Guide to Ethics & Morality
Principles, Problems, and Questions

What are ethics? What is morality? How can one behave in a moral manner? These are among the most difficult and most interesting questions which face people of any age. Today, however, with advancing technology, difficult moral situations come upon us faster than we can even create the questions, much less find the answers. This FAQ will address both general issues and specific questions in the area of moral philosophy.

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Nature of Ethics

What are Ethics and Morality?
Ethics is the formal study of moral standards and conduct. For this reason, the study of ethics is also often called "moral philosophy." What is good? What is evil? How should I behave - and why? How should I balance my needs against the needs of others? These are some of the questions asked in the field of ethics, a branch of philosophy which has some of the most immediate and obvious consequences for how we live our lives.

Ethics, Morals, and Values
There are three principle types of values which humans can have: preferential values, instrumental values and intrinsic values. Each plays an important role in our lives, but they don't all play equal roles in the formation of moral standards and moral norms.

Ethics: Descriptive, Normative and Analytic
The field of ethics is usually broken down into three different ways of thinking about ethics: descriptive, normative and analytic. It isn't unusual for disagreements in debates over ethics to arise because people are approaching the topic from a different one of these three categories. Thus, learning what they are and how to recognize them might save you some grief later.

Ethics: Deontological, Teleological and Virtue
Normative ethical systems can generally be broken down into three categories: deontological, teleological and virtue ethics. The first two are considered deontic or action-based theories of morality because they focus entirely upon the actions which a person performs. The third, virtue ethics, focuses upon what sort of person one wants to be.

Who Cares?
Why be concerned with moral theories and distinctions between different types of moral theories? Why bother with some of the difficult questions which are raised in metaethics? Everyone is brought up with some sort of moral system, and it usually works out fairly well - isn't that enough? What's the point of bothering further?

Ethics and Morality
What are they?

The terms ethics and morality are often used interchangeably - indeed, they usually can mean the same thing, and in casual conversation there isn't a problem with switching between one and the other. However, there is a distinction between them in philosophy which will be maintained throughout this FAQ.

Strictly speaking, morality is used to refer to what we would call moral standards and moral conduct while ethics is used to refer to the formal **study** of those standards and

conduct. For this reason, the study of ethics is also often called "moral philosophy." Here are some examples of statements which express moral judgments:

1. Dumping chemicals in the rivers is wrong and ought be banned.
2. It's wrong that our company is trying to avoid the regulations and it should stop.
3. He's a bad person - he never treats people well and doesn't seem to respect anyone.

As seen in the above examples, moral judgments tend to be characterized by words like ought, should, good and bad. However, the mere appearance of such words does not mean that we automatically have a statement about morals. For example:

4. Most Americans believe that racism is wrong.
5. Picasso was a bad painter.
6. If you want to get home quickly, you should take the bus.

None of the above are moral judgments, although example #4 does describe the moral judgments made by others. Example #5 is an aesthetic judgement while #6 is simply a prudential statement explaining how to achieve some goal.

Another important feature of morality is that it serves as a guide for people's actions. Because of this, it is necessary to point out that moral judgments are made about those actions which involve **choice**. It is only when people have possible alternatives to their actions that we conclude those actions are either morally good or morally bad.

When discussing morality it is important to distinguish between morals and mores. Both are aspects of human conduct and human interaction, but they are very different types of conduct. Mores are usually treated as "harmless customs," where "harmless" means that failure to follow the custom may result in a negative reaction, but not a very serious one. Such mores would include the time of day when meals are eaten and the proper form of greeting particular individuals.

Morals, on the other hand, involve much more serious aspects of how we behave and how we treat others. What this means is that failure to follow the dominant morals will result in a much harsher reaction from others - examples of this would include discrimination, physical abuse and theft.

Another important distinction in morality is that between standards, conduct and character. When we form a moral judgment, we are employing moral **standards** - principles against which we compare what we see in order to form a conclusion. Such judgments might be about particular conduct, which includes a person's actions, or it might be about a person's character, which includes their attitudes and beliefs.

