

eat pork and that he requires us to keep the Sabbath holy. Muslims also eat no pork, but they believe that God requires us to pray five times a day. Hindus consider the cow to be sacred and refuse to eat beef, whereas the Christian God is indifferent to the eating of pork and beef. Is there any plausible way to decide what religion has the correct understanding of God's commands? If there is none, then the divine command theory faces a serious epistemic problem. Although the theory tells us that morality requires us to follow God's commands, the theory fails to provide a method that enables us to determine what God's commands actually are.

Food for Thought

Different religions have a very different understanding of what God commands us to do. Give a list of ten actions that are demanded of us according to one religion but not demanded of us according to a different religion.

Second, for the sake of argument, let us assume that we could establish clearly what God has commanded. In order that these commands turn out to be useful guides for our life, we have to interpret them. Suppose, for example, that we could establish with absolute certainty that God commands us not to kill. What does this command require us to do? Should we conclude, for instance, that it is morally wrong to become a soldier or to defend oneself? Does the command entail that the killing of animals is wrong? If the command is to offer us any help in guiding our lives, we need a precise interpretation and explanation of what the command entails. But such an interpretation can only be given by somebody who already has substantial moral knowledge. And this moral knowledge cannot, if we are to avoid circular reasoning, be derived from God's commands.

Third, it seems clear that God's commands cannot be arbitrary. Few people would think that torturing babies would become morally right if God were to command it. God cannot command whatever strikes his fancy, but he will command us to perform those actions that are intrinsically right. If we agree with this conclusion, and it is hard to see how one could disagree, then we admit automatically that moral norms are prior and more fundamental than God's pronouncements. It follows therefore that God's commands are insufficient to provide a complete explanation why actions are morally right or wrong.

Food for Thought

A good illustration of this difficulty for the divine command theory is given by the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. According to the Bible, God commands Abraham to kill his son Isaac. Although God eventually interferes and prevents Abraham from killing his son, the question arises of whether killing a child can become morally right when God commands it to be done. What do you think? How would you have responded if you were in Abraham's situation?

There are further weaknesses of the divine command theory. However, our discussion so far suffices to show that the divine command theory does not offer a satisfactory account of what moral norms there are. Let us investigate whether other moral theories fare any better.

Utilitarianism

The Basic Idea The term *utilitarianism* does not refer to one single and uniform ethical theory, but rather to a group of ethical theories. Two key ideas are at the center of any utilitarian account of morality:

1. Human happiness is the ultimate moral good.
2. Actions should be evaluated in the light of their consequences.

Both principles are intuitively plausible. Let us start with the first principle. Why should we think that happiness is the most important good? At first glance, it might seem as if different people disagree about what kind of things are good. One of us desires fame, another money, and a third person might desire a quiet farm life in North Dakota. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), one of the best known advocates of utilitarianism, pointed out that in spite of the apparent variety of desires among different people, all of us ultimately only seek one thing: namely, happiness. The person who desires a quiet farm life in North Dakota does so because he expects this kind of life to make him happy. The same is true for the person who desires money. She expects money to make her happy. Happiness is the common ultimate goal. If somebody asks me why I want to be happy, it is reasonable to reply that the question makes no sense. Although I can desire money or fame for the sake of happiness,

happiness cannot be desired for the sake of anything else. Happiness is an ultimate good that is desired for its own sake.

Food for Thought

Is it possible to desire something although we do not think that it makes us happy? If yes, give an example. If no, does this establish that happiness is the most important good in life?

These considerations make it plausible that happiness is indeed the ultimate good in our lives. Once this point has been established, it makes sense to argue that all other goods have value only insofar as they contribute to general happiness. When I say, for example, that George has a good job, I mean to assert that George has a job that makes him happy. A job that leads to misery cannot be good. This general idea that things have value insofar as they contribute to happiness can be applied to our thinking about morality as well. This is where the second principle of utilitarianism originates. Utilitarian thinkers argue that an action is morally right insofar as the action contributes to general happiness. John Stuart Mill explains this central point of utilitarianism as follows:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals "utility" or the "greatest happiness principle" holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.²

Let us illustrate this central principle of utilitarianism with respect to the story of Robin Hood. You might recall that Robin Hood is an outlaw who lives in Sherwood Forest and who fights against the Sheriff of Nottingham. Robin and his men steal from the rich and give to the poor. Are Robin's actions morally right? Some people might condemn Robin Hood because he breaks laws, but a utilitarian would not agree with such an analysis. From a utilitarian perspective, it is not important to know whether Robin Hood follows laws or not. What counts is whether his actions contribute to general happiness. And in this respect, Robin Hood fares well. Although he steals, he shares the proceeds with the poor. He contributes thereby to the happiness of the people around him. A utilitarian would conclude therefore that Robin Hood's actions are morally right.

The example of Robin Hood also raises a crucial question. Although Robin and his men contribute to the happiness of the poor, they make the rich quite miserable. There can be no doubt that the Sheriff of Nottingham and other noble men would be much happier if Robin were to stop stealing. Is Robin Hood morally justified to make some people happy but others miserable? In order to answer this question, utilitarian thinkers introduce strict egalitarianism. When we calculate the consequences of our actions, we need to take into account the happiness of everybody affected. In these calculations everybody counts as one, and nobody as more than one. This means that we cannot pay special attention to our own happiness or to the happiness of the people we like. Even if Robin dislikes the Sheriff of Nottingham, he needs to keep in mind that his actions make him unhappy. Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor is therefore morally justified only if it produces more "net" happiness. The net happiness of an action is the happiness it causes minus the unhappiness it causes. Since more poor people than rich people are affected by Robin Hood's actions, it is plausible to suppose that Robin Hood's robbery produces a positive amount of net happiness. Robin's actions are therefore morally justified. Notice, however, that a utilitarian might change his assessment of the situation if Robin Hood were to steal from many different rich people and distribute the money only among his few best friends. The moral status of Robin's actions depends on how many people's lives are happier as a result of his stealing.

