

# Philosophical Ethics

## Modern Ethics

- I. Modern (though not postmodern) ethical theory claims that ethical behavior requires a foundation or the acceptance an “intrinsic good.” This foundation answers the question “why do we act well?”
  - A. Avoids “relativism,” the school of thought that claims the answer to the question “What is the highest good?” is relative to the person asking (and answering) the question.
  - B. We tend to believe that there are such universal foundations, though we struggle to identify and agree upon them (i.e. the axe murderer).
  - C. Two usual foundations are: (a) happiness and (b) respect for human dignity
- II. Most universal seems to be human happiness
  - A. Does this mean *my own* happiness?
    - i. Trying to increase my own happiness is “egoism”
    - ii. Egoism ends up reducing to relativism
  - B. No, it must mean general happiness
    - i. “. . . the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation” (Jeremy Bentham 1832)
    - ii. Concern for the “general welfare” is known as “utilitarianism”
    - iii. Almost like a chart: “no good is mo better”
  - C. Standard objections to utilitarianism
    - i. Violates moral intuitions (the example of shooting smokers)
    - ii. Requires supererogatory (exceptionally praiseworthy) acts (if the goal is the greatest happiness for the greatest number we would all always be required to act for the good of the whole—we don’t of course)
    - iii. Calculation impossible (both not enough time to calculate, and many of the variables are unknown or can only be estimated)
  - D. Rule utilitarianism attempts to answer these objections through the following addition:
    - i. Develop rules over time (and throughout history) that incorporate prior calculations of the consequences of an act
    - ii. Then follow the rule
    - iii. This approach lessens, but does not fully solve, the preceding objections
  - E. Risk analysis is another variation of rule utilitarianism—risk analysis attempts to evaluate a consequence in terms of the likelihood that the consequence will happen. By this theory, something very likely and somewhat bad is to be preferred, perhaps, over something which is unlikely but worse.
    - i. Risk analysis is essential to things like computer security
    - ii. It is a way to rationally compare things with different sizes and probabilities
    - iii. Roughly the calculation is size of impact x probability (e.g. a 50% chance that 100 people will die is equivalent to a 100% chance that 50 people will die)

- III. Equally important school claims that the foundation for ethical behavior is respect for human dignity
- A. Immanuel Kant, first exponent of this line of thought called deontology (literally, not-being), claimed
- i. Morality is not the study of how people behave, but rather how they should behave; and how they should behave is a function of human reason
  - ii. If we do not view human rationality as a special feature of humans, then we reduce ourselves to animals
  - iii. Pleasure and happiness are always subjective and not limited to humans; therefore a morality based on either would not take into account human rationality
  - iv. Ethical behavior is about the *reasons why* one acts and therefore is universal (true for all people at all times)
  - v. In sum, ethical behavior is governed by the “categorical imperative”:
    - a. One should act according to principles that one believes governs the actions of others (i.e. each act should be capable of being generalized to universal law)
      1. Kant illustrates this principle in the following way: Should I make a false promise in order to secure some short term gain? For example, should I borrow \$5 on the promise of repayment, when I have no intention of ever repaying the lender? Of course, Kant’s answer is no, because if I imagine that the principle—make a false promise to obtain something—were a “universal law,” which is to say true for all people at all times, then the institution of promising would cease to exist because part of what makes a promise a promise is its credibility. If we all knew in advance that all promises were false, then we would never believe people who made them. In that case, says Kant, when I make a false promise, I am therefore also operating on a principle that would destroy “promising” itself. And because it is contradictory both to use the principle of promising and to destroy promising it at the same time, making a false promise fails the test of universalizability.
    - b. Never treat people as a means to some end, but as ends in themselves
- B. Deontology is an appealing theory because
- i. It squares with our moral intuitions (i.e. it sounds right)
  - ii. It preserves our sense of human worth
- C. Standard objections
- i. The case of killing in self-defense—actually a misunderstanding of deontology. In response to the question “Should I kill someone?” the answer is no, but because deontology stresses the reasons why we do something and not the act itself, the correct question is “Should I kill someone in order to save my own life?” and the correct answer is yes.
  - ii. Standard of behavior too high—nobody actually acts this way; Kant’s response is that ethics investigates how we *should* behave
  - iii. Glorifies intuitions—some people’s intuitions are more important than others (i.e. if we redefine what we mean by “human,” we can still enslave)