# A brief but practical summary of ethics

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## Abstract

Scientifically trained people can sometimes be suspicious of ethics. This is usually because they believe it to be entirely subjective and therefore not constrained by rational discipline. However I shall outline here some of the ways in which ethical thinking can indeed be disciplined by patterns of theory, which will make it seem much more likely that sensible people can usually reach a practically useful level of reasoned agreement. This will not be a complete account, but by considering a representative sample of ethical theories I hope to demonstrate that ethics is far from being entirely subjective.

## Introduction

Let's start with an idea that goes back to Aristotle over 2000 years ago[1]. He said, "We come together for the sake of life, and we stay together for the sake of the good life." We may suppose he was imagining something rather like the following story. A tribe of ancient hunter-gatherers facing winter would need to lay in a stock of food. There's a herd of mammoth in the woods, but nobody in the tribe can catch one by themselves. So they work out that if they band together ("..you lot go up the valley and dig a pit while we get some drums and firesticks and chase a small mammoth after you") then they'll have plenty

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[1] 384–322 BC.

to eat. Afterwards they sit in their cave, gnawing their mammoth bones and chatting: "That cooperation strategy worked out well; I wonder if we can get some more benefits from it? Perhaps we should have a few rules, like *Don't eat each other's babies, Don't steal anyone else's cooking pot* and so forth." Thus the tribe evolves the beginnings of morality. They are working out how to stay together for the sake of the good life. They are making conjectures about practically successful rules of cooperation, and these conjectures can be tested against the results. "Does this rule help us live happily together? If so, we keep it, and if not, we change it."

With Aristotle's guidance I want to suggest that morality is a human social artefact. It is *our* game. It is up to us to get it right, and getting it right is a practical matter. It is not a set of absolute rules, but rather it is work in progress. At its best it is a pragmatic, cooperative and flexible scheme for resolving conflict and making human interactions more beneficial for us all. That is why we owe it our allegiance, not because disobedience is sinful, but because opting into the game helps us all get closer to what we want together.

## A minor complication

Isaac Newton is reputed to have said "If I have seen further than other men it is through standing on the shoulders of giants", so now let's stand on Aristotle's shoulders and look a few kilometres down the river. There we see another tribe who have gone through a similar exercise and have come up with a somewhat different set of rules. If these tribes meet they have a couple of obvious choices. They can agree to stay away from each other saying in effect "We believe this is morally right so this is morally right for us but you believe that is morally right so that is morally right

for you". That position is called (moral) *relativism*. It does not allow for cooperation between the two groups. Alternatively they can each take the view that the other tribe is wrong and go to war. That position is called *absolutism* and it has been responsible for a lot of harm throughout human history.

However, there is a superior alternative known as *pluralism* which resembles scientific scepticism. The pluralist says in effect "I see you have some different moral rules from ours and I suppose you have reasons for them. Let's agree to discuss our ideas in a peaceful manner, and try to avoid treading on each other's toes in the meantime. This negotiation might very well produce a better system for all of us." This attitude extends the work-in-progress model of morality to the level of larger and larger groups staying together for the sake of the good life. A lot of successful social advancement has resulted from taking such an attitude to moral differences between people.

Such discussions will obviously proceed more smoothly if the participants are willing to stick to clear lines of reasoning. During the development of Western philosophical ideas, a small number of theories of how moral thinking can be based on one or two simple ideas have dominated the discussion, and we now turn to looking briefly at a selection of these theories, in order to demonstrate that moral thinking can be a disciplined activity, governed just as much as science is by a commitment to practical rationality. A further payoff will be that most people think about morality in ways that these theories suggest, albeit not entirely clearly or even consistently, so that managing disputes that do not yield to the production of more facts, and are therefore probably due to disagreement about what to value rather than about facts at all, will be easier if you can recognise where people are coming from.

