Chapter 5
Normative Ethics
Kajornpat Tangyin

Concept of Normative Ethics

Normative ethics is concerned with the moral standards as a norm to guide our actions. The Golden Rule (Treat others as one wishes to be treated, or Do not treat others as one would not like to be treated) is an example of a moral norm which is used to guide our moral conduct. Through this moral standard, we could judge whether our action is morally right or wrong.

When we are faced with a situation where we need to choose between many alternatives in moral decision making, normative ethics can play the role of helping us decide. When we try to evaluate moral actions – whether in our own self or of the other – our moral norms will play an important role in our decision.

Normative ethics has been discussed since ancient times. Attempts to arrive at moral standards which can be applied to moral decisions have been debated among philosophers, which can be categorized into two main groups: Utilitarianism and Deontology.
Utilitarianism

Founders

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) & John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Fundamental Idea of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are the two founders of Utilitarianism. Both Bentham and Mill are British philosophers. Bentham, in his book *Introduction to the Principles of Moral and Legislation* (1789), introduced the “utility principle” as the moral foundation for moral decision for individuals and also for legislation. For him, this principle of utility is the sole principle applicable to personal and social morality. This utility principle evaluates an action based upon the idea of maximizing pleasure or happiness. Mill will later develop more detail the different qualities of pleasure. But the idea here is that the result of an action can be measured based upon the amount of pleasure or happiness that it creates. These philosophers believed that this principle of utility could be applied to personal moral decision-making and to government policy planning for society.

The original utilitarians were democratic, progressive, empiricist, and optimistic. They were democratic in the sense that they believed that social policy ought to work for the good of all persons, not just the upper class. However, they also believed that when interests of various persons conflicted, the best choice was that which promoted the interests of the greater number….Social programs should be judged by their usefulness in promoting what was deemed to be good. (Mackinnon, 2001, p.49)
Bentham was the first who introduced ‘the principle of utility’ as the normative principle which could be used for the moral standard in making judgment whether an action is morally right or wrong. About the principle of utility, he says,

By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever; and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government. (Bentham, 1994, p.306-307)

Utility, for Bentham, means happiness. Happiness is therefore the goal of action. He says, “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.” (Bentham, 1994, p.306) Utility, happiness, pleasure, goodness, all amount to the same thing. These two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure, plays the important role in all decision making. We, by nature, try to escape from pain and seek for pleasure. The good thing brings us pleasure, and the bad things bring us suffering. Therefore, decisions made by an individual and decisions made by a government, can be measured by how they maximize the happiness for the people. He was the founder of moral norms based upon ‘the greatest happiness principle’.

For Bentham, the principle of utility is the only principle that can be regarded as the basis for moral standards. If we are really under the two sovereign masters between pain and pleasure, we have no other principle to guide our moral decision. He used his hedonistic approach to measure all human actions whether they are good or bad. For him, the principle of utility focuses on the consequences actions produce, not the motive. The right principle and the right motive must be based on the principle of utility. He says,

Admitting any other principle than the principle of utility to be a right principle that it is right for man to pursue; admitting (which is not true) that the word right can have a meaning without reference to utility, let him say whether there is any such thing as a motive that a man can have to pursue the dictates of it: if there is, let him say what the motive is, and how it is to be distinguished from those which enforce the dictates of utility: if not, then lastly let him say what it is this other principle can be good for? (Bentham, 1994, p.310)

So, according to Bentham, ‘the greatest happiness principle’ is the moral principle which can be regarded as the criterion in making judgment whether an action is morally right or wrong. He does not take the motive, or action itself into consideration, but he evaluates an action according to the consequences that action produces. An action has to aim at pleasure, or
happiness as the primary goal. He gives a check list as a criterion to measure whether an action brings greater or less pleasure, or the so-called ‘hedonistic measurement’.

1. Its intensity.
2. Its duration.
3. Its certainty or uncertainty.
4. Its propinquity or remoteness.
5. Its fecundity.
6. Its purity.
7. Its extent; that is, the number of persons to whom it extends; or (in other words) who are affected by it. (Bentham, 1994, p.311)

For Bentham, this is a useful means to calculate whether the result of action promotes pleasure over pain. If it does, we should act. And if it does not, we should not act. When we take all these lists into account to consider our action, we can calculate how much pleasure we gain through how intense it is, how long-lasting it is, how certain it is, how fruitful it will be in the future, and how many people it affects. This hedonistic measurement can help us value an action based not only on the quantity of pleasure for each individual, but also the total number of people it affects. For Bentham, the greatest happiness for the greatest number of persons is, therefore, the founding moral principle of Utilitarianism.

**Utilitarian Principle**

As we saw, Bentham introduced the founding principle of moral on the basis of ‘the greatest happiness principle’ which based upon the quantity of pleasure and the quantity of persons benefiting from an action. If an action brings the more pleasure to the more number of persons, that action is morally right. The right of action is aiming at promoting happiness for the greatest number of persons, and this is the moral principle accepted by Utilitarianism.