Food for Thought

Utilitarianism looks out for the well-being and happiness of the majority. However, utilitarian thinking does not always go hand in hand with majority rule. There are situations in which a utilitarian would advocate to make the majority of people slightly unhappy in order to save a few people from great misery. Can you think of some policies that affect most people negatively but which nevertheless maximize overall net happiness?

The Robin Hood example not only shows us that utilitarianism takes into account the well-being and happiness of everybody, it also shows us that we need to be able to measure and compare the degree to which our actions make people happy. To do that, we need to know more about what happiness is.

Pleasure and Happiness Traditionally, utilitarian thinkers explain happiness in terms of pleasure and pain. This is not unreasonable. If I come across a person who experiences intense pain, it seems natural to describe the person as unhappy. On the other hand, if I come across a person who experiences many pleasant sensations, it is plausible to call the person happy. Philosophers who believe that happiness is a result of how much pleasure and pain we experience are called **hedonists**. It is important not to misunderstand the basic message of hedonism. When we talk about pleasures and pains, we are not only talking about physical pleasures like having sex or eating a good steak. Many other activities are pleasant as well, and might offer longer lasting and more fulfilling pleasurable experiences. Raising a child, writing a book, or going on vacation are all activities that can lead to long-term pleasures. The first philosophers who advocated hedonism, the Epicureans, argued, for example, that the greatest pleasures in life are friendship and peace of mind.

Food for Thought

A person who believes that happiness is a result of how much pleasure and pain we experience in our lives is called a hedonist. Are you a hedonist, or do you believe that there is more to happiness than maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain? If yes, what is the hedonist missing? Can you give a description of a happy life that is not also a very pleasant life?

The two main advocates of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill, were both hedonists. However, they advocated different forms of hedonism. Bentham advocated a strict quantitative version of hedonism. According to Bentham, we can measure all pleasures and pains according to one scale. For example, watching your favorite TV show might produce 3 units of pleasure, but spending an evening with a good friend might produce 20 units of pleasure. So if you have to choose between watching TV and going out with your friend, you should choose the evening with your friend. Bentham called these kinds of calculations **hedonistic calculus**.

John Stuart Mill agreed with Bentham that we need to calculate happiness in terms of pleasure and pain, but Mill insisted that there are qualitative differences between different pleasures. In order to understand

the difference between Bentham's and Mill's thinking about happiness, it is useful to consider a specific example. Suppose that you are a very lonely person who has no friends. That means, of course, that you will never spend a pleasant evening with a good friend. So you can never get those 20 units of pleasure that a nice evening with a good friend produces. However, according to Bentham's theory, the lonely person can still lead a very happy life. Since watching your favorite TV show produces 3 units of pleasure, you can simply watch seven episodes of your favorite TV show instead of going out with a good friend. Watching seven good TV shows will produce 21 units of pleasure, and your life will therefore be as happy as the life of the person who spends an evening with a good friend.

John Stuart Mill disagrees on this point. According to Mill, not all pleasures are commensurable with each other. Mill thinks that a life full of simple pleasures will not amount to a happy human life. He writes in this context: "Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures."³ Mill's point seems plausible. It is difficult to imagine that any human would be satisfied and happy with a life that only permits us to eat and sleep, even if the food is excellent and the bed very comfortable. To account for this, Mill introduced the idea that pleasures do not only differ in quantity, but also in quality. Some activities, like playing a musical instrument, will lead to such a high qualitative pleasure that no amount of lower pleasures can easily make up for it.

Although Mill's position appears initially more plausible than Bentham's view, Mill's approach to hedonism raises some serious questions. If we agree with him that there are important qualitative differences between pleasures, a question arises: How can we measure these qualitative distinctions? Mill thought that people with sufficient life experience would ultimately all agree about what kind of pleasures are qualitatively higher and which ones are lower. But this seems overly optimistic. Even very refined and well-educated people might disagree about whether reading a good book is a qualitative higher pleasure than watching your favorite football team win the Super Bowl.

Food for Thought

Do you agree with John Stuart Mill that some activities are of such high qualitative character that they are essential to a happy human life? Take a look at the following activities. Which of these

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activities, if any, do you think are most essential for leading a happy human life? If possible, produce a qualitative ranking.

1. Exercising regularly.
2. Working in a job that pays well.
3. Eating in good restaurants.
4. Owning a big house.
5. Having friends.
6. Helping people in need.
7. Having children.
8. Getting drunk.
9. Writing letters or a diary.
10. Watching TV.
11. Being politically active in one's community.
12. Watching movies.
13. Having a lover.
14. Having a good sense of humor.
15. Listening to good music.
16. Talking about philosophical problems.

Moreover, Mill's qualitative ranking of pleasures seems to imply that pleasure and pain are not the only values there are. This, however, seems incompatible with the hedonistic tenets of utilitarianism.