Ethics, on the other hand, involves the **study** of those standards and judgments which people create. Ethics assumes that the standards exist and seeks to describe them, evaluate them, or evaluate the premises upon which those standards exist. This is where the field of ethics is broken down into Descriptive Ethics, Normative Ethics and Analytic Ethics (also called Metaethics).

The basic questions asked in Ethics include:

> What does it mean to be good?
> How can I differentiate good from evil?
> Are morals objective or subjective?

Ethics, Morals, and Values
How do they relate?

One of the most important characteristics of moral judgments is that they express our values. Not all expressions of values are also moral judgments, but all moral judgments do express something about what we value. Thus, understanding morality requires investigating what people value and why.

There are three principle types of values which humans can have: preferential values, instrumental values and intrinsic values. Each plays an important role in our lives, but they don't all play equal roles in the formation of moral standards and moral norms.

Preference Value
The expression of preference is the expression of some value we hold. When we say that we prefer to play sports, we are saying that we value that activity. When we say that we prefer relaxing at home over being at work, we are saying that we hold our leisure time more highly than our work time.
Most ethical theories do not place much emphasis on this type of value when constructing arguments for particular actions being moral or immoral. The one exception would be hedonistic ethical theories which explicitly place such preferences at the center of moral consideration. Such systems argue that those situations or activities which make us happiest are, in fact, the ones we should morally choose.

Instrumental Value
When something is valued instrumentally, that means we only value it as a means to achieve some other end which is, in turn, more important. Thus, if my car is of instrumental value, that means that I only value it insofar as it allows me to accomplish other tasks, such as getting to work or the store.
Instrumental values play an important role in teleological moral systems - theories of morality which argue that the moral choices are those which lead to the best possible consequences (such as human happiness). Thus, the choice to feed a homeless person is considered a moral choice and is valued not simply for its own sake but, rather, because it leads to some other good - the well-being of another person.

Intrinsic Value
Something which has intrinsic value is valued purely for itself - it isn't used simply as a means to some other end and it isn't simply "preferred" above other possible options. This sort of value is the source of a great deal of debate in moral philosophy because not all agree that such intrinsic values actually exist.

If intrinsic values do exist, how is it that they occur? Are they like color or mass, a characteristic which we can detect so long as we use the right tools? We can explain what produces the characteristics like mass and color, but what would produce the characteristic of value? If people are unable to reach any sort of agreement about the value of some object or event, does that mean that its value, whatever it is, can't be intrinsic?

Instrumental vs. Intrinsic Values
One problem in ethics is, assuming that intrinsic values really do exist, how do we differentiate them from instrumental values? That may seem simple at first, but it isn't. Take, for example, the question of good health - that is something which just about everyone values, but is it an intrinsic value?

Some might be inclined to answer "yes," but in fact people tend to value good health because it allows them to engage in activities they like. So, that would make good health an instrumental value. But are those pleasurable activities intrinsically valuable? People often perform them for a variety of reasons - social bonding, learning, to test their abilities, etc.

So, perhaps those activities are also instrumental rather than intrinsic values - but what about the reasons for those activities? We could keep going on like this for quite a long time. It seems that everything we value is something which leads to some other value, suggesting that all of our values are, at least in part, instrumental values. Perhaps there is no "final" value or set of values and we are caught in a constant feed-back loop where things we value continually lead to other things we value.

Values: Subjective or Objective?
Another debate in the field of ethics is the role humans play when it comes to creating or assessing value. Some argue that value is a purely human construction - or at least, the construction of any being with sufficiently advanced cognitive functions. Should all such beings disappear from the universe, then some things like mass would not change, but other things like value would also disappear.

Others argue, however, that at least some forms of value (intrinsic values) exist objectively and independently of any observer. Thus, our only role is in **recognizing** the intrinsic value which certain objects of goods hold. We might deny that they have value, but in such a situation we are either deceiving ourselves or we are simply mistaken. Indeed, some ethical theorists have argued that many moral problems could be resolved if we could simply learn to better recognize those things which have true value and dispense with artificially created values which distract us.

