

## Introduction to Ethical Theory

- I. **Normative Ethics:** Normative ethical theory is the branch of philosophy concerned with formulating and evaluating theories of moral rightness and moral goodness. Such theories attempt to state the features in virtue of which morally right actions are morally right and morally good states of affairs are morally good. Normative ethical theory has two parts:
  - A. Theory of Value (Theory of the Good): This branch concerns the moral evaluation of people, states of affairs, character traits, etc. as good or bad (or better or worse). It doesn't directly answer the question of how one should act.
  - B. Theory of Obligation (Theory of the Right): This branch concerns the moral evaluation of actions as right or wrong, obligatory, permissible or forbidden.
- II. **Types of Normative Ethical Theories:** Normative Ethical Theories are most frequently classified according to their theory of obligation. The distinction between deontological and consequentialistic theories is usually cited as the fundamental distinction here.
  - A. Consequentialism: holds that the rightness or wrongness (etc.) of actions depends entirely on the moral value (goodness) of the consequences. Typically, consequentialist views are comparative in the sense that the rightness of an action depends on the value of its consequences compared with the value of the consequences of alternatives available.
  - B. Deontological Theories of Obligation: These theories hold that the moral rightness or wrongness (etc.) of actions does not depend entirely on considerations of goodness. (It follows, of course, that such theories hold that the rightness of an action does not depend entirely on the value of the consequences of that action.) One example of a deontological theory is Divine Command Theory.
- III. **Types of Consequentialism:** Consequentialist theories are classified according both to their theories of obligation and their theories of value.
  - A. Consequentialist Theories of Obligation:
    1. Ethical Egoism: The egoist holds that the rightness of actions is determined solely by the value of the consequences that affect the agent of the action. Effects on others are, if relevant at all, only indirectly relevant because of effects they have on the agent.
    2. Group Chauvinism: The group chauvinist holds that the rightness of actions is determined solely by the value of the consequences for some group (usually defined in relation to the agent--e.g., her race, her sex, her religious group) which is a proper subset of those affected by the action.
    3. Utilitarianism: This view, clearly the most popular among moral theorists, holds that the rightness of actions is determined by the value of the consequences for all affected by the action.

- B. **Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic (Instrumental) Value:** To understand the consequentialist theories, it is necessary to understand the distinction between intrinsic value and extrinsic (or instrumental) value.
1. **Intrinsic Value:** A thing has intrinsic value if it is valuable in itself--apart from any other considerations, including considerations of its effects.
  2. **Extrinsic Value:** A thing has extrinsic value in virtue of its capacity to produce something of value--ultimately, something of intrinsic value. (All chains of extrinsic value terminate in something of intrinsic value.)
- C. **Consequentialist Theories of Value:** Strictly speaking there are no consequentialist theories of value. Consequentialism has to do with the theory of obligation. The correct way to head this section is: 'Theories of Value Frequently Held by Consequentialists':
1. **Hedonism:** The Hedonist holds that what has intrinsic value is pleasure and this is all that has intrinsic value. The value of other things is always dependent on their tendency to produce pleasure.
  2. **Eudaimonism:** The Eudaimonist holds that the what has intrinsic value is happiness and that this is the only thing with intrinsic value. Happiness is to be distinguished from pleasure in ways that eudaimonists disagree about. Typically, it is taken to involve not merely sensations but self-development, a sense of self-worth, etc.
  3. **Desire Satisfaction:** Desire Satisfaction Theories (DSTs) hold that all and only those things that satisfy intrinsic desires are intrinsically good. (A person who desires something (object, state of affairs, sensation, etc.) for itself and not just for something it can bring about, has an intrinsic desire for it.)

#### **IV. Difficulties With Consequentialism** (see problems with consequentialism handout)

- A. **Special Obligations:** teachers, jurors, etc.
- B. **Rights** (property, life): scapegoat objection, Justine story
- C. **Justice:** cheating/making example of entire class case
- D. **Excessive Demands:** Any consequentialist theory, utilitarianism included, seems to demand too much of us. Practically everything we do will be immoral. For it is almost always true that we could be doing something else that would produce more utility/value. Is it permissible to give only 1/3 of your income to the needy? Not if it would produce more total utility to give 1/2 or 2/3 of it. Many argue that morality does not demand that on each and every occasion we be doing all we can to produce total utility. Morality leaves us some leeway - some moral slack.