Although there is no general consensus among utilitarian thinkers about how pleasure and happiness are related, utilitarianism is nevertheless an attractive moral theory. In most circumstances, it is pretty clear what kinds of actions promote or diminish general welfare. Utilitarianism is, therefore, a moral theory that produces clear and direct suggestions of what is morally required of us. This is especially helpful when we are confronted with difficult ethical dilemmas. Moreover, utilitarianism also explains well why moral thinking must be impartial. Utilitarian calculations take into account the well-being of everybody to an equal degree. This explains well why any form of egoism is incompatible with a moral point of view. Utilitarianism also has a good answer to the question of why we should be moral. According to utilitarianism, we care about morality because we are interested in making people happy. Increasing general well-being and happiness is a natural human endeavor, and utilitarianism can therefore demonstrate why the demands of morality are not something abstract and alien, but rather something that is a natural part of our existence.

Problems for Utilitarianism Although utilitarianism is an attractive moral theory, it also faces a number of well-known problems. First, it seems as if maximizing general happiness requires us in certain situations to perform immoral actions. Consider the following example. Suppose you are a doctor in a remote hospital in the Andes. One day, three very important people of the village get seriously sick (the priest, the only teacher, and the mayor). The teacher has lung cancer, the priest has kidney failure, and the mayor needs a new liver. If all three die, the village will be in serious trouble. As an experienced surgeon, you know that you could save the three lives if you had the necessary organs. Suddenly you realize that Freddie, a friendless but very healthy young man who is disliked by everybody in the village, happens to be in the hospital to have his tonsils removed; he could provide the necessary organs. Since Freddie is an antisocial loner, he would never volunteer his organs to save the three important people. However, you realize that you could simply take Freddie's organs during his tonsil surgery without his permission and save the mayor, the teacher, and the priest. What should you do?

This is of course a very artificial example, but it illustrates that utilitarianism can get us into trouble. Removing Freddie's organs without his permission seems to be morally wrong, but the action nevertheless seems to maximize general happiness. It follows therefore that utilitarianism will not always go hand in hand with our intuitions about what is morally required. A good utilitarian might respond to this objection that our moral intuitions are not always reliable and should be revised in light of utilitarian consideration. But many draw different conclusions from these types of situations. The philosopher A. C. Ewing writes, for example, that "utilitarian principles, logically carried out, would result in far more cheating, lying and unfair action than any good man would tolerate."⁴

Food for Thought

Can you think of other situations in which maximizing general welfare requires us to perform actions that according to common-sense morality are immoral?

A closely related objection to utilitarianism charges that utilitarian thinking cannot explain why we should respect people's rights. The philosopher James Rachels gives the example of a Peeping Tom who secretly takes pictures of his undressed neighbor Ms. York.⁵ Rachels

writes: "Suppose that he does this without ever being detected and that he uses the photographs entirely for his own amusement, without showing them to anyone. In these circumstances it is clear that the only consequence of his actions is an increase in his own happiness. No one else, including Ms. York, is caused any unhappiness at all. How, then, could utilitarianism deny that the Peeping Tom's actions are right?" This example shows nicely that utilitarian thinking is not easily compatible with our thinking about moral rights. Most of us would agree that everybody has the right to privacy, and that the Peeping Tom has violated Ms. York's rights to privacy. Thus, for those who take moral rights to be a central element in their moral thinking, utilitarianism seems unacceptable.

The third major objection against utilitarianism has to do with promise making. Suppose that I have promised to pick Susan up from the airport. On the way to the airport, I stop at a convenience store and run into a homeless man who is walking to a hospital with severe stomach pains. If I offer him a ride to the hospital, I will not be able to meet Susan at the airport. What should I do? From a utilitarian perspective, it seems clear that bringing the homeless man to the hospital has priority. It is, after all, possible that the homeless man will experience severe health problems if he is not treated soon, while Susan's well-being will not be as seriously affected by my failure to show up at the airport.

These examples show that utilitarianism only requires us to keep promises if doing so will maximize general happiness. In all other cases, it is not only morally permissible but actually morally required to break the promise instead. Many philosophers find this result problematic. The philosopher John Rawls, for example, writes in this context: "What would one say of someone who, when asked why he broke a promise, replied simply that breaking it was best on the whole? Assuming that his reply is sincere . . . one would question whether or not he knew what it means to say 'I promise.'"⁶

Food for Thought

Many objections against utilitarianism have to do with promise making. William Shaw describes a nice version of a deathbed promise. In a passage from his book *Contemporary Ethics: Taking Account of Utilitarianism*, he writes:

An elderly woman living alone in poor circumstances with few friends or relatives is dying, and you are at her bedside. She draws your attention to a small case under her bed, which contains some mementos along with the money she has managed to save over the

years, despite her apparent poverty. She asks you to take the case and to promise to deliver its contents, after she dies, to her nephew living in another state. Moved by her plight and by your affection for her, you promise to do as she bids. After a tearful good-bye, you take the case and leave. A few weeks later the old woman dies, and when you open her case you discover that it contains \$50,000. No one else knows about the money or the promise that you made. . . . Now suppose further that the nephew is a compulsive gambler and heavy drinker and that you know that, if you were to give him the \$50,000 as promised, he would rapidly squander the money.

What would a utilitarian do in this situation? What would you do? What is morally required?

Utilitarianism also seems to be too demanding. Keep in mind that utilitarianism requires us to maximize general happiness constantly. Suppose now that you are spending a lazy Sunday in bed. It seems clear that this action does not maximize general happiness. Instead of lying in bed, you could visit a nursing home and play cards with its elderly residents, or you could at least call your mother, or write a letter to your uncle. All of these activities would contribute more to general happiness than lying in bed. It seems to follow therefore that spending a lazy Sunday in bed is an immoral action. But that is a very curious conclusion. Most of us would reject the idea that spending a lazy Sunday is morally wrong. Commonsense morality draws the distinctions between **obligatory actions**, that is, actions that are morally required, and **supererogatory actions**, that is, actions that are praiseworthy but not strictly required. Going to a nursing home on your free Sunday to play cards with the elderly residents appears to be a supererogatory action but not an obligatory one. Utilitarianism makes it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish clearly between obligatory actions and supererogatory actions.

