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DIFFERENT WAYS TO THINK ABOUT MORAL PROBLEMS

An Introduction to Ethics as an Academic Discipline

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The purpose of this essay is to introduce you to some of the central features of ethics as an academic discipline. You may be surprised to learn that ethics is a subject matter at college in which you can take classes. After all, isn't ethics a matter of personal opinion? You have your values and beliefs and I have mine. How can I impose my values on you, and similarly, how can you impose your values on me? Certainly, there are limits on the ways we can impose our views on others, but at the same time, part of what it means to hold beliefs is being prepared to explain and defend them. One purpose of ethics as an academic discipline is to help you think more seriously and more deeply about some of the beliefs you hold.

Unlike many other disciplines you will study at college, ethics involves making value judgments. To decide that something is right or wrong is to approve or disapprove of it. Therefore, ethics as a discipline evaluates different choices and discriminates between them. It recommends courses of action. That is to say, ethics as an academic discipline articulates moral judgments. To articulate a judgment, however, is different from voicing an opinion. An opinion is merely asserted while a judgment has the support of reasons. The discipline of ethics involves identifying arguments, discriminating between them, and articulating good reasons for making particular value judgments. In what follows, I'll try to show you some of the different ways in which moral philosophers and theologians have tried to reason about moral questions and defend moral judgments.

The Importance of Identifying a Point of View

A moral judgment is always articulated in response to some question about human action. People, throughout their lives, encounter situations that require making decisions. In a perplexing situation, one must decide on a plan of action; confronted by an array of options, one must choose a particular course of action. For example, a student graduating from high school faces a number of possibilities. He or she might start working right away in the family business, begin to pursue a career in professional sports, join a cloister to become a monk or a nun, or attend college to earn a baccalaureate degree. Confronting these possibilities, the high school graduate must make a choice, he or she must decide on a course of action.

The way one approaches questions about human action, however, and the judgment one makes about the right course of action, can vary depending on one's point of view. A question about human action asked from a first-person point of view is a question about what *I* should do. A question about human action asked from a third-person point of view is about what *they* should do. For example, the theologian Karl Barth believed that ethics concerned the shape of human obedience to the command of God. He approached ethics from a first-person perspective, because he wanted each person to encounter God directly and ask, what is God's will for *me*? How should *I* respond to the command of God? In contrast to Barth, the philosopher John Stuart Mill believed ethics was about how to achieve the greatest overall happiness in society. Mill approached ethics from a third-person point of view, because he wanted to give advice to decision-makers like politicians and legislators about what *they* needed to do to make society a better place to live in.

The perspective one adopts on ethical questions can influence the shape of one's moral judgments. Consider the question: should reproductive technologies involving surrogacy be permitted? A woman who asked this question from Karl Barth's first person perspective would ask, what does God want *me* to do? The woman might decide that God has commanded that her body be given to one man in marriage, that surrogacy requires sharing her body in intimate ways with more than one man, and that, therefore, God's command to her is that she not be a surrogate mother. In thinking about the question this way, the woman

would not be making a judgment about surrogacy in general; she would not be making a judgment about what other women should do; she would be deciding about herself. Now consider the same question about surrogacy asked from John Stuart Mill's third-person perspective. The question is no longer, should *I* be a surrogate mother? but rather, should society allow the practice of surrogacy? Legislators deliberating on this question should, according to Mill, consider what policy will produce the greatest overall happiness in society. *They* would need to weigh the happiness the practice of surrogacy can bring to infertile couples against any potential harms, and if they decide that surrogacy will bring more overall happiness than unhappiness, *they* should make the practice legal for others. Notice, however, that in making surrogacy legal, the legislators would not be recommending surrogacy one way or another to any particular woman asking herself, should *I* be a surrogate mother?

It turns out that the perspective a thinker adopts when approaching ethical questions not only affects the answers they give to particular questions, but can also affect the shape of an entire moral theory. Thinkers who like to approach ethical questions from a first-person perspective frequently produce a moral theory focused on character and virtue. Thinkers who like to approach ethical questions from a third-person perspective often produce a moral theory focused on results and consequences. Let's consider these two kinds of moral theory briefly.