## Egoism

The first of these, Egoism, has a very simple basic rule at its core. *Do the best you can for yourself.* Look out for number one. At first glance that doesn't look very much like a moral theory at all, however popular it might be in the real world. After all, if the cooperative business of staying together for the sake of the good life is what morality is all about, a rule that upholds selfishness as a way of life seems to be steering us in the wrong direction.

But it isn't quite as simple as that. Suppose you find yourself in possession of a large quantity of beer. If you selfishly drink it all right now you'll have a hangover tomorrow and you won't make any friends that way either, whereas if you give a party and invite all your mates, you'll be in better shape the next day and your mates will invite you to their parties over the following weeks. In general, the egoist who thinks about the long term and remembers the value of good-quality interactions with other people will make his own life happier, and the short-term selfish egoist will be a failed egoist in the long term. So it's not such a bad theory after all.

Living as we do in a developed civilisation, we are surrounded by the results of other people's labours. I can't make a pair of shoes or an electric light, but the things I can contribute to the whole fabric of civilisation allow me to enjoy the rich and diverse array of its goods and services. The cooperation suggested by Aristotle's thought experiment is in my interest. Prudent, clear thinking egoists are good neighbours.

Nearly 300 years ago the founding economist Adam Smith suggested that people in business acting in the marketplace for their own best benefit would be led "as if by an invisible hand" to benefit the whole of society, and the difference between long-term and short-term egoism seems very close to what he had in mind. If there are two cobblers in the village, and one of them does good work for a fair price while the other is greedy and does shoddy work and charges too much, it's quite clear who will get repeat business and who will have to lift their game. Maybe egoists in mutual constraint really do make the best of all possible worlds.

Our next move is to generalise this last line of thinking and so arrive at the next inhabitant of the moral Zoo, known as a Utilitarian.

## Utilitarianism

Imagine a top-end egoist with a couple of extra characteristics which are quite plausibly part of normal human nature. One is that in a general way they like other people. They enjoy having friends and are happy when they tell a joke and their friends laugh. Another is that they recognise that the future consequences of their actions are often difficult to predict accurately, so that it is prudent to make impartial rather than selfish choices, thus getting a reputation for being fair

and honest. Such a person will readily adopt a different basic rule at the core of their moral thinking. *Seek the greatest good for the greatest number.* This slogan captures the fundamental principal of the doctrine known as Utilitarianism. Note that it allows you to take your own welfare into account, but only to the same extent as the welfare of everyone else. (The idea that you consider everybody's welfare *except* your own is officially known as Altruism, and it is very rare in practice.)

Utilitarianism was very influential when it was first suggested[2], although there were many who opposed it bitterly, for reasons we'll see later. Like egoism, it directs attention to the future, and in particular to the consequences flowing from our choices. It does however have a couple of major practical difficulties, and these have occupied a lot of attention in the years since its early development.

The first difficulty is a practical one. The estimation of consequences required to make a utilitarian decision is likely to be extremely complicated. First you must imagine all possible choices open to you in the situation where a decision is called for. Then you must estimate the consequences, good or bad, for everyone affected by each choice, including the choice of doing nothing, which will have consequences. Then you must calculate somehow the extent to which good consequences outweigh bad in each case, and finally you must act only on that choice in which the good outweighs the bad to the greatest achievable extent. This is not merely cost-benefit analysis. It is a comparative weighing-up of the cost-benefit analyses of every choice open to you. That will often take an inordinate amount of time and effort.

The second problem is even more awkward. It is that sometimes you will be able to achieve the greatest excess of good over bad consequences only by subjecting a minority of people to considerable harm. This is usually called the scapegoat problem and it is particularly embarrassing for utilitarians because their basic aim is to make the future better than the past for everyone. Indeed it remains the fundamental weak point of utilitarianism, just as victimisation of minori-

ties by the ballot box is the weak point of democracy. (Roughly speaking, democracy can be seen as the political analogue of utilitarianism in morality.)