Food for Thought

Practice your understanding of the difference between obligatory actions and supererogatory actions. Which of the following actions are morally obligatory and which ones are supererogatory?

1. Not parking in a handicap parking spot.
2. Studying as hard as you can for your final exams.

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3. Being honest on your income tax report.
4. Giving at least some money to charity.
5. Spending time with your parents.
6. Making sure that your children receive the best possible education.
7. Supporting your own country in times of war.

Food for Thought

Utilitarianism also has problems incorporating our special obligations as parents, siblings, or relatives into our moral thinking. The following example illustrates this problem:

Suppose you are the parent of a three-year-old son. This summer you are cruising the Atlantic on an expensive cruise ship. Disaster strikes. The ship sinks. You somehow manage to get on a lifeboat with a motor. All around you, people are drowning and crying for help. Suddenly you see your son 100 yards away. He is frantically trying to stay afloat. In order to save your son you must drive the life boat to him. However, just as you are about to do that, you see that two children are about to drown 10 yards away in the opposite direction.

What would you do? What would utilitarianism require you to do? What do you think is the morally right thing to do?

The last four arguments show that a utilitarian account of morality faces some serious challenges. Some philosophers have tried to overcome these challenges by refining utilitarian thinking. It is, however, tempting to investigate whether nonconsequentialist moral theories might not produce a more acceptable moral position. We will explore this question in the next two sections.

Duty-Based Theories

The Importance of a Good Will The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) developed one of the main alternatives to consequence-based moral thinking. Kant's moral theory is often referred to as deontology, since the concept of duty plays an

important role in it. Kant rejects the idea that morally good actions will always lead to good consequences. According to him, consequences cannot explain why our actions are morally good or morally bad. Why does he think this? An example will help to clarify his position. Suppose Amelia is a 21-year-old college student who is a bit short on money. She thinks to herself: "If I go home next weekend and surprise my mother with an unannounced visit, I am sure she will give me some money." So, Amelia takes off early Saturday morning and drives for three hours to her mother's house. To Amelia's surprise, it turns out that it is her mother's birthday, and her mother is so moved by Amelia's surprise visit that she calls her daughter the "most thoughtful daughter in the world." It is obvious that Amelia's decision to visit her mother led to good consequences. Her mother is happy, and Amelia ends up with some additional money. However, Kant would argue that all of these positive consequences do not make Amelia's decision to drive to her mother's house a morally praiseworthy action. Something is missing! Amelia's motive for visiting her mother is too self-centered and too egoistic to make her action morally good.

Food for Thought

We have seen that an action that leads to good consequences might nevertheless be morally wicked. But Kant also thinks that an action that leads to bad consequences might be morally good. Can you think of examples of actions that lead to terrible consequences but which one might nevertheless consider to be morally good?

Kant suggests that moral judgments must focus on the motives behind our actions. It is the will that determines whether our actions are morally good or bad. Kant writes:

There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will.⁷

Kant's idea that a good will is the key factor in moral judgments is plausible. It makes sense to say that we should not be judged on the basis

of what we achieve, but rather on the basis of what we try to achieve. We are good, not because we succeed in our efforts, but rather because we try as hard as we can. However, Kant's concept of a good will also raises a crucial question: When exactly can we be sure that our will is good?

According to Kant, we have to realize that our will is constantly threatened by potentially overwhelming alien forces. Suppose I wake up one morning and feel a strong desire to eat a freshly baked bagel with cream cheese. Consequently, I get dressed and eat a bagel at the closest bagel shop. What should we say about this action? In this situation, I had a will to eat a bagel and I acted on that will. Was my will a good will? Kant would say "no." This does not mean that there is something wrong with my decision to eat a bagel, but Kant would insist that my action is not worthy of moral praise. The problem is that my will and my action were determined by my desire to eat a bagel. My desires, however, are not something I control. I cannot determine whether I wake up and have a desire for a bagel. As far as I know, I might wake up and have a desire for toast with jelly. Desires come and go, and as long as my will is only determined by my desires, my will is subjected to forces that I do not control. For this reason, Kant thinks that animals cannot be moral agents. The will of animals is always controlled by their desires, and animals are, therefore, unable to freely determine their own will. Animals are puppets of nature and not moral agents. But how can we humans escape the fate of animals and become free moral agents?

Kant argues that a good will is a will that stands on its own. It must determine itself in a manner that is independent of all outside forces. If we manage to do so, then our will becomes **autonomous**, and it is the autonomy of our will that makes our will good and worthy of respect.

Let us take a closer look at how the autonomy of our will can be achieved. Suppose you have promised to help your friend Joe with his move to a new apartment. On Saturday, the day you have promised to help him, you wake up with a terrible headache and feel a strong desire to stay in bed. You are not sure what you should do. One possibility is that you simply do what you feel like doing and stay in bed. In this case, your will is neither free nor autonomous, and your action has no moral worth. How else then can you approach this decision? Kant suggests in this context that your will becomes autonomous if you shape your will according to principles that are acceptable to all moral agents. Kant expresses this idea as follows:

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.⁸

Kant calls this the **categorical imperative**. The categorical imperative offers us a procedure that allows us to evaluate whether a principle should be allowed to shape our will. In order to understand this more clearly consider the following two principles:

1. Always keep your promises even if you do not feel like fulfilling them.
2. Keep your promises unless you have a headache.