Descriptive, Normative and Analytic Ethics
Categorizing Ethics & Morality

The field of ethics is usually broken down into three different ways of thinking about ethics: descriptive, normative and analytic. It isn't unusual for disagreements in debates over ethics to arise because people are approaching the topic from a different one of these three categories. Thus, learning what they are and how to recognize them might save you some grief later.

Descriptive Ethics
The category of descriptive ethics is the easiest to understand - it simply involves **describing** how people behave and/or what sorts of moral standards they claim to follow. Descriptive ethics incorporates research from the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and history as part of the process of understanding what people do or have believed about moral norms.

Normative Ethics
The category of normative ethics involves creating or evaluating moral standards. Thus, it is an attempt to figure out what people **should** do or whether their current moral behavior is reasonable. Traditionally, most of the field of moral philosophy has involved normative ethics - there are few philosophers out there who haven't tried their hand at explaining what they think people should do and why.

Analytic Ethics (Metaethics)
The category of analytic ethics, also often referred to as metaethics, is perhaps the most difficult of the three to understand. In fact, some philosophers disagree as to whether or not it should be considered an independent pursuit, arguing that it should instead be included under Normative Ethics. Nevertheless, it is discussed independently often enough that it deserves its own discussion here.

Examples
Understanding the how the exact same ethical question can be and is addressed in descriptive, normative and analytic ethics can be difficult until you have had some practice, so here is a series of easy examples which will help make the differences more clear.

Deontological, Teleological and Virtue Ethics
Types of Ethical Systems

Normative ethical systems can generally be broken down into three categories: deontological, teleological and virtue ethics. The first two are considered deontic or action-based theories of morality because they focus entirely upon the actions which a person performs. When actions are judged morally right based upon their consequences, we have teleological or consequentialist ethical theory. When actions are judged morally right based upon how well they conform to some set of duties, we have a deontological ethical theory.

Whereas these first two systems focus on the question "What should I do?," the third asks an entirely different question: "What sort of person should I be?" With this we have a virtue-based ethical theory - it doesn't judge actions as right or wrong but rather the character of the person doing the actions. The person, in turn, makes moral decisions based upon which actions would make one a good person.

Deontology and Ethics
Deontological moral systems are characterized primarily by a focus upon adherence to independent moral rules or duties. Thus, in order to make the correct moral choices, we simply have to understand what our moral duties are and what correct rules exist which regulate those duties. When we follow our duty, we are behaving morally. When we fail to follow our duty, we are behaving immorally.

Teleology and Ethics
Teleological moral systems are characterized primarily by a focus on the consequences which any action might have (for that reason, they are often referred to as consequentalist moral systems, and both terms are used here). Thus, in order to make correct moral choices, we have to have some understanding of what will result from our choices. When we make choices which result in the correct consequences, then we are acting morally; when we make choices which result in the incorrect consequences, then we are acting immorally.

Virtue Ethics
Virtue-based ethical theories place much less emphasis on which rules people should follow and instead focus on helping people develop good character traits, such as kindness and generosity. These character traits will, in turn, allow a person to make the correct decisions later on in life. Virtue theorists also emphasize the need for people to learn how to break bad habits of character, like greed or anger. These are called vices and stand in the way of becoming a good person.

Ethics and Morality: Who Cares?
Does any of this really matter?

Why be concerned with moral theories and distinctions between different types of moral theories? Why bother with some of the difficult questions which are raised in metaethics? Everyone is brought up with some sort of moral system, and it usually works out fairly well - isn't that enough? What's the point of bothering further?

The point is that the "conventional" or "customary" morality which people are brought up with is something those people too rarely think about very carefully. Following a moral

system blindly and without reflection is not a method likely to result in a very moral person. Moreover, if this person is suddenly faced with people from a different culture who have a very different moral system, it won't be possible to handle it very well. The most likely results will be extreme dogmatism, deep disillusionment, or even the abandonment of morality entirely.

