Prof. Scanlan, Spring 2024

A Short Introduction to Five Types of Ethics

*These first three types of ethics are known as normative ethics.

1. Deontology Ethics:

The word deontology derives from the Greek word for duty (deon). In contemporary moral philosophy, deontology is one of those kinds of normative theories regarding which choices are required, forbidden, or permitted. In other words, deontology falls within the domain of rules that guide and assess our choices of what we ought to do. Any system that involves a clear set of rules is a form of deontology; it is often referred to as a rule-based ethic. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Ten Commandments are two examples of deontological ethics. Many professions center on deontic principles such as medical physicians, scientists, firefighters, military personnel, and many others. Deontologists require people to follow an established set of rules, not arbitrary or personal rules. These rules must be in accordance with reason—in particular, they must be logically consistent and not give rise to contradictions. Deontologists describe two types of ethical duties: perfect duties and imperfect duties. A perfect duty is one that cannot be obeyed partly. It's all or nothing. An example is "do not kill innocent people." You can't obey this a little bit. There's no middle ground. Imperfect duties allow for middle ground. "Educate yourself about the world around you," is imperfect because each person spends a different amount of time gaining an education. While the appeal of deontology lies in its consistency, it is critiqued for its inflexibility.

2. Virtue Ethics:

Virtue ethics addresses this fundamentally important, yet broad, question: what sort of person should I be? Virtue ethics focuses on ideas such as: the virtues themselves, motives and moral character, moral education, moral wisdom, friendship and family relationships, a deep concept of happiness, and the role of the emotions in our moral life. Virtue ethics do not aim to identify universal principles that can be applied in any one moral situation. Three main strands of virtue ethics have gained attention over the past century: human flourishing or performing one's functions well; common-sense ideas of what are admirable traits in others; and the ethics of care in which the feminine traits of caring and nurturing are as important as justice and autonomy.

Virtue ethics is often called self-centered, and it does not provide guidance on how we should act.

3. Utilitarian Ethics:

Utilitarianism is the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good. There are many ways to spell out this general claim. One thing to note is that this theory is a form of consequentialism: the right action is understood entirely in terms of consequences produced. On the utilitarian view, one ought to maximize the overall good — that is, consider the good of others as well as one's own good. Utilitarians believe that the purpose of morality is to make life better by increasing the amount of "good" things (such as pleasure and happiness) in the world and decreasing the amount of "bad" things (such as pain and unhappiness). They reject moral codes or systems that consist of commands or taboos that are based on customs, traditions, or orders given by leaders or supernatural beings. Instead, utilitarians think that what makes a morality be true or justifiable is its positive end result. These questions form an important critique: what is meant by the most good?; which person's good are we aiming to maximize?; did the utilitarian's decisions produce the effect or did some unforeseen action intervene?

4. Feminist Ethics:

Feminist Ethics is an attempt to revise or rethink traditional ethics—which often depreciate or devalue women's moral experience. Among others, feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar faults traditional ethics for letting women down in five related ways. First, traditional normative ethics often show less concern for women's as opposed to men's issues and interests. Second, traditional ethics trivializes the moral issues that arise in the so-called private world, the realm in which women do housework and take care of children, the infirm, and the elderly. Third, traditional ethics implies that, in general, women are not as morally mature or deep as men. Fourth, traditional ethics overrates culturally masculine traits like "independence, autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, product, asceticism, war, and death," while it underrates culturally feminine traits like "interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace, and life." Fifth, and finally, traditional ethics favors "male" ways of moral reasoning that emphasize rules, rights, universality, and impartiality over "female" ways of moral reasoning that emphasize relationships, responsibilities, particularity, and partiality ("Feminist Ethics," 1992).

<u>5. Global Ethics:</u>

According to Kimberly Hutching's *Global Ethics: An Introduction* (2010), the concept of Global Ethics can be "defined as a field of theoretical enquiry that addresses ethical questions and problems arising out of the global interconnection and interdependence of the world's population. On this account, Global Ethics investigates and evaluates the standards that should govern the behavior of individual and collective actors as members of, or participants in, a global world" (9-10). Such behaviors are connected to these major focal points: access to global markets, climate change, and a broad set of human rights related to health, education, clean air and water, labor rights, living wages, and equality for all. Global ethics aims to enable people from different cultures, religions, and nations to be able to live in a constructive way, with common values that connect and provide mutual aid.

<u>Example:</u>

The following example helps us to recognize the differences between these five types of ethics. Suppose that someone has fallen, and it is obvious that this person should be helped up. A deontologist might point to the fact that in doing so the person will be acting in accordance with a moral rule such as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or "Always help those in need." A virtue ethicist might point to the fact that helping the person would be charitable or benevolent, and if one calls herself a benevolent person, then she must help. A utilitarian might point to the fact that the consequences of helping the person who has fallen will maximize that person's well-being; but a utilitarian might not help the person if her back is tender and might get hurt by bending over and helping (self-interest); additionally, a utilitarian might help the fallen person even if doing so hurts another person (the outcome is more important than the steps taken). The feminist might help the person if she identifies with those who care for the elderly, the young, the frail, or believes in sharing, trust, and body issues. A global ethicist might help the person up because the fallen person is interrelated in terms of being human, and it is ethical to treat all people equally. [note that this is a very simplified example and real-world ethical decisions do not fit neatly into any one category. Sometimes ethical types overlap]

The top three definitions are adapted from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.plato.stanford.edu