The categorical imperative shows us that we should not allow the second principle to shape our will. This principle cannot be adopted by all rational agents. For if all rational agents would break their promises if they had a headache, nobody would trust anybody's promises. And if that is the case, then promise making is not really possible. So, if one understands principle 2 as a universal law, it turns out to be self-defeating. The same is not true for principle 1. If we imagine a world in which all rational agents adopt principle 1, we do not end up with any contradictions. Principle 1 passes the categorical imperative and is therefore an acceptable moral principle. Kant suggests that the more we shape our will according to universal principles, the more our will becomes autonomous and worthy of respect. It is quite clear that this is a demanding project. Nobody will succeed in making the categorical imperative the lone power that shapes one's will in every situation. But this is beside the point. The categorical imperative is not a description of how we act, but it is an ideal of how we ought to act. In real life we will at times act on mere impulses and inclinations, but the categorical imperative shows us a way in which we can rise above these brute forces of nature. It is our ability to shape our will according to universal principles that makes us moral agents who deserve dignity and respect.

Food for Thought

Test your understanding of the categorical imperative by deciding whether the following principles can be wished to be universal laws of nature:

1. Give money to people in need.
2. Be faithful to your spouse unless you suspect that your spouse is not faithful to you.

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3. Be friendly to somebody only if the person was friendly to you.
4. Never steal from anybody.
5. Always do what is in your best interest.
6. If you want to perform an action and the action does not harm anybody, then go ahead and do it.
7. Tell lies only if you have to.
8. Never break a promise. 77. 77.
9. If you feel like it, drink a shot of Tequila.
10. Treat people with respect.

The Food for Thought exercise above illustrates that it is not always trivial to tell whether a principle can be universally adopted by all rational agents. This is the reason why Kant offered an alternative formulation of the categorical imperative. Keep in mind that the main purpose of the categorical imperative is to shape the will such that it becomes autonomous. It is the autonomy of my will that makes it possible for me to become a moral agent. Since I have such a keen interest in becoming a moral agent, it seems obvious that it would be wrong for me to prevent others from achieving this status as well. It follows therefore that I should not act in ways that prevent others from developing an autonomous will. Kant puts this point as follows:

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.⁹

In this so-called second formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant expresses the same idea as before. We need to act on principles that are universally acceptable to all rational agents. But a principle cannot be universally accepted if it prevents a rational agent from becoming autonomous. Consider an example. Suppose you and I have been dating for six months. I am very much in love with you, but last weekend, after having too much to drink, I had sex with somebody else. I do not care for that other person, and since I do love you, I decide to keep this whole unfortunate event secret. What is wrong with this action? Notice that my decision to keep my affair secret is an attempt to influence your decisions. I want you to stay with me, but I am afraid that you might leave me if I tell you the truth. So, I try to make you stay by keeping my actions secret.

In this situation, it is clear that I do not respect you as an autonomous agent. My actions prevent you from making a decision that is based on your own will. By keeping my actions secret, I am treating you as a mere means to my ends. If I had respect for your autonomy, I would tell you everything you needed to know in order to make up your own mind. I am, therefore, morally obligated to tell you about my affair.

The second formulation of the categorical imperative explains nicely why Kant thought that lying is always and everywhere an immoral action. Lying, by definition, involves that we treat another rational agent as a mere means to an end, and that is never acceptable.

Food for Thought

The second formulation of the categorical imperative stresses that we should never treat others as a means to an end. Give some examples of situations in which people are treated only as a means to an end.

A good test to clarify whether you understand Kantian ethics is to apply it to concrete situations. Let us return to the story of Robin Hood. We have seen that—from a utilitarian point of view—Robin Hood's actions can be considered to be morally good. If Robin Hood only steals from a small number of rich people and if he distributes the spoils of this thievery among many poor and starving people, then his actions bring about more happiness than misery. What would Kant say about Robin Hood? Let us start by analyzing Robin Hood's action in the light of the first version of the categorical imperative. Robin Hood seems to be acting on the following principle (maxim): if I can help many poor people, it is acceptable to steal from the rich. Can we want this principle to become a universal law? The answer is a clear "no." If we were to universalize this principle, it is clear that everybody would feel justified to steal. If that were the case, there would be no property, and that would make stealing conceptually impossible. So the principle in question, if universalized, turns out to be self-defeating. The principle does not pass the first version of the categorical imperative. We must conclude therefore that Robin Hood's actions are morally wrong.

We reach the same result if we apply the second formulation of the categorical imperative to this situation. It is clear that Robin Hood is treating rich people as a mere means to an end. He does not respect

their autonomy. His actions are therefore morally wrong. What we see in this example is that the two versions of the categorical imperative work hand in hand. We can choose either formulation in order to help clarify what we have to do in specific situations.

Food for Thought

Utilitarianism and deontological thinking frequently lead to conflicting recommendations of what we should do in difficult moral situations. In the following situation, a convinced utilitarian would act differently from a full-blown deontologist. Can you explain the differences?

