PHILOSOPHY CLASS

Ethical Theories

By Brian McClinton

THERE ARE SEVERAL **THEORIES** of ethics but we shall consider only four: the natural law, virtue, deontological and consequentialist theories. As with the great debate about whether reason or emotion is the basis of ethical activity discussed in part three, there is also a major divide between those who believe an act is right or wrong depending on its results and those who believe it is right or wrong in itself, irrespective of the consequences.

THE NATURAL LAW THEORY

Its main exponent was **Thomas Aquinas** (1224/6-74). He sought to harmonise Aristotelianism with Christianity, and the result remains the semi-official philosophy of the Catholic Church to this day. The idea is that we have, within our own nature, a rational guide to what is good for us because we have an inclination to act to fulfil our natural purpose, and if we follow our own nature we will flourish. Therefore we will know which actions or dispositions are 'inhuman', 'unnaturally cruel' or 'morally unreasonable'. The fundamental principle of the natural law is that good is to be done and evil avoided. Of course, as far as Aquinas is concerned, the natural law is an aspect of divine providence, a 'participation in the eternal law' (*Summa Theologiae*). It is the way in which human beings participate in the eternal law of God.

A number of difficulties arise here, not least the problem of determining what is 'natural' and what is 'unnatural'. Many Catholic moralists will argue, for example, that contraception, homosexuality, abortion and so on are immoral because they are 'unnatural'. Then there is the question whether we have to believe in a God to believe in 'natural law'.

Thomas Aquinas

THE VIRTUE THEORY

Aristotle (384-322 BC) would have agreed with Aquinas that goodness comes from our rational nature and that in order to live the good life we have to develop virtuous habits. Some philosophers have labelled this approach 'virtue ethics', because it begins not with the acts themselves but with the person who performs them. It determines what is good on the basis of what a good person would do. The difference between Aquinas and Aristotle, however, is that Aristotle did not believe that there was a divine law which dictates our 'natural' behaviour. For him, the distinguishing mark of human beings was that we are rational animals. It was the Stoics who saw this rational human nature as part of the rational order of the cosmos. For them, reason was a spark of the creative fire, the logos, which ordered and unified the cosmos. In this respect, Aquinas was closer to them than to Aristotle.

According to Aristotle (*Nichomachean Ethics*), we all seek *eudaimonia* - happiness, flourishing or well-being - and the way to achieve it is by cultivating the virtues. This process requires education and practice and an intelligent judgement about the appropriate response to a given situation. It seems to imply that character is more important than conformity to rules. But difficulties arise when we ask ourselves what exactly are virtues? We can all provide a list - kindness, courage, honesty, integrity, wisdom, loyalty, and so on. But there will always be debate about what should be included. If being good is a matter of character, then good actions are what good people do, which is surely circular. It doesn't tell us what is good and what we should actually do.

Other questions arise. Are the virtues fixed for ever? What is virtuous to one society, group or era - say, bullfighting or fox-hunting - is a vice to others. Do we mean the virtues which happen to be considered important by a majority at a given time? Is virtue thus determined by a head count? Should we follow a multitude to do evil? How does virtue ethics deal with moral dilemmas such as abortion or euthanasia? What happens when virtues conflict? And is there a human nature anyway? Is not bad behaviour just as much a part of our nature as virtuous actions?

Nevertheless, virtue theory is not to be totally dismissed. Other moral theories tend to be impersonal and concerned with cold calculations of utility, interests, rights and so on, while neglecting the kind of person who is involved in making such decisions. The virtue of virtue theory (sorry!) is that it asks us to consider those areas of life which form character and how it in turn influences our behaviour. A good person is, after all, more likely to do good deeds than a bad person. And the theory also suggests that we can instil virtuous habits through practice and teaching, thus giving a central role to moral education and role models. ➤

THE DEONTOLOGICAL THEORY

This theory focuses on the action and the motives or intention behind it. The deontologist claims that certain acts are inherently wrong and cannot be justified, no matter what the consequences are. It can also be called duty ethics, from the Greek *deon* meaning duty and *logos* meaning science. A duty is a moral obligation and in this view certain actions are right in themselves and therefore there is a duty to follow them. By the same token, some acts are morally wrong in themselves, e.g. breaking a promise, lying, punishing the innocent, murder. This perspective implies that there is a distinction between what is right and what is good because it may be right to do something which does not produce the best result. It also clearly implies that the ends do not justify the means. Instead, it argues that morality is all about means.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is regarded as the chief exponent of deontological ethics. His categorical imperative in *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), discussed in part three, is based on principles of universalisability (the so-called formula of universal law) and respect for persons (the so-called formula of the end in itself). In Kant's view, these principles have political implications which include a republican constitution, respect for freedom, especially of religion and speech, the dignity of man, and international peace. In other words, they are not merely empty rules which offer little help in determining what we ought to do. Rather, they are essentially *humanist* principles: a more sophisticated version of the Golden Rule of Confucius and a humane regard for others.

