Normative Ethics: Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics

[Calvin and Hobbes comic strip]
Normative Ethics

- Applied ethics is popular because it is easy to see the application.
- Applied ethics is unpopular because it is difficult to make progress—those who are cynical will say that it is just listing a bunch of competing intuitions with no real direction.
- *Normative* ethics attempts to give systematic answers to how we should generally decide what to do.
- In normative ethics, we abstract from a lot of individual cases what it is in general that makes something right or wrong, then we take that abstracted principle back down with us into particularly difficult cases.
- Normative ethics can be seen as answering the general question, what should we do?
Consequentialism

- **Consequentialism** in ethics is the view that whether or not an action is good or bad depends **solely** on what effects that action has on the world.
- “The greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people”
- The Greatest Happiness Principle—“actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” —Jonh Stuart Mill
- Among other things, this ignores the motivation/intention behind the action and the nature of the action itself.
Utilitarianism

- The most common form of consequentialism is utilitarianism.

- *Utilitarianism* combines consequentialism with the claim that the only valuable consequence is pleasure, and the only disvaluable consequence is pain.

- Some utilitarians even allow for there to be quantifiable units of pain and pleasure.

- We can give an easy model of the value of an action. If hedons (H) are units of pleasure and pains (P) are units of pain, then the value of an action (A) is $A = H - P$. 
An Argument for Utilitarianism

“the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it....No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness...that each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.”

(1) People desire happiness.
(2) If people desire something other than happiness, it is because they believe it leads to happiness.
(3) Therefore, happiness is the only thing that is desired for its own sake. (from 1 and 2)
(4) Something is desirable iff it is desired for its own sake.
(5) Happiness is the only desirable thing. (from 3 and 4)
(6) Something is good iff it is desirable.
(7) Happiness is the only good. (from 5 and 6)
(C) The total amount of happiness among persons is the total good. (From 7)
Scenario 1

What would the utilitarian say to do in the following scenario? 

**Root Canal**

*Root canals are exceedingly painful. They are several hours of misery, and are very expensive. But, they are only called for when there is an infection in the gum which is also exceedingly painful and won’t go away without treatment.*

*Should I ever get a root canal? Should a dentists ever perform one, knowing she is going to cause someone excruciating pain?*
Scenario 2

What would the utilitarian say to do in the following scenario?

**Nuclear Bombs**

*Dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of WWII killed approximately 270,000 people within a few weeks, and estimates of how many deaths since then are hard to come by.*

*However, it was estimated that in an invasion of Japan, the U.S. would lose 250,000-1,000,000 people.*

*Additionally, the war poverty in Japan was extreme; extreme enough that they would give a village one grenade so that everyone could come around and end their suffering together.*

*It is estimated that between the fighting and the poverty, about 5,000,000-10,000,000 Japanese would have died from an invasion. Should we have dropped the bombs?*

*Suppose, on the other hand, that our best estimates said that an invasion would result in the same number of deaths as dropping the bomb.* The only difference is that
Scenario 3

What would the utilitarian say to do in the following scenario?

**Divorce**

Suppose Barney and Robin have been married three years, and have been growing apart every since they got married. They don’t fight much, and neither one has cheated on the other. Nonetheless, given the way their interests have changed, they both now think that they will be happier not being married. Should they get divorced?

What if, if they stay married Robin will be miserable and Barney will be moderately happy, while if they get divorced Barney will be miserable and Robin will be incredibly happy?
What would the utilitarian say to do in the following scenario?  

**Euthanasia**

*Suppose Carl has just lost his wife of 50 years. Furthermore, he is in incredible pain when he walks, so he no longer gets to do the various things he has enjoyed all his life. Lastly, he has recently been diagnosed with cancer which will kill him in approximately two years. Given that his prospects for pleasure are extremely low, and his potential for pain is extremely high, should he kill himself?*
What would the utilitarian say to do in the following scenario?