Suppose you are a famous anthropologist. One day you find a remote tribe in the middle of the Amazon rain forest. The tribe is really surprised by your visit. After all, you are the first stranger they have ever seen. The tribe is just in the middle of a religious ritual. They are preparing to execute twenty prisoners from a neighboring tribe as a gift to the sun god. However, since they also want to honor you, they offer you the honor of strangling one of the prisoners with your own hands. If you do that, they will let the others go back to their tribe. If you refuse to accept the honor, they will sacrifice all twenty people. You try to tell them that your god does not allow you to strangle people, but the tribe leader is unwilling to make any deals. He is very clear: either you strangle one of the prisoners, or else all twenty will be killed.

Advantages of Kant's Ethics Kant's moral philosophy has a number of advantages. First, Kant derives moral principles simply on the basis of rational and a priori reasoning. This demonstrates that moral principles are independent of time and place, and are binding for all human beings. Second, deontological ethics tells us that we have a number of strict duties. We must tell the truth; we must develop our talents; we cannot commit suicide; and we have to give to charity. This categorical and rigorous advocacy of duties helps us when we face difficult moral decisions. Kantian ethics provides us, therefore, with very clear and unambiguous moral directions. Third, Kant's theory of ethics shows us that human beings have infinite worth. Most of us probably always suspected that there is something morally wrong with putting a price on a human life. Is a human life worth one million dollars or perhaps ten million dollars? Deontological thinking demonstrates that

each of us is worth an infinite amount, for each of us has to be seen as an ultimate end and not just as the means to some purpose. Finally, deontological ethics is compatible with the idea that we have fundamental moral rights. We have seen that according to Kant we must respect the autonomy of others in all situations. This lends itself to the idea that we are born with fundamental rights (like the right to life and the pursuit of happiness) that nobody can take away from us. Such rights-based moral thinking is familiar to most of us, and Kant's ethics provides a good foundation for it.

Problems for Kant's Ethics The biggest weakness of deontological thinking is that it does not allow the consequences of our actions to be of ethical significance. We have seen that Kant makes the will the central element in his ethical value system. Our will is good if we try to act according to principles that are compatible with the categorical imperative. It does not matter what consequences our good will actually brings about. This neglect of consequences leads to paradoxical results.

Suppose that your best friend Susan has an argument with her husband Felix. Susan is very upset and decides that it is better to spend the night at your house away from her husband. Two hours later, Felix stands at your door and is carrying an axe. He breathes heavily and seems very angry. He asks you whether Susan is staying with you. What do you do? It seems extremely likely that most of us would choose to tell Felix a lie. We might say, for example: "Felix, I am surprised to see that Susan is not with you. I have no idea where she might be. Can I help you look for her?" The reason for this blatant lie is clear: If you do not lie, the consequences will be terrible. A deontologist would insist, however, that we have to tell the truth. We have, after all, a perfect duty never to tell a lie, and consequences do not matter. That recommendation seems crazy! In some situations, consequences do matter a great deal, and they should therefore influence our decisions. This shows that deontological thinking is too restricted. Kant's insistence that a good will is sufficient for moral goodness seems misguided.

Food for Thought

Can you think of other situations in which telling a lie is not only morally permitted, but even morally required of us?

A closely related problem with Kant's ethics is caused by situations in which duties conflict with each other. It is not far-fetched to assume that in certain situations our duty to respect the autonomy of others can be in conflict with the duty to save as many lives as possible. Kant's ethics gives us no recipe of how to prioritize duties when they conflict. This lack of clarity makes it difficult to apply deontological thinking in challenging ethical situations.

Food for Thought

Describe a number of situations in which important and central duties are in conflict with each other.

There are further weaknesses of deontological ethical theories, but the two discussed problems make it clear that deontology faces some serious challenges. Some deontological thinkers, for example, W. D. Ross, have tried to respond to these difficulties by refining deontological ethical thinking. It is, however, interesting to see whether a completely different approach to ethics might not fare better. Such an alternative approach is provided by virtue ethics. We will explore it in the next and last section of this chapter.

Virtue-Based Theories

The Importance of Moral Character Although utilitarianism and deontology are often presented as opposing ethical theories, they have something in common: both try to develop general and universal criteria that allow us to classify actions as either morally good or bad. Utilitarianism and deontology are therefore action- and rule-centered ethical theories. Virtue ethics takes a different approach. Virtue ethics highlights the role of the agent in moral deliberations. Let us illustrate this difference with the help of an example. Suppose you have to explain to a child why lying is morally wrong. According to utilitarianism, lying is wrong because it tends to lead to bad consequences. A deontologist would say that lying is wrong because it entails that we treat others as a mere means to our ends. A virtue ethical thinker, on the other hand, will prefer a different type of explanation. She might say: Lying is wrong because lying tends to

corrupt our character. People who lie habitually live not as well as honest people.

From a virtue ethical perspective, judgments about character are more fundamental than judgments about rules, duties, and obligations. Virtue ethics replaces the question "What ought I to do?" with the question "What sort of person ought I to be?" We therefore should focus our energies on improving our moral character rather than finding abstract moral rules that allow us to classify actions.

This introduces a new direction into our thinking about ethical theory. We can forgo our search for universal moral rules, and focus instead on clarifying what type of moral character is praiseworthy. An agent's character is good insofar as the agent possesses virtues and lacks vice. Virtues are character traits that allow agents to act habitually well. Honesty, for example, is a virtue. People who are honest are people who have a strong disposition to speak the truth in all situations. Many people lack this virtue. Some people have the character that tempts them to exaggerate constantly. Having such a character is a vice. Compassion is another virtue. Persons with compassion can relate well to people who suffer and thus are motivated to help people in need. In addition to honesty and compassion, there are many other positive and praiseworthy character traits that are considered to be virtues.