Morals, to Kant, take on the appearance of objectivity. Whereas many deontological theorists might appeal to God as that which determines whether or not an action is morally right or wrong, Kant takes a different, less predictable approach. What he proposes is that the objective moral value of an action can be determined by finding out if 'universalising' the maxim of any given situation can be done. The maxim therefore of, say, a man faced with stealing bread, would be "Whenever one's family is starving, the person should steal bread which should normally be bought at a price". If this were universally applicable to all men at the same time, it would be a valid, objective moral standard. However, this particular maxim cannot be universalised, because it would most likely result in bakeries not selling bread, which would make it impossible to steal bread which would normally be sold.

The strengths of deontological ethics include universalism and anti-conformism. Weaknesses include a lack of specific strategies, a tendency to invoke arbitrary or absolute rules and a lack of concern for consequences. An obvious deficiency of basing an ethical theory on intentions is that someone cannot be held accountable for what they do, but only for why they did it. Hence, if a person *were* to steal a loaf of bread, we would really have to put their heart on trial, something which, at the moment, we are unable to do. Finally, the universalisation of the maxim according to which one acts doesn't make it automatically into a moral action. One can universalise also maxims which allow immoral actions, e.g. 'kill anyone who gets in your way'. Nevertheless, Kant's ethics remains the most influential attempt to vindicate universal moral principles without reference to preferences or to a God.

THE CONSEQUENTIALIST THEORY

Consequentialism assesses the rightness or wrongness of actions in terms of the value of their results. Utilitarianism, the best-known type of consequentialism, argues that the morally right action is that which produces the most 'utility' or, in the phrase of **Jeremy Bentham** (1748-1832), 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. In a strict interpretation, this is a rather hedonistic philosophy. **John Stuart Mill** (1806-73) tried to refine it by arguing that the higher pleasures of the intellect were worth more than the lower pleasures of the body - "Socrates dissatisfied should have more moral weight than a pig satisfied" - but this sounds rather arbitrary and elitist. Why should so-called higher pleasures provide more happiness than lower ones? Is opera preferable to football?

It is possible to distinguish two types of utilitarianism. According to rule utilitarianism, we should decide what to do in particular cases by following general rules that produce the most utility. Rule-utilitarians hold that the right act is one that conforms to the set of rules that in turn will result in the best consequences (as compared with other sets of rules). Act utilitarianism, on the other hand, states that an act is morally right if and only if it brings about greater utility to everyone affected by the action than any other possible action in that specific situation. Act-utilitarians hold that the right act in a situation is one that results (or is most likely to result) in the best consequences.

One problem with consequentialism is the question of how a 'good result' is determined. Who decides what action is likely to produce 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'? In 1932 the Nazi party received more votes in Germany than any other. Was its election therefore right? Are good and bad defined in terms of what people want? Or in terms of what is in their 'best' interests? And who decides what is in their best interests? If there are conflicts between short-term effects and long-term results, which should take priority?

Consequentialism can easily be used to absolve individuals of responsibility for their actions - "It's not me; I was doing it for the greater good". Even if you are doing something horrible, you can justify it by postulating some benefit to come out of it. Take the dropping of the atomic bombs in 1945. Truman argued that they ended the war more quickly and saved lives. But at best this could only be a probable consequence at the time of the decision. And was this the only motive for dropping them? Was fighting the whole war with 50 million dead justified by the ending of totalitarian regimes? Consequentialism seems to imply that the end justifies the means, which renders it a decidedly Machiavellian ethic.