The version of utilitarianism described so far is commonly known as *Act Utilitarianism*. Its problems can be substantially reduced by adopting an alternative form of utilitarianism known as *Rule Utilitarianism* as follows. When you need to make a moral choice, you proceed according to a set of rules which you believe will help you to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. If things turn out badly, you and your utilitarian colleagues give thought to revising the rules so that a better result will occur next time a similar situation arises. Thus a community of utilitarians evolves a better and better virtual rule book by common consent. This allows for speedy decision-making, reducing the first problem substantially. It also helps with the second, indirectly, because if you are led to produce a great deal of good by making a small number of victims, you are under pressure from your own doctrine to try to imagine ways in which the same good can be achieved with less harm. To mention Adam Smith again, he suggested that a small pool of unemployed people would stimulate the economy by driving wages down, but in most modern countries their plight is softened by such arrangements as the dole, assisted work training and so forth.

Nevertheless, as suggested above, the scapegoat problem remains utilitarianism's least attractive feature, so we will now turn to a very different way of grounding our thinking about morality which not only represents how many people think, both in the past and the present, but which can also suggest a possible remedy for the problem.

## Deontic Ethics

### Duty

We get a clue to the basic position here from the derivation of the word, from the Greek *deon*, meaning duty. For a deontic ethicist the basic rule is, *Do your Duty*. All very well, but of course we need an answer to the question, How do we know what our duty actually is? Many of us learn out values and duties at out mother's knee (or our father's boot?). They are part of our cultural heritage. In some cases they are given by the role we occupy in life. Indeed the expression *my*

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[2]John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), his father James Mill (1773–1806) and his friend Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) are the major early figures. Other related dates may be of interest: Adam Smith 1723–1790, Karl Marx 1818–1893, Charles Dickens 1812–1870, US declaration of independence and publication of Adam Smith's seminal text *Wealth of Nations*, both 1776.

*station and its duties*[3] captures this line of thinking well enough. The general idea that we find our duties from our place in relation to those around us would be familiar enough to a member of the army, for example, and it would also have been familiar to almost everyone throughout the long life of the feudal system. Perhaps this explains the slightly old-fashioned feel of deontic ethics. It also explains why utilitarianism was greeted with such dismay at first. Deontic thinking is fundamentally past-oriented. A contemporary deontic, Robert Nozick, a staunch defender of capitalism, describes his theory as *historical*, meaning that the justice of a distribution of property is determined by how it comes about, and if it turns out cruelly for some people, too bad. To utilitarians, this seems outrageous, because they are future-oriented. They estimate the moral value of a situation by its likely consequences, rather than by the path by which it was arrived at.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) tried to put deontic thinking on a firmly rational basis, and although his ideas are difficult, a summary account is worth a place here, because we can learn a useful lesson from his attempt. The core idea is known as the *Categorical Imperative*. That's an awkward expression, but it means an unconditional requirement. Here is one way in which Kant expressed the idea: *Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.* The concept he is getting at is that a valid moral law is one which you can imagine being applied in every circumstance, without striking some kind of logical snag such as self-contradiction or meaninglessness. The maxim is the rule you are following when you make a moral choice. Perhaps it is easier to grasp by way of examples.

Suppose we are considering whether it is morally acceptable to tell a lie. If so, the maxim of your action would be *Tell lies*. Turning it into a universal law would give the rule *Everyone tell lies all the time*. In that case all discourse would become meaningless; nobody would understand what anyone else was trying to communicate. But if instead you decide to tell the truth, then the universalised maxim would be *Everyone tell the truth all the time*. This might sometimes be embarrassing, but rational, meaningful discourse would be preserved. Therefore you should tell the truth.

Another example: Should I break a promise? If I decide to do so, the universalised maxim would be *Everyone always break their promises*. That would destroy the concept of a promise. However, if everyone always kept their promises the concept of a promise would remain coherent. Therefore the valid moral law is to keep promises rather than break them.