However, once a person does begin to reflect upon a moral system and look more closely at its premises and inferences, then we are now in the realm of ethics. Indeed, the very process of moral growth requires such reflection and the attempt to find a path between extreme dogmatism and extreme skepticism. Both moral maturity and moral autonomy require that a person can reach moral conclusions on their own - and just as importantly, explain and justify those moral decisions in a reasonable manner.

That is why it is important for people to be able to reason about their moral beliefs and moral positions. Such reasoning requires, first, an understanding about **how** to reason and use logic, and second, an understanding about how morality and moral systems work. These are the sorts of skills and information which a person needs in order reach a level of moral autonomy sufficient to make them independent and functional.

Descriptive Ethics
What are our ethical values?

The category of descriptive ethics is the easiest to understand - it simply involves **describing** how people behave and/or what sorts of moral standards they claim to follow. Descriptive ethics incorporates research from the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and history as part of the process of understanding what people do or have believed about moral norms.

Anthropologists and sociologists can provide us with all sorts of information about how societies past and present have structured moral standards and how they have expected people to behave. Psychologists can study how a person's conscience develops and how that person goes about actually making moral choices in real or hypothetical situations. Descriptive ethics also studies the codes of conduct created by professional organizations to regulate the conduct of members.

Descriptive ethics is sometimes referred to as comparative ethics because so much activity can involve comparing ethical systems: comparing the ethics of the past to the present, comparing the ethics of one society to another and comparing the ethics which people claim to follow with the actual rules of conduct which do describe their actions. Strictly speaking, then, descriptive ethics is not entirely a field within philosophy - rather, it is more a specialty which involves many different fields within the social sciences. It is not designed to provide guidance to people in making moral decisions, nor is it designed to evaluate the reasonableness of moral norms. Nevertheless, actual work in moral philosophy cannot proceed very far without the knowledge gained from descriptive ethics.

In short, descriptive ethics asks these two questions:

1. What do people claim as their moral norms?
2. How do people actually behave when it comes to moral problems?

Here are some examples of statements from Descriptive Ethics:

1. Most Americans think that racism is wrong.
2. Among certain cultures, there is no stigma attached to homosexuality.
3. Stanley Milgram's study found a great discrepancy between what people claimed and what they actually did.

Normative Ethics
What moral standards should we use?

The category of normative ethics is also relatively easy to understand - it involves creating or evaluating moral standards. Thus, it is an attempt to figure out what people **should** do or whether their current moral behavior is reasonable. Traditionally, most of the field of moral philosophy has involved normative ethics - there are few philosophers out there who haven't tried their hand at explaining what they think people should do and why.

This process involves examining the moral standards people currently use in order to determine if they are justifiable, as well as attempting to construct new moral standards which might be better. In either case, the philosopher is critically investigating the nature and grounds of moral standards, moral principles, moral rules, and moral conduct.

The category of normative ethics also includes the entire field of Applied Ethics. This field is the attempt to take insights from the work of philosophers and theologians and apply them to real-world situations. For example, bioethics is an important and growing aspect of applied ethics which involves people working out the most moral decisions regarding issues like organ transplants, genetic engineering, cloning, etc.

An issue falls under the category of applied ethics whenever:

1. There is general disagreement about the correct course of action.
2. The choice involved is a specifically moral choice.

The first characteristic means that there must be some actual debate in which different groups take opposing positions for what they consider good reasons. Thus, abortion is a question of applied ethics in which people can analyze the facts and values involved and arrive at some sort of conclusion backed by arguments. On the other hand, deliberately placing a poison in the water supply is not a question of applied ethics because there is no general debate over whether or not such an action is wrong.

The second characteristic requires, obviously, that applied ethics only be involved when we are facing moral choices. Not every controversial issue is also a moral issue - for example, traffic laws and zoning codes may be the basis for heated debate, but they rarely turn on questions of fundamental moral values.