The Difference Between Moral Theory Focused on Character and Moral Theory Focused on Consequences

A moral philosopher with whom you may be familiar, Socrates, generally approached ethical questions from a first-person perspective. His concern with first-person questions also led him to develop a moral theory focused on character. Socrates believed the most important task in life was to become a moral person. The steps in the development of his moral theory went something like this: I know I want to be happy, but what is happiness? True happiness is not really the good feeling I get when I'm in a good mood, rather true happiness is a condition of the soul. Therefore, if I want to know what true happiness consists of, I need to understand the nature of the soul. Now, the nature of the soul is to seek out what is true and good, and the best way to seek out what is true and good is to live a virtuous life. To live a virtuous life depends on wisdom, and wisdom gives rise to virtues necessary for living a happy life. Germaine Walsh's chapter in this book mentions several of the virtues Socrates pursued: justice, courage, moderation, piety, love, and friendship. Any person who lacks such virtues, Socrates believed, also lacks the ability to make good decisions, and a person who cannot make good decisions will never be happy. Therefore, Socrates reasoned, if I want to be happy, I need to acquire the virtues and develop my moral character.

Of course, Socrates was not the only philosopher to develop a moral theory centered on character and virtue. Many philosophers have adopted his basic approach to the moral life, and we label this approach *virtue theory* or *character ethics*. Character ethics, as the name implies, is concerned with questions of moral character. It is a type of moral theory particularly well suited for asking questions from a first-person perspective. Within the framework of character ethics, the moral agent asks herself, what kind of person will I become, if I decide to act in this way?

However, because of its focus on the individual, character ethics is not always helpful when thinking about social questions, questions which we are more likely to approach from a third-person perspective. Many times—although not always—thinkers concerned with social questions will develop a moral theory focused on consequences. One important moral philosopher who developed a moral theory focused on consequences was John Stuart Mill. Mill called his theory *utilitarianism*. According to utilitarianism, ethics is about producing the greatest good for the greatest number. An action that produces more good consequences than bad consequences is the right one; an action that produces more bad than good is wrong. According to Mill, the greatest overall good should be measured in terms of *utility*, a principle that assesses happiness. Thus the greatest overall good is that which produces the greatest overall happiness.

Mill's utilitarianism led him to develop a defense of toleration and liberty. According to Mill, the only justification for interfering into the affairs of another person is to prevent him or her from harming someone else. Since to allow someone to harm another would be to allow a decrease in the overall happiness in society,

harm should be prevented. Otherwise, however, when people are not harming others, they should be left free to do as they choose, according to their own good pleasure.

In fact, utilitarianism became part of a larger movement of social reform in 19th century England. Mill and others like him looked at laws and social practices in their day and found them lacking. For example, laws which prohibited unorthodox religious beliefs and practices, or laws which punished people for personal immorality (things like adultery or sexual deviance) could not be justified in light of the principle of utility—they did not contribute to the overall happiness. Similarly, restrictions on the roles that women could fill in society were unjustified because they inhibited a woman's personal development, which again subtracted from the overall happiness. In short, the theory of utilitarianism raised questions about the way people were being treated in society and generated arguments about how to improve things.

This ability to focus on social questions is the main strength of utilitarianism. At the same time, because it focuses so exclusively on social questions, utilitarianism has very little illuminating to say about personal ethics. In other words, by adopting a third-person perspective so exclusively, utilitarianism forgets about first-person questions altogether. To discuss first-person questions, we need something like character ethics.

However, to make matters even more complicated, there is yet a third type of moral theory, different from both character ethics and utilitarianism, which focuses on duties and obligations. This third type of moral theory is often labeled *deontology*.

Deontology: Ethics Centered on Duty and Obligation

Deontology is a type of moral theory that focuses on absolute rules. Rather than focusing on consequences, as in utilitarian theory, or focusing on questions of character, deontology says that one should form moral judgments about human action by applying the appropriate rules. Furthermore, these rules are exceptionless. So, for example, if I want to know whether I should tell a lie, I don't need to think about the overall consequences—as with utilitarianism—and I don't need to ask about what lying will do to my character—as with character ethics—I simply need to discover whether or not there is a rule against lying. If there is a rule against lying, which there is, it will be exceptionless. Therefore, one may never tell a lie, period—no exceptions.

Deontology introduces a new set of considerations into our discussions of ethics, which do not overlap with the distinction between the first- and third-person perspectives I introduced earlier. One can arrive at deontological positions setting out from either a first-person or third-person perspective. One moral philosopher who held deontological positions, but who approached ethics from both a first- and third-person perspective, was Immanuel Kant. Kant is a very difficult philosopher to read, but he is also an important one, so trying to understand Kant is worthwhile.