Alternatively, we might say that it absolves us of nothing because almost everything we do has consequences, whether we are aware of them or not. If I spend my money on goods for myself instead of giving it to the poor, I am depriving them of life's essentials. If I eat meat, I connive at the suffering and slaughter of animals. If I sneeze, I may give someone else a cold. The question of acts and omissions may be relevant here. For the consequentialist there appears to be no difference. Take the choice between allowing someone on a life-support machine to die by not giving them food or medicine (an omission), or helping them to die by switching off the machine (an act). For the consequentialist, the act and the omission are ➤

morally equivalent because their consequences are the same and we have the same degree of choice in both. But are they really the same, ethically? The deontologist is likely to say that there is a clear difference: one is deliberate killing and the other is letting die. The first action is more unethical than the second. An illustration by Philippa Foot makes this point clear: "Most of us allow people to die of starvation in India and Africa, and there is surely something wrong with us that we do; it would be nonsense, however, to pretend that it is only in law that we make a distinction between allowing people in the underdeveloped countries to die of starvation and sending them poisoned food" (*The Oxford Review*, 1967).

Yet our example of the person on a life-support machine is not really like this case at all. For switching off the machine may be the wish of the patient (as stated, for example, in a living will), which means that we are committing an act of 'assisted suicide' or voluntary euthanasia, not murder. And we are presumably helping the patient in this way because we believe that he/she has a fundamental right to choose how they live and die.

So, where do rights feature in a consequentialist theory? Maximising utility (preferences, welfare, happiness or whatever) is a majority principle ('the greatest happiness of the greatest number') which seems to imply that individual and minority rights must take second place. This conclusion is unlikely to please liberals, and would certainly not have appealed to an arch-liberal such as John Stuart Mill. If applied to Northern Ireland it could justify majority Stormont rule and even discrimination against the minority. It is in fact a contradiction of *liberal* democracy as applied in most western societies, where there is majority rule on some issues and minority or individual rule on others.

CONCLUSION

Following a simple consequentialist ethic can therefore lead us down some strange pathways. The same holds for any of the other theories we have discussed. The truth is that our world has inherited fragments of conflicting ethical traditions and our moral code is usually a hodge-podge in which we switch from one to the other depending on the circumstances. Murder is wrong and subject to severe punishment (it negates a categorical imperative affirming personal autonomy) but killing in war may be worth a medal

(affirming the utilitarian principle of 'the greater good').

Is there a specifically Humanist approach to ethics? Is it possible to maintain that ethical rules are derived from a pre-existing definition of humanist principles? In this approach, the first step is not to start with ethics but to begin with a statement of the fundamental principles of Humanism, thus shifting the entire burden of the definition of ethics onto the definition (or formulation) of humanist principles. However, we could argue that since Humanist values are humane, civilised and universal, then we are back with Kantian principles of universality and of humanity.

Immanuel Kant

In this respect, **Kant** could be seen as a great Humanist philosopher, even though he was a theist, because he based morality on reason and our common humanity rather than on the will or orders of a God, whereas Hume, who was clearly an atheist, falls short in offering us only 'sympathetic feelings' as a basis.

A modified deontological approach to ethics is therefore probably the starting point for an attempt at coherent moral theory. As with most approaches to living - rights, for example - we begin by stating the basic principles, and then we acknowledge that there are exceptions to them. Two key deontological duties arguably are non-maleficence (don't harm others) and beneficence (help others). Other prima facie duties include: 'don't lie', 'don't

kill', and 'keep promises'. Kant was right about these basic rules of moral behaviour. We might add more, such as: 'don't rape', 'don't torture' and 'don't mentally or physically abuse'.

When conflicts occur between duties, our actual duty becomes what 'intuitive judgment' discerns as the right thing to do (e.g. lying to save the life of an innocent person). Critics are cautious about referring to 'intuition' as the criterion for determining our actual course of action. **Stephen Toulmin** (*Reason in Ethics,* 1950) suggests that we weigh up, as well as we can, the risks involved in ignoring either, and choose 'the lesser of two evils'. Thus, while the principles may be deontological in nature, a resolution of conflicts of principles could appeal to probable consequences.

Select General Booklist for the series
Simon Blackburn: *Think*, OUP, 1999, £8.99
Edward Craig: *Philosophy, A Very Short Introduction,* OUP, 2002, £6.99
A.C. Grayling: *The Meaning of Things*, Weidenfeld, 2001, £12.99
Brian Magee: *Confessions of a Philosopher*, Phoenix, 2000, £8.99
Thomas Nagel: *What Does It All Mean?*, OUP, 1987, £4.99
Nigel Warburton: *Philosophy, the Basics*, Routledge, 1992, £8.99
Nigel Warburton: *Thinking from A to Z*, Routledge, 2000, £7.99