

Ethical theories

To be able to deal with responsibilities in an ethical way, we need to know more about ethics. What is ethics? And what ethical theories are around? That's what we'll discuss in this chapter.

1 Ethical definitions

1.1 What is ethics?

The word **ethics** comes from the Greek ethos, meaning something like 'morals'. In fact, ethics is defined as the systematic reflection on what is moral. In this definition, **morality** is the whole of opinions, decisions and actions with which people express what they think is good or right. So, in short, to think ethically, you need to systematically reflect on what people think is good or right. Ethics is not a manual with answers on how to act. It is only a search for the right kind of morality.

We can distinguish two kinds of ethics. The **descriptive ethics** is involved with the description of existing morality. It is about facts. Descriptive judgments are therefore true or false. On the other hand, there is the **prescriptive ethics**, also known as the **normative ethics**. This branch of ethics actually judges morality. Normative judgments are therefore value judgments: they indicate whether something is good or bad. We will mainly consider ourselves with normative ethics.

1.2 Norms, values and virtues

The most important parts of normative ethical theories are values, norms and virtues. It is important to know the distinction between these three terms.

- Moral **values** are matters/convictions that are worth striving for in general. Examples include justice, happiness, charity and such. A distinction can be made between intrinsic values and instrumental values. An **intrinsic value** is a value in itself: something that is worth striving for. An **instrumental value** is a value that only contributes to an intrinsic value. For example, if you want to get money to help people, then getting money is the instrumental value, while helping people is the intrinsic value.
- Moral **norms** are rules that prescribe what actions are required, permitted or forbidden. In fact, some norms are so important and so prescriptive, that they have been turned into laws. Norms can often be deduced from values. But, whereas values are ideals which people want to achieve, norms are the means to realize these ideals.
- Moral **virtues** are character traits that make someone a good person and allow him to lead a good life. Examples of virtues are honesty, courage, loyalty, creativity, humor, and so on. Virtues seem to be similar to values. But whereas values are things you strive for, virtues are character properties that are good to have.

2 Ethical theories

2.1 The extremes of ethical theories: relativism and absolutism

There are several ethical theories around. But, before we are going to discuss them, we first look at two extremes of the normative ethical theories. On one hand is **normative relativism**. It states that all moral points of view are relative. The morals of one person are not necessarily equal to the morals of another person. Next to this, it is also impossible to say that certain norms and values are better than

other norms and values. The problem with this theory is that it is now impossible to discuss normative ethics: all norms and values are allowed.

On the other hand is **absolutism**, also known as **universalism**. It states that there is a system of norms and values that is universally applicable to everyone, everywhere at every time. Absolutism makes no exceptions: a rule is a rule. However, there is no set of norms and values that never contradicts itself. So, absolutism in general doesn't work either.

We know that both relativism and absolutism don't work. Any choice/judgment based on one of these theories is ethically suspect. But we do know something important now: more useful ethical theories need to be somewhere between relativism and absolutism.

2.2 Duty ethics and the Kantian theory

Ethics is all about choosing the right actions. An **action** is carried out by a certain **actor** with a certain **intention**. This action then leads to certain **consequences**. In ethical theories, we can focus on the action, the actor, the intention or the consequences. If we mainly focus on the action itself, then we use **deontological ethics** (also known as **deontology** or **duty ethics**).

In duty ethics, the point of departure is the norms. An action is morally right if it is in agreement with moral rules/norms. Some theories within duty ethics depart from one main principle/rule from which all moral norms are derived. This is the so-called **monistic duty ethics**. On the other hand, **pluralistic theories** are based on several principles that apply as norms.

Immanuel Kant has developed the most well known system of duty ethics: the **Kantian theory**. A core notion here is **autonomy**. A man should place a moral norm upon himself and obey it. This is his duty. He should then, on his own, be able to determine through reasoning what is morally correct.

The Kantian theory is part of monistic duty ethics: there is one universal principle. This principle is called the **categorical imperative**. It is formulated in different ways. The first formulation is the **universality principle**: 'Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.' The second formulation is the **reciprocity principle**: 'Act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end, never as means only.'

There are several downsides to the Kantian theory. In Kant's theory, rules can not be bent. This reminds us of absolutism. So, the question arises whether all the moral laws form a consistent system of norms. Another downside is that Kantian theory prescribes to rigidly adhere to the rules, irrespective of the consequences. But in real life, following a rule can of course have very negative consequences. Kant's theory does not deal with these exceptions.