The ultimate goal of all of this is to show how it might be possible to develop a consistent and reasonable system of moral rules which are valid for all "moral agents." Philosophers often speak of "moral agents": a moral agent is any being capable of understanding and acting upon some moral rule. Thus, it isn't simply enough to **answer** a moral question, like "Is abortion wrong?" - instead, normative ethics is involved with demonstrating that this and other questions can be answered with consistency and in the context of some general moral principles or rules.

In short, normative ethics addresses questions like the following:

What should be our moral obligations?
What is Right and what is Wrong?
What should be our moral values?
What is Good and what is Evil?

Here are some examples of statements from Normative Ethics:

1. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. (Golden Rule)
2. Act as if the maxim of your action was to become through your will a universal law of nature. (Kant's Categorical Imperative)
3. That which God wills is the Good.

Analytic Ethics (Metaethics)
Evaluating our premises

The category of analytic ethics, also often referred to as metaethics, is perhaps the most difficult of the three to understand. In fact, some philosophers disagree as to whether or not it should be considered an independent pursuit, arguing that it should instead be included under Normative Ethics. Nevertheless, it is discussed independently often enough that it deserves its own discussion here.

Basically, metaethics involves reasoning about the presuppositions behind the moral systems developed under the category of normative ethics. Whenever a moral system is created, it is based upon certain premises about reality, human nature, values, etc. Metaethics is all about questioning the validity of those premises and arguing that perhaps we don't really know what we are talking about after all.

The first key aspect of metaethics is one which can also be annoying for many: semantic discussions. In order to understand the nature of morality, it can be very important to better understand how people should and do use key words like good, evil, moral, etc. This isn't the simple issue it might appear. Some have argued that the entire

field of ethics has gone wrong because of misunderstandings about how people use moral language.

According to one view, called emotivism, the statement "murder is wrong" does not actually express an objective claim about the world. It is, instead, a negative emotional reaction to the act of murder - not entirely unlike a cry of pain. Such an expression might be characterized as appropriate or inappropriate, but it cannot be characterized as either true or false any more than a laugh can be true or false. Thus, when I say "X is immoral," I am not just expressing my emotional reaction to X, but I am also trying to get you to share that reaction with me.

The reason why some question whether or not metaethics should it be its own pursuit is because many feel that these questions should already have been discussed and debated as part of the development of the moral system in question. However, philosophers spend enough time discussing these questions independent of any specific moral system that this objection is not as strong as it seems.

Analytic ethics asks quite a lot of questions, including:

> How are moral judgments even possible? Why be moral at all?
> Do moral values exist objectively or only subjectively?
> Are moral values relative to something, like culture or individuals?
> Can morality exist independently of religion?
> Do people have a free will which would make moral judgments possible?

Ethics: Descriptive, Normative and Analytic
Examples

Here are a couple of examples which should help make the difference between descriptive, normative and analytic ethics even more clear.

1. Descriptive: Different societies have different moral standards.
2. Normative: This action **is** wrong in this society, but it **is right** in another.
3. Analytic: Morality is relative.

All of these statements are about ethical relativism, the idea that moral standards differ from person to person or from society to society.

In *descriptive* ethics, it is simply observed that different societies have different standards - this is a true and factual statement which offers no judgments or conclusions.

In *normative* ethics, a conclusion is drawn from the observation made above, namely that some action **is wrong** in one society and **is right** in another. This is a **normative** claim because it goes beyond simply observing that this action is **treated** as wrong in one place and **treated** as right in another.

In *analytic* ethics, an even broader conclusion is drawn from the above, namely that the very nature of morality is that it is relative. This position argues that there are no moral standards independent of our social groups, and hence whatever a social group decides is right **is** right and whatever it decides is wrong **is** wrong - there is nothing "above" the group to which we can appeal in order to challenge those standards.

1. Descriptive: People tend to make decisions which bring pleasure or avoid pain.
2. Normative: The moral decision is that which enhances well-being and limits suffering.
3. Analytic: Morality is simply a system for helping humans stay happy and alive.