It is important to realize that having a virtue has an emotional as well as an intellectual component. Being generous, for example, involves more than sharing money and resources with others. The generous person also feels pleasure and joy while doing so. Moreover, the generous person also has the right kind of beliefs about when generosity is appropriate. Since virtues are rather complex character traits, it seems natural to understand virtue possession as a matter of degree. Very few of us can be described as being always fully courageous and loyal. However, in real life it makes sense to say that we are more courageous or loyal than somebody else. A virtue ethical thinker claims that the more we develop a virtuous character, the greater the chances are that we will act well in life. Good actions naturally flow from a good character.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was the first to provide a systematic account of the virtues. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he argues that moral virtues are character traits that are a mean between two vices. Courage, for example, is a mean between cowardice and rashness. The coward has the type of character that causes him to feel fear too strongly (a state of excess). The rash person feels fear insufficiently (a state of deficiency). Only

the courageous person has the kind of character that allows her to feel fear to the right degree and at the right time. The courageous person, therefore, has a tendency to act appropriately when she faces dangerous situations. The nature of other moral virtues, like temperance, generosity, magnificence, high-mindedness, controlled anger, friendliness, and modesty, can also be analyzed as states of character that lie between two vices. Generosity, for example, is a mean between stinginess and wastefulness. Modesty is a mean between shamelessness and bashfulness. This is Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Aristotle draws attention to the fact that finding the mean cannot be accomplished by theoretical reflection alone. Developing a virtuous character requires life experience and practical wisdom.

Over time, Aristotle's virtue theory became the dominant account of the virtues. In medieval discussions, the particular virtues described by Aristotle and the ancient Greeks became known as the cardinal virtues. Medieval thinkers added the Christian virtues of humility, chastity, obedience, faith, and love to the list. In the eighteenth century, it was common to add frugality, industry, cleanliness, and tranquillity to the list of important moral virtues. These various lists of virtues highlight one peculiar feature of virtue ethics. There is no general agreement regarding how many virtues there are. At different times, different thinkers have developed very different lists of virtues. Any attempt to develop a definite list must be somewhat arbitrary and subject to cultural influences.

Food for Thought

Although it is relatively easy to list various virtues and vices, it is much more difficult to describe in detail what these virtues or vices actually are. Take a look at each of the following virtues and explain to a classmate what you think these virtues entail. Give some concrete examples and check whether both of you understand the virtues and vices in a similar fashion.

Virtues: civility, courage, compassion, courteousness, dependability, fairness, friendliness, generosity, good temper, honesty, justice, loyalty, and moderation.

Vices: envy, lust, cruelty, gluttony, anger, covetousness, sloth, greed, selfishness, impulsiveness, insensitivity, and recklessness.

The absence of a definite list of virtues can actually be seen as an advantage of virtue ethics. We have seen that Aristotle stresses the importance of practical wisdom in the acquisition of moral virtues. Practical wisdom is by its nature concerned with particular, situation-specific "know-how" rather than with abstract and general rules. This means that it is perfectly fine if different agents focus on different virtues if they happen to live in different societies. It is appropriate that a person in ancient Athens aims to develop a different character from a person who lives in present-day New York City. Moreover, a person's occupation must also be taken into account. A good nurse has to develop a different character from a banker or a university professor. In order to provide guidance, virtue ethical thinkers stress the importance of role models. A role model is a person of excellent moral character who habitually acts well and who feels pleasure when exercising her virtues. Once we have found a virtuous role model, we have found a list of important virtues and a goal that we can strive to achieve. Moreover, role models also help us to decide what we should do in difficult situations. If the role model is close by, we can ask them for advice, or, when that is not possible, we can simply imagine what our virtuous role model would do.

Food for Thought

Role models play an important role in virtue ethical thinking. From the list of the following persons, decide which of these is in your opinion the best role model. Which of them is the worst?

1. Socrates
2. Buddha
3. Oprah Winfrey
4. Jesus Christ
5. Abraham Lincoln
6. Mahatma Gandhi
7. Martin Luther King, Jr.
8. Mohammed
9. Mother Teresa
10. Alan Greenspan
11. Tom Hanks

A good test to see whether you are beginning to understand the basic thrust of virtue ethics is to analyze a specific situation in the light of virtue ethical considerations. Let us turn to the story of Robin Hood one last time. Would a virtue ethical thinker approve of Robin Hood's actions? In order to answer this question we must do more than look at what Robin Hood does. In addition, we have to understand what kind of person Robin Hood is. According to most portrayals of Robin Hood in movies and books, he is motivated by a sense of loyalty to King Richard. This is one reason why he is opposing the new king, John. From a virtue ethical perspective, loyalty is clearly a virtue and a praiseworthy character trait. Notice how different our assessment of Robin Hood would be if his disobedience toward King John were simply caused by youthful rebelliousness. In that case, a virtue ethical thinker would find fault with Robin Hood's character and his actions. Moreover, Robin Hood also seems to be very compassionate toward poor people, and he does not seem to be cruel or inhumane when he robs the rich. Just the opposite, he is often portrayed as humorous and gentle, even when he has to fight against wicked men. In addition, Robin Hood is a good friend and a courageous leader. It seems then that Robin Hood's actions flow from a praiseworthy and excellent character. According to virtue ethics, his actions are, therefore, morally good.

Advantages of Virtue Ethics Virtue ethics has a number of attractive features. By concentrating on moral character rather than on abstract rules, virtue ethics stresses that becoming a moral person is mostly a matter of receiving the right education and upbringing. Utilitarianism and deontology make it appear as if becoming morally good is simply a matter of applying the right moral principles. This produces the misleading impression that being moral is a theoretical matter rather than a practical affair. By stressing the importance of role models, practical wisdom, and moral education, virtue ethical thinking provides us with a practical moral framework that squares well with common sense.