2.3 Utilitarianism

We don't always have to focus on actions. We can also focus on consequences. If we do this, we wind up with **consequentialism**. One type of consequentialism is **utilitarianism**, founded by **Jeremy Bentham**. The name of utilitarianism is derived from the Latin 'utilis', meaning 'useful'. In utilitarianism, the consequences of actions are measured against one value. This 'useful' value can be something like happiness, welfare or pleasure. It should be maximized.

Utilitarianism is based on the **utility principle**: we simply need to give the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. (Do note that we have silently made the assumption that 'pleasure' is the only goal in life, and that everything else is just a means to get pleasure. This idea/assumption is called **hedonism**.) An action is morally right if it results in pleasure, whereas it is wrong if it gives rise to pain. The **freedom principle** is also based on this. This principle states that you can do whatever you want, as long as you don't cause anyone any pain/harm.

There are several downsides to utilitarianism. Of course it is very hard to determine how much pleasure

an action will actually give. Also, to find the total amount of pleasure, we need to consider all individuals that are involved and add up their pleasures. But how do we quantify pleasure? And has the pleasure of one person the same value as the pleasure of another? Also, how do we decide whether one action gives more pleasure than another? Answering these questions is difficult. Even the clever **John Stuart Mill** did not have an answer, although he did have an opinion. He stated that certain pleasures (like intellectual fulfillment) are by nature more valuable than other pleasures (like physical desires).

Another downside is that utilitarianism doesn't always divide happiness in a fair way. For example, a very talented entertainer can make a lot of people happy. But does this mean that he needs to spend every waking moment entertaining people, until he burns out? However, most utilitarians argue that this isn't a downside of the theory. In fact, they state that after a while, a small moment of spare time will give the entertainer more happiness than all the people he could have entertained in that time. Thus, utilitarianism automatically compensates for this 'flaw'.

In utilitarianism, an engineer could also be asked to bend or break a fundamental rule, because this will result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. For example, the engineer has the opportunity to save 10 million euros on a design. But he knows that this will later cause an accident killing 5 people. He argues that 10 million euros can cause more happiness than 5 lives. To compensate for this, **rule utilitarianism** has been created. This kind of utilitarianism recognizes and uses moral rules. It is thus also similar to duty ethics.

2.4 Virtue ethics and care ethics

Virtue ethics focuses on the nature of the acting person. This actor should base his actions on the right virtues. So, the central theme in virtue ethics is shaping people into morally good and responsible creatures. Virtue ethics is rather similar to duty ethics. But, whereas duty ethics is based on certain rules/norms, virtue ethics is based on certain virtues.

Virtue ethics is strongly influenced by **Aristotle**. He stated that every moral virtue is positioned somewhere between two extremes. In fact, the correct moral virtue equals the optimal balance between these two extremes. For example, to be courageous, you need to find an optimal balance between the two extremes of cowardice and recklessness. Sadly, there are downsides to this idea. The optimal balance often depends on the situation which a person is in. Also, moral virtues are subjective: you cannot generally say that the courageousness of one person is better than the courageousness of the other.

Care ethics is a rather new ethical theory. It emphasizes that the development of morals is not caused by learning moral principles. Instead, people should learn norms and values in specific contexts. Other people are of fundamental importance here. By contacting other people, and by placing yourself in their shoes, you learn what is good or bad at a particular time. The solution of moral problems must always be focused on maintaining the relationships between people. So, the connectedness of people is the key.

2.5 Caveats of ethical theories

Some people believe that applying ethics is just a matter of applying ethical principles to situations. But this is not true. One reason for this is the fact that there is no generally accepted ethical theory. And, different ethical theories might very well result in different judgments. So what should we do if we run into a new case? Well, we can apply our ethical theories to it. But we should be open to the possibility that the new case might reveal a flaw in our theory. Therefore, you should never blindly apply an ethical theory and rely on the outcome.

Now you may wonder, what are ethical theories good for anyway? Ethical theories may function as instruments in discovering the ethical aspects of a problem/situation. (For example, applying consequentialism is a good way to explore the consequences of actions.) Similarly, ethical theories may suggest certain arguments/reasons that can play a role in moral judgments.