All of these statements refer to the moral philosophy commonly known as utilitarianism. The first, from *descriptive* ethics, simply makes the observation that when it comes to making moral choices, people have a tendency to go with whatever option makes them feel better or, at the very least, they avoid whichever option causes them problems or pain. This observation may or may not be true, but it does not attempt to derive any conclusions as to how people **should** behave.

The second statement, from *normative* ethics, does attempt to derive a normative conclusion - namely, that the most moral choices **are** those which tend to enhance our well-being, or at the very least limit our pain and suffering. This is represents an attempt to create a moral standard, and as such, must be treated differently form the observation made previously.

The third statement, from *analytic* ethics, draws yet a further conclusion based upon the previous two, this one about the very nature of morality itself. Instead of arguing, as in the previous example, that morals are all relative, this one makes a claim about the purpose of morals - namely, that moral exist simply to keep us happy and alive.

Deontology and Ethics
Explaining Deontological Systems

Deontological moral systems are characterized primarily by a focus upon adherence to independent moral rules or duties. Thus, in order to make the correct moral choices, we simply have to understand what our moral duties are and what correct rules exist which regulate those duties. When we follow our duty, we are behaving morally. When we fail to follow our duty, we are behaving immorally.

Deontological moral systems also place some stress on the reasons **why** certain actions are performed. Thus, simply following the correct moral rules is often not sufficient - instead, we have to have the correct motivations. This would allow a person to not be considered immoral even though they have broken a moral rule, but only so long as they were motivated to adhere to some correct moral duty.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand that in deontological moral systems, a correct motivation alone is never a **justification** for an action and cannot be used as a

basis for describing an action as morally correct. It is also not enough to simply **believe** that something is the correct duty to follow. Duties and obligations must be determined objectively and absolutely, not subjectively.

Perhaps the most significant thing to understand about deontological moral systems is that their moral principles are completely separated from any consequences which following those principles might have. Thus, if you have a moral duty not to lie, then lying is always wrong - even if that results in harm to others. For example, you would be acting immorally if you lied to Nazis about where Jews were hiding.

The word deontology comes from the Greek roots *deon*, which means duty, and *logos*, which means science. Thus, deontology is the "science of duty." Key questions which deontological ethical systems ask include:

> What is my moral duty?
> What are my moral obligations?
> How do I weigh one moral duty against another?

Types
Some examples of deontological ethical theories include:

> **Divine Command**: one of the most common forms of deontological moral theories are those which derive their set of moral obligations from a deity. An action is morally correct whenever it is in agreement with the rules and duties established by God.

> **Duty Theories**: an action is morally right if it is in accord with some list of duties and obligations.

> **Rights Theories**: an action is morally right if it adequately respects the rights which all humans (or at least all members of society) have. This is also sometimes referred to as Libertarianism, the political philosophy that people should be legally free to do whatever they wish so long as their actions do not impinge upon the rights of others.

> **Contractarianism**: an action is morally right if it is in accordance with the rules that rational moral agents would agree to observe upon entering into a social relationship (contract) for mutual benefit. This is also sometimes referred to as Contractualism.

> **Monistic Deontology**: an action is morally right if it agrees with some single deontological principle which guides all other subsidiary principles.

Problems
One key criticism often made about deontological moral systems is that there is no clear way to resolve conflicts between moral duties. Surely a deontological moral system would not only include a moral duty not to lie, but also to keep others from harm - but in the above example, how is a person to choose between those two moral duties?
One common response to this is to simply choose the "lesser of two evils" - but that involves relying upon which of the two has the least evil consequences, and therefore

the moral choice is no longer being made on a deontological basis. Deontological moral systems do not readily allow for grey areas where the morality of an action is questionable. They are, rather, systems which are based upon absolutes - absolute principles and absolute conclusions.

Another common criticism of deontological ethical theories is the question of just which duties qualify as those which we should all follow, regardless of the consequences. Duties which might have been valid in the 18th century are not necessarily valid now - but who is to say which ones should be abandoned and which are still valid? And if any are to be abandoned, how can we say that they really were moral duties back in the 18th century? Many attempts to develop deontological systems focus on explaining how and why certain duties are valid at any time or at all times and how we can know that.