Kant believed human beings were rational; they could understand the rules of logic and use logic to understand the world. Kant also believed morality was rational; whatever the moral law commanded was in agreement with the rules of logic. Because the moral law is rational, and because human beings are also rational, human beings could discover the moral law within their own reason, that is, within their own minds. A person who looks within her own mind and discovers the moral law within her reason must then confront a choice. Either she may disregard the moral law or she may obey it. This, in a sense, is a first person question: should *I* be moral, and if so why?

Kant says I should obey the moral law, because in obeying the moral law I become free and self-determining. The person who obeys the moral law is free and self-determining because he causes his own action. By contrast, a person who ignores the moral law is not free, because in that case the cause of his action is something other than himself. To be free is to be the cause of your own actions. Since the moral law exists in my own mind, I cause my own actions when I obey the moral law within me. To be unfree is to have your actions caused by something else. When I disregard the moral law, my actions are caused by things outside of myself; for example, the opinion of my peers or the desire for material possessions.

So for Kant the answer to the question, should I be moral? is yes, because by acting in a moral way I become free. Furthermore, according to Kant, the moral law applies all the time, without exception. Since only the person who adheres to the moral law is free, if we wish to remain free, we must adhere to our moral

duty at all times. We can never make exceptions. Kant held that the moral law is exceptionless; that makes his theory deontological.

Kant's deontological theory influenced the way he approached social ethics, questions approached from a third-person perspective. In approaching social ethics, Kant developed a theory of human rights. To say that people have rights is to say that they are entitled to a certain kind of just treatment, without exception and regardless of the consequences. Kant believed that because human beings are rational and have the moral law within them, they must always be treated as ends and never as merely a means. Kant called this the *categorical imperative*, which he formulates this way, "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means."[1] To treat someone as an end is to respect them for who they are; to treat someone as a means is to use them as tool in a project. So Kant's categorical imperative may just be a fancy way of expressing the Golden Rule: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. For Kant, however, the Golden Rule applies absolutely, without exceptions. To disregard the rights of another, no matter what the circumstances, is a violation of the moral law.

Overview and Evaluation

We have reached a point where we can summarize a number of central points concerning ethics as an academic discipline. Broadly speaking, there are three types of moral theory. The first type of theory we considered focuses on character and virtue and might simply be called character ethics. The second type of theory we considered focuses on consequences and is frequently called utilitarianism. The third type of moral theory centers on duties and obligations and is usually called deontology. In addition, moral questions can be approached from at least two different perspectives, what I've called a first-person and third-person perspective, and the kind of perspective a thinker adopts tends to influence the shape of his or her moral theory.

In fact, many moral disagreements are rooted in competition between conflicting moral perspectives and theories. Consider, for example, the controversy surrounding legalized gambling. Many states sponsor a lottery or other forms of gambling as a way of increasing state revenue without levying taxes. Proponents of state sponsored gambling argue that this is a painless way to raise revenue, since only the people who want them buy lottery tickets. Proponents make a kind of utilitarian argument about the good consequences that come from state sponsored gambling. In contrast, critics argue that state lotteries appeal primarily to the poor, who can't afford to spend money on the lottery, but who dream that winning the lottery will improve their economic circumstances. In other words, the argument goes, the lottery takes advantage of certain kinds of character weaknesses found among the poor, and even contributes to perpetuating those weaknesses. This is an argument based, at least in part, on character ethics, because the argument is that gambling is bad for moral character. Of course, if one were a deontologist who believed gambling was wrong in itself, then one would oppose state sponsored gambling regardless of the good consequences it might bring, and irrespective of questions about the effects of gambling on moral character.

Given the variety of approaches to ethical questions, you might reasonably feel confused about which theory or perspective is best to adopt. My own suggestion would be that, rather than electing for one moral theory or perspective, you should recognize that every theory and perspective casts light on an aspect of moral experience that is important. The difficulty is knowing when and how to draw on different perspectives and theories when formulating moral judgments.

Consider deontological theory, which is frequently the object of criticism, but which also seems to offer a necessary perspective. To many, an ethic which disregards all consequences and focuses exclusively on exceptionless rules seems irresponsible. For example, Kant argued that a person could never tell a lie, even if by doing so he could protect a person hiding in his house from a potential murderer. Many of Kant's critics have thought this position extreme. A utilitarian would say that a person must accept responsibility for the consequences of his actions. Thus it would be better to tell a lie in order to protect the person hiding in your

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981): 36.

house, than to assist the murderer by telling the truth. An ethical system like Kant's, which focuses on duty without regard for the consequences, is irresponsible—or so a utilitarian like John Stuart Mill would argue.