John Stuart Mill came to revise Bentham’s the greatest happiness principle which he believed places too much emphasis on the quantity of pleasure. He agrees with Bentham that the value of an action should be measured by how well it promotes happiness, but he focuses more on the quality of pleasure that results. So he takes into account not only quantity of pleasure but quality of pleasure as well. He says, “It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.” (Mill, 1994, p.202) He also distinguishes between higher and lower pleasures. For him, animal pleasures are not the same as human pleasures. It is better to be less satisfied as a human being than more satisfied as an animal. He says, “A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and is certainly accessible to it at more
points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence.” (Mill, in Singer, p.202) Or in another famous quote: It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” (Mill, 1994, p.203)

So again, for Mill, the greatest happiness principle considers not only the quantity of pleasure but also the quality of pleasure for the greatest number of persons. “Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit. But the bare enunciation of such an absurdity as this last, renders refutation superfluous.” (Mill, 1994, p.204) Mill seems to classify the difference qualities of pleasure where some pleasures are more noble while some are lower level of pleasure. Louis P. Pojman points out to the problem of this different quality of pleasure proposed by Mill:

The point is not merely that humans would not be satisfied with what satisfies a pig, but that somehow the quality of these pleasures is better. But what does it mean to speak of better pleasure? Is Mill assuming some non-hedonic notion of intrinsic value to make this distinction – that is, that knowledge, intelligence, freedom, friendship, love, health, and so forth are good things in their own right? Or is Mill simply saying that the lives of humans are generally such that they will be happier with more developed, refined, spiritual values? Which thesis would you be inclined to defend? (Pojman, 1999, p.111)

The modern discussion on Utilitarianism comes to make the distinction between two types of Utilitarianism: Act-utilitarianism, and Rule-utilitarianism.

Act-utilitarianism: An act is right if and only if it results in as much good as any available alternative. (Pojman, 1999, p.112) This moral principle concerns much on the consequence of an act whether it will bring the utility to the person affected in each case. To maximize happiness for the person concerned is the guiding principle to make any moral decision depending on the situation. The principle of utility should be applied to each person in each situation.

Rule-utilitarianism: An act is right if and only if it is required by a rule that is itself a member of a set of rules whose acceptance would lead to greater utility for society than any available alternative. (Pojman, 1999, p.113) This moral principle attempts to adopt the moral rule to be the first consideration before we make any moral decision. An act must comply with the moral rule, and bring the happiness to the person concerned according to the principle of utility.
**Deontology**

Founder

---

**Fundamental Idea of Deontological Ethics**

The term deontology is derived from the Greek ‘deon’ which roughly translates to ‘duty, obligation’, and then deontology means ‘the study of duty; or what moral obligation requires us to do’. Immanuel Kant, the founder of this deontological ethics, in his work, ‘Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals’ says, “The present groundwork is, however, nothing more than the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality, which constitute by itself a business that in its purpose is complete and to be kept apart from every other moral investigation.” (Kant, 1996, p.47) To attain the supreme principle of morality is rooted in the three main questions he proposed for philosophical inquiry: What can I know? What ought I to do? What do I hope for? The first question was posed in his book *The Critique of Pure Reason*. The second question, What ought I to do?, was introduced in his book *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Then deontological ethics was introduced and formulated by Kant in these latter two books.

In order to attain the supreme principle of morality, for Kant, “it is clear that all moral concepts have their seat and origin completely *a priori* in reason” (Kant, 1996, p.65). By the exercise of pure reason, not based on experience or empirical data, he attempts to arrive at the moral principle. And this moral principle is not guided by sentimental elements. The moral
worth of an action, for Kant, is not based on utility, or not the consequences of an act, or not the sympathy, but on the act itself. Kant says, “A good will is not good because of what it affects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself and, regarded for itself” (Kant, 1996, p.50). The act itself must have moral worth if and only if it acts out of the “will” to act. We cannot control the consequences of our acts because the result is not always what we want it to be, but we can control our will to act. The good will, for Kant, is good in itself, not because of consequences, or expectations. He says, “It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will.” (Kant, 1996, p.49) For Kant, the supreme moral principle takes the will to act as the first criteria in moral decision. An act itself has moral value depending on the will to act, and the right thing to do must come out of the right motive.

For Kant, the right motive to act is the act out of duty. Kant says, “duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law.” (Kant, 1996, p.55) The moral law is valid for me as a rational being, and it could be applied to all rational beings. This is a supreme moral principle which is common to all rational beings. He remarks on the unique nature of human being as different from animals and other creatures. Human beings can exercise reasoning to choose the right thing to do, not controlled by instincts or passions. Moral worth arises when humans choose to act out of their moral duty. Through this moral duty, we are obliged to act in conformity with the moral law. This moral law is what Kant called the “categorical imperative”.

According to Kant, “The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end.” (Kant, 1996, p.67) Kant makes the distinction between hypothetical imperative and categorical imperative. Hypothetical imperative always depends upon a situation: “If (or because) I want X, then I ought to do Y.” Whether I ought to do Y is totally contingent or dependent on my wanting X. (Mackinnon, 2001, p.69) On the contrary, the categorical imperative is necessary, universal, and commands us to act in a certain way. For Kant, “What I think of a hypothetical imperative in general I do not know beforehand what it will contain; I do not know this until I am given the condition. But when I think of a categorical imperative I know at once what it contains.” (Kant, 1996, p.73) From the implication of categorical imperative, Kant arrives at the supreme moral principle which binds all human to act according to these two moral maxims.

**Deontological Principles**

Kant establishes the supreme principle of morality based on these two moral categorical imperatives:
The first categorical imperative: *act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*, or in a shorter form: *act as if the maxim of our action were to become by your will a universal law of nature*. (Kant, 1996, p.73)

The second categorical imperative: *So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.* (Kant, 1996, p.80)

References