Kant offers an alternative formulation of the categorical imperative, which is *Always treat other people as ends in themselves and never as a means only*. This way of expressing the idea emphasises the moral autonomy of others. We should respect other people enough to avoid using them for our own ends. The word *only* is very important here, note. If I catch a bus, I am treating the bus driver as a means to provide me with transport, but if I pay the fare, which is how he makes his living, I am not treating him as a means *only*. Kant takes enormous pains to argue that the two formulations of the categorical imperative are logically equivalent, but here it will suffice to see that they are extensionally equivalent (decide like cases alike). If I tell a lie, or break a promise, I am treating the other person as a means only rather than as an end in themselves. If I cheat in an exam I am behaving in a way which would make exam results useless if everyone did it, and also using the other candidates who get their results honestly for my own aim of seeming as good as they are, so I am violating both versions of the categorical imperative.

Now for a payoff from Kant's difficult thinking. In its second version, the categorical imperative suggests a remedy for the scapegoat problem which is utilitarianism's Achilles heel. We can suggest a modified doctrine which says that we should seek the greatest good of the greatest number by any method that does not abuse people by treating them as a means only. That will give us a workable test which allows us to try to make the future better than the past, without producing victims in the process of benefiting the majority.

Now comes a pause for reflection. There is a word I have not used so far, and many of you might be surprised not to have heard that word yet in a discussion of ethics. That word is Rights, and the concept of rights will be the next topic.

## Rights

Rights and duties are closely related concepts. Typically, if one person has a right to something, another person will have the duty of providing it, and nobody

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[3]This is the title of a chapter in a book, *Ethical Studies*, written by F H Bradley in 1876.

will have the right to prevent him from obtaining it. At least that's how it works if the moral situation is in good order. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights boldly asserts that everyone has a right to education[4]. In New Zealand, citizens have access to that right because the Government has taken on the duty of providing a system of public education. Not so in less fortunate parts of the world. Indeed one way to assess the moral status of a community is to see if the rights and duties accepted in that community are functioning smoothly in relation to each other.

Legal rights are, of course, set up by legislative fiat, but the idea that human (or even all sentient) beings have moral rights even when the relevant legal framework is missing or inadequate is widely believed, even if it is difficult to defend. Some enthusiastic supporters of the concept of rights regard them as the most basic moral idea. They will speak variously of their favourite examples as fundamental, natural, imprescriptible and so forth. However there is reason to suppose rights cannot be truly as fundamental as that. Consider two people claiming incompatible rights, such as the right to occupy the same piece of land. Unfortunately often, the issue between them cannot be decided by appealing to the concept of rights. To avoid deciding the issue by going to war, some other moral notion will be needed, such as estimating the likely consequences of granting one or the other right. Indeed the concept of rights tends to encour-

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[4] Article 26.

age people to adopt an absolutist position, which fails to resolve the conflict, and can thus become part of the problem.

## Animals and ethics

We have now considered two very different ways of thinking about ethics. One was the consequentialist view, focussing on the outcomes of our choices and covering a spectrum from the narrowly selfish egoist to the all-embracing utilitarian. The other was the deontic viewpoint, focussing on duties and rights, and thus laying emphasis on following approved procedures. In theoretically pure form these tend to oppose each other, but in real life we usually try to take both good consequences and proper procedures into account. When considering the moral status of animals the difference between an outcome-oriented approach and a procedures-oriented approach will help explain some of the disputes which tend to occur, such as that between those attending this conference, and those protesting outside it.

Those who emphasise animal rights tend to regard all activities which exploit animals, from eating meat to doing animal-based science, as wicked. Their deontic attitude discourages compromise. Those who emphasise animal welfare tend to take a more pragmatic and measured attitude, of which the "Three Rs" approach, familiar enough in this company, is a good example. The Three Rs fit very well into a utilitarian framework but can seem offensive to hard-liners in the animal rights camp.