multiple-rule deontological theories claim that the moral rightness or wrongness (or neutrality) is determined by moral rules that cannot be reduced to a single moral rule. Such theories encounter the possibility of ultimate conflicts of rules.