On the other hand, certain aspects of the moral life simply cannot be explained convincingly without the view that sometimes one must do right regardless of the consequences. Consider a moral value like fidelity. The nature of fidelity is to remain faithful, but faithfulness manifests itself most strongly in situations where a person is under pressure to be unfaithful. A martyr remains faithful to God at the cost of his or her life. In marriage, fidelity means standing by one's spouse for better or worse, in sickness and in health. A wedding ceremony in which husband and wife promised to be faithful just so long as that would contribute to the greatest overall happiness would be—at the very least—odd. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of figures in the Western intellectual traditional who have thought about ethics have also held deontological convictions of some sort or another—although they have generally not been radical deontologists of the sort Kant was.

Nobody can tell you when precisely to adopt a particular perspective during the consideration of a particular moral problem. That's a matter for individual deliberation and judgment. At the same time, by learning to draw upon these different moral theories and perspectives you may discover certain issues and questions that you had not seen before. For example, one way to think about the difference between deontology and utilitarianism, a way that goes beyond simply choosing to adopt one approach over the other, is to recognize that the differences between the two have a lot to do with the way we measure the nature and extent of human responsibility.

People with deontological views tend to think that human responsibility is limited. Their view is often related to theological commitments, particularly a belief in God's providence. Ultimately, a deontologist might say God is responsible for the human condition, which includes both good and bad. Human beings are neither wise enough nor powerful enough to manage that condition; thus they are not responsible for the negative consequence that may follow from adhering to the moral law. The difference between God and human beings, on this view, is the source of moral limits. A utilitarian, by contrast, is likely to find the effort to limit human responsibility objectionable. Indeed, the central utilitarian maxim, *the greatest good for the greatest number*, assumes that, with sufficient deliberation, human beings are capable of producing the greatest overall good.

This utilitarian confidence in our capacity to manage human affairs is distinctly modern. It depends upon a level of scientific understanding and technological mastery of nature unknown throughout most of human history. In the Middle Ages, for example, Europe was ravished by the bubonic plague, a bacterial disease transmitted by fleas carried by rodents which can be easily treated today. But people in the Middle Ages did not know about bacterial infections and how to treat them, nor did they understand the importance of hygiene, and we do not fault those people for failing to prevent the spread of the Black Death. Today, however, if fifty to seventy-five percent of the population in Austin and San Antonio were wiped out by the bubonic plague we would rightly blame public health officials for failing to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. Again, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans a few years ago, the government was criticized for failing to help the thousands of people stranded in the city. A hundred years earlier, however, a hurricane destroyed the city of Galveston, possibly killing more than 10,000 people, who, because they lacked satellite imagery, did not even know the hurricane was coming. We do not hold a government in 1900 to the same level of responsibility to which we hold the government in 2005, because the human mastery of nature and technology in the two centuries is vastly different.

Our ability to manipulate nature and to manage societies is not only a necessary presupposition of utilitarianism, it is also the source of tremendous improvements in the human condition, improvements all of us would wish to affirm. A strong sense of the ways in which we can make the world a better place inspires every moral theory, like utilitarianism, that emphasizes consequences and the human responsibility for outcomes. At the same time, one should ask whether the human capacity to produce the greatest good is really unlimited. Much of twentieth century history records the rise and fall of totalitarian regimes, like Nazism and communism, which caused tremendous suffering. Yet the guiding maxim for every totalitarian regime is *the greatest good for the greatest number*. One could even argue that in a certain sense the most influential utilitarians in history were Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin, a fact that should give us pause.

Be that as it may, my point is not to deny that each type of moral theory has its limited value. Rather my point is to illustrate the way our use of moral theories is usually embedded in a larger framework of concerns

related to our view of the world and the perspectives we adopt when taking up ethical questions. Each type of moral theory responds to authentic moral concerns, but different types of concerns generate different types of moral theory. A piece of advice for engaging different thinkers is to try to understand their basic motivations and worries. A serious thinker always responds to serious concerns. That does not mean, of course, that every thinker is equally good and every moral theory is equally satisfactory. Some thinkers may do a better job than others of responding to authentic concerns, and some thinkers may be better than others at integrating the legitimate perspectives arising from the different sides of an issue. Any serious thinker, however, will give you something to think about, and learning to think is an important part of the discipline of ethics.

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