Some critics argue that deontological moral systems are, in fact, consequentialist moral systems in disguise. According to this argument, the duties and obligations which are set forth in deontological systems are actually those actions which have been demonstrated over long periods of time as those with the best consequences. Eventually, they become enshrined in custom and law, and people stop giving them or their consequences much thought - they are simply assumed to be correct.

Teleology and Ethics
Actions & Consequences

Teleological moral systems are characterized primarily by a focus on the consequences which any action might have (for that reason, they are often referred to as consequentalist moral systems, and both terms are used here). Thus, in order to make correct moral choices, we have to have some understanding of what will result from our choices. When we make choices which result in the correct consequences, then we are acting morally; when we make choices which result in the incorrect consequences, then we are acting immorally.

The idea that the moral worth of an action is determined by the consequences of that action is often labeled consequentialism. Usually, the "correct consequences" are those which are most beneficial to humanity - they may promote human happiness, human pleasure, human satisfaction, human survival or simply the general welfare of all humans. Whatever the consequences are, it is believed that those consequences are intrinsically good and valuable, and that is why actions which lead to those consequences are moral while actions which lead away from them are immoral.

The various teleological moral systems differ not only on exactly what the "correct consequences" are, but also on how people balance the various possible consequences. After all, few choices are unequivocally positive, and this means it is necessary to figure out how to arrive at the correct balance of good and bad in what we do. Note that merely being concerned with the consequences of an action does not

make a person a consequentialist - the key factor is, rather, basing the morality of that action on the consequences instead of on something else.

The word teleology comes from the Greek roots *telos*, which means end, and *logos*, which means science. Thus, teleology is the "science of ends." Key questions which teleological ethical systems ask include:

What will be the consequences of this action?
What will be the consequences of inaction?
How do I weigh the harm against the benefits of this action?

Types
Some examples of teleological ethical theories include:

Ethical Egoism: an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favorable than unfavorable only to the moral agent performing the action.

Ethical Altruism: an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone except the moral agent.

Ethical Utilitarianism: an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favorable than unfavorable to everyone.

Act and Rule Consequentialism
Consequentalist moral systems are usually differentiated into act-consequentialism and rule-consequentialism. The former, act-consequentialism, argues that the morality of any action is dependent upon **its** consequences. Thus, the most moral action is the one which leads to the best consequences.

The latter, rule-consequentialism, argues that focusing only on the consequences of the action in question can lead people to committing outrageous actions when they foresee good consequences. Thus, rule-consequentialists add the following provision: imagine that an action were to become a general rule - if the following of such a rule would result in bad consequences, then it should be avoided even if it would lead to good consequences in this one instance. This has very obvious similarities to Kant's categorical imperative, a deontological moral principle.

Rule-consequentialism can lead to a person performing actions which, taken alone, may lead to bad consequences. It is argued, however, that the overall situation is that there will be more good than bad when people follow the rules derived from consequentialist considerations. For example, one of the objections to euthanasia is that allowing such an exception to the moral rule "do not kill" would lead to a weakening of a rule which has generally positive consequences - even though in such instances following the rule leads to negative consequences.

Problems
One common criticism of teleological moral systems is the fact that a moral duty is

derived from a set of circumstances lacking any moral component. For example, when a teleological system declares that choices are moral if they enhance human happiness, it isn't argued that "human happiness" is intrinsically moral itself. Nevertheless, a choice which enhances that happiness is moral. How does it happen that one can lead to the other?

Critics also often point out the impossibility of actually determining the full range of consequences any action will have, thus rendering attempts to evaluate the morality of an action based upon those consequences similarly impossible. In addition, there is much disagreement over how or even if different consequences can really be quantified in the way necessary for some moral calculations to be made. Just how much "good" is necessary to outweigh some "evil," and why?