Second, virtue ethics seems to provide the correct account of moral motivation. To illustrate this, it will be useful to consider an example. Suppose three adult sisters call their mother on her birthday. The oldest daughter is a deontologist. She calls her mother because it is the right thing to do. The second daughter is utilitarian, and she calls her mother because it maximizes general welfare. Both of these motives for calling one's mother on her birthday seem artificial and even a bit callous. Let us

compare these motivations to what moves the third daughter. The third daughter is a virtue ethical thinker who calls her mother because she has developed the kind of character that makes it pleasant to call one's mother on her birthday. She does not ask herself whether it is her duty to do this or what the consequences of her actions are; she simply acts out of a feeling of affection for her mother. This example shows that a virtue ethical theory provides a much more realistic and plausible account of what motivates people to perform morally good actions.

Third, virtue ethics makes it possible to give weight to special relationships within our ethical deliberations. Classical ethical theories like utilitarianism and deontology require us to adopt a position of strict impartiality. According to these theories, morality requires that we care as much about the well-being of strangers as we care about the well-being of our children. In many situations, this absolute impartiality seems forced and inhumane. Virtue ethics allows us to pay attention to the special moral obligations that arise in the context of being a lover, a parent, and a good friend.

Food for Thought

Can you describe situations in which we might be morally required to violate a strict sense of impartiality? For example, is it morally acceptable to prefer the well-being of one's own country over that of other countries? Is it morally permitted to give more weight to the well-being of one's own children than to the well-being of other children?

Finally, virtue ethics provides a more flexible moral framework than competing ethical theories. We have seen in our prior discussion that utilitarian thinking and deontological thinking are both confronted with counterexamples. This is because both theories demand that we apply one theoretical principle in all situations. Virtue ethics does not face such a problem. According to virtue ethics, we should perform those actions that a completely virtuous person would perform as well. But this opens up the possibility that our role model will sometimes think in terms of consequences and sometimes in terms of strict duty. We thus are able to incorporate the best recommendations of the two main competitors within a virtue ethical framework.

Problems for Virtue Ethics We have seen that virtue ethics moves away from the question “What ought we to do?” and focuses instead on the analysis of moral character traits. However, it is clear that we study and develop moral theories in order to find answers to specific moral questions. We want to know whether it is morally right to execute dangerous criminals or whether it is morally required of us to help a terminally sick patient to die. It is difficult to see how virtue ethics can provide much help in answering these questions.

We have seen that virtue ethics recommends that we do what a completely virtuous person would do. But this recommendation raises two crucial epistemic questions.

1. How can we identify a completely virtuous person?
2. How does the role model know what to do in difficult ethical situations?

The first of these questions might be answered in a pragmatic way. We might simply accept someone as a role model if the society around us accepts the person as a role model as well. Aristotle, for example, tells us that Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom.¹⁰ But this recommendation only makes sense in the context of the Athenian community. If we adopt this method, virtue ethics seems to require that we accept the moral judgments of our society and thus seems to embrace a form of cultural relativism. On the other hand, if we reject this pragmatic answer, we need to develop some objective and timeless criteria regarding ways of recognizing and identifying completely virtuous persons. This, however, might not only be difficult but actually impossible.

Let us now turn to the second issue. How does the virtuous person know what to do in difficult ethical situations? In many situations, different virtues are in conflict with each other. The honest thing to do is not always the most prudent or the most courageous. How are we to weigh the different virtues against each other? The most plausible answer to this question is that the role model must appeal to some general moral rules that are provided by classical ethical theories. This suggests, however, that virtue ethics cannot stand completely on its own. It might be best to regard virtue ethics as a part of an overall theory of ethics rather than as a complete theory itself.

Final Remarks on the Problem of Morality

We started our discussion of ethics by criticizing moral relativism. There are good reasons to think that there are at least some universal moral norms that apply to all people, in all cultures, at all times. However, our discussion of famous moral theories did not produce a unanimous winner. Divine command theories, utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics offer different accounts of morality, and we were not able to identify one theory as superior to all the others. This is puzzling. If moral objectivism is correct and there truly exists an objective moral reality that is independent of our moral judgments, shouldn't we be in a position to recognize that one ethical theory provides a better description of moral reality than all the other theories? A moral relativist will count this result as evidence against moral objectivism. He will argue that our inability to identify one moral theory as superior to all the others is most compatible with moral relativism. However, we do not have to draw such a conclusion. We can agree with Plato and argue that moral values are the most difficult entities to be clearly grasped by human intellect. We thus can hope that in the future, philosophers who are a bit smarter than us will find an ultimate unified moral theory. The second option to avoid moral relativism entails that we embrace a form of moral pluralism. Moral pluralism holds that moral reality consists in multiple and competing moral values. If we accept this view, we can understand each internally consistent moral theory as explaining a part of moral reality. According to this picture, every consistent moral theory contributes something to our moral understanding, but no theory can claim that it is entirely accurate.

Endnotes

1. This story is probably factually false. If I am informed correctly, Inuits probably never treated elders in this way. However, it does not matter whether the story is historically accurate or not; it illustrates well why certain drastic behavioral differences between different cultures can be caused by nonmoral background beliefs and not by differences in moral values.
2. Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
4. Ewing, A. C. *Ethics*. London: English Universities Press, 1953, p. 40.
5. Rachels, James. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003, pp. 112–113.