**Eugenics**

*While the science is still out on the issue, it has been hypothesized that less intelligent people reproduce at much higher rates than more intelligent people. In observation, it is not difficult to see intelligent, successful people choosing to have the standard 1-3 kids, while less intelligent people have 6 or more. The fear is that if we allow this trend to continue, it will result in a much less intelligent human race over time (also unproven). If it were to turn out that both of these were true, how should the utilitarian handle the situation?*
Scenario 5

What would the utilitarian say to do in the following scenario?

**Eugenics**

*Given that humans should be able to survive for millions of more years, do we need to always favor whatever will benefit the future of the human race?*
What would the utilitarian say to do in the following scenario?

**Eugenics**

Likewise, was the U.S. right to sterilize 60,000 mentally handicapped people in the mid 20th century?
Problems for Utilitarianism

- One of the main ways we evaluate a normative ethic is to see what it says about various test cases. If we think it gives generally the right answers in the obvious cases, then we are more likely to trust it in the difficult cases.
- Here there are mixed results. Pretty much everyone does utilitarian calculations when deciding medical procedures, or deciding whether or not to exercise, etc. However, some people are bothered by many answers that utilitarianism gives.
- In addition to this “comfortableness” test, there are a couple other arguments against utilitarianism that have been given.
Utilitarianism seems to treat people like animals—we exist to maximize pleasure, which seems to be no different than any other animal.

Mill tries to respond by dividing pleasures into higher and lower pleasures.

The utilitarian need not merely pursue food and sex; instead, she can say that mental pleasures, dignity, autonomy, etc. are vastly or incommensurably more pleasurable than fulfilling appetites.

Does this cohere with our general experience of pleasure?
Problems for Utilitarianism (2)

- There is an *epistemic* problem for utilitarians in that it is not clear how we could ever *know* what to do.
- We at best know the short term outcomes of a decision, but we are really in no place to know the long-term effects.
- In response, some utilitarians redefine the maxim to say “the greatest *expected* amount of happiness for the greatest number of people” — drawing on the expected value of outcomes.
- Other utilitarians will endorse a rule-based utilitarianism, saying that we should do the action which generally results in the greatest amount of happiness.
There is one particular type of scenario which proves to be highly counter-intuitive for utilitarians.

**Trolley 1**
Suppose you are walking along and you come across the train tracks right as one track splits into two. Looking at the two tracks just beyond the split you notice that tied to one set of tracks are 5 people, and tied to the other is 1 person. You suddenly hear the train and see it barreling down, and you know there will not be time to untie the poor victims. There is, however, a switch which controls which track the train goes down. If you do nothing, the train will kill the 5, but if you pull the switch the train will kill the 1. Would you pull the switch?
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Trolley 2
Suppose you are walking across a bridge under which a single train track goes, and you see in the distance a trolley heading down the track. Suddenly, on the other side of the bridge, you see five people tied to the track. Having extensive knowledge of train engineering, you know that the trolley will run over and kill all five people, but that a single sufficiently heavy weight person would stop it. It is then that you notice an extremely fat man standing at the side of the bridge looking at the trolley. If you push him over, he will die, but the 5 will be saved, would you push him?

From a consequentialist perspective, the moral reasoning seems to be the same in both cases, and yet most people answer them differently. Trolley 2 can thus be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum* to the utilitarian’s answer to Trolley 1.
Deontological Ethics

- Deontological ethics is often seen as the opposite of consequentialist ethics.
- Where the consequentialist is concerned with the outcome of the action, the deontologist is concerned with the nature of the action itself (more specifically, the rule/law/reason/maxim for which an action was taken).
- For the deontologist, some actions like murder are just inherently wrong, no matter the ultimate result.

- By far the most famous deontologist was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).
Kant gives many reasons for thinking that the only things of moral worth are the maxims on which we act (instead of the happiness caused by action being the bearer of moral worth).

For one, the distinguishing characteristic of humans is reason. Reason is very bad at making us happy (just consider how much happier most animals are). The only thing reason is good for is allowing us to consider and follow good principles/maxims.

A second thing