Another common criticism is that consequentialist moral systems are simply complicated ways of saying that the ends justify the means - thus, if it is possible to argue that enough good will result, then any outrageous and horrible actions would be justified. For example, a consequentialist moral system might justify the torture and murder of an innocent child if it would lead to a cure for all forms of cancer.

The question of whether or not we should really be committed to taking responsibility for **all** of the consequences of our actions is another issue which critics bring up. After all, if the morality of my action is dependent upon **all** of its consequences, then I am taking responsibility for them - but those consequences will reach far and wide in ways I cannot anticipate or comprehend.

Virtue Ethics
Morality and Character

Both teleological and deontological ethical theories are called deontic or action-based theories of morality because they focus entirely upon the actions which a person performs. Those theories focus on the question, "Which action should I choose?" Virtue ethics, however, take a very different perspective.

Virtue-based ethical theories place much less emphasis on which rules people should follow and instead focus on helping people develop good character traits, such as kindness and generosity. These character traits will, in turn, allow a person to make the correct decisions later on in life. Virtue theorists also emphasize the need for people to learn how to break bad habits of character, like greed or anger. These are called vices and stand in the way of becoming a good person.

Recently virtue ethics has not been a very common topic for study, but it back to the ancient Greek thinkers and it thus the oldest type of ethical theory in Western philosophy. Plato discussed four key virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. The first systematic description of virtue ethics was written down by Aristotle in his famous work Nichomachean Ethics. According to Aristotle, when people acquire good

habits of character, they are better able to regulate their emotions and their reason. This, in turn, helps us reach morally correct decisions when we are faced with difficult choices.

One reason why virtue ethics can be popular and why they can make an important contribution to our understanding of morality is that they emphasize the central role played by motives in moral questions. To act from virtue is to act from some particular motivation; thus to say that certain virtues are necessary for correct moral decisions is to say that correct moral decisions require correct motives.

Neither teleological nor deontological moral theories require motives to play a role in our evaluation of moral decisions - but encouraging correct motivations is very often a key component of the moral education of young people. We are taught that we should **desire** certain outcomes and that we should **want** to accomplish certain goals by our actions.

Another reason why virtue theories can be so attractive is that the other moral theories share in common the difficulty in dealing with complicated moral calculations over what actions to take or which moral duties to emphasize. Virtue theories promise that once we are successful in creating the sort of person we want to be, arriving at the correct moral decisions will come naturally.

Key questions which virtue ethical systems ask include:

> What sort of person do I want to be?
> What virtues are characteristic of the person I want to be?
> What actions will cultivate the virtues I want to possess?
> What actions will be characteristic of the sort of person I want to be?

Problems
Unfortunately, the reality isn't quite so neat and simple. Although many common moral decisions may indeed come more easily to a person of the "right" moral character, the fact of the matter is that many moral dilemmas require a great deal of careful reasoning and thinking - simply having the right character cannot be enough to even make the right decision likely, much less assured. The fact that rule based and duty based ethical systems are complicated and difficult to employ does not make a person of good character more likely to make the right choices.

Another problem with virtue-based ethical systems is the question of just what the "right" sort of character is a person should have. Many, if not most, virtue theorists have treated the answer to this question as self-evident, but it is anything but that. One person's virtue may be another person's vice, and a vice in one set of circumstances may be a virtue in another.

Some advocates of virtue ethics may suggest that we determine the right virtues by asking a virtuous person, but that is just an exercise in begging the question. Others

might suggest asking a happy person, but that assumes that happiness and virtue always coincide - by no means an obvious truth.

Perhaps the key to understanding virtue theories of ethics is to regard them as ways to approach moral psychology but not moral epistemology. What this means is that virtue theories cannot and should not be contrasted with theories about how to make moral **choices**, like the teleological theory of John Stuart Mill or the deontological theory of Immanuel Kant.

Instead, virtue theories of ethics should be treated as ways to understand how we become moral creatures, how we develop the means by which we make moral decisions, and the process by which moral attitudes develop. More importantly, virtue theories may be able to teach us how morals themselves should be taught, particularly in the earliest years when the more complicated decision-making processes are not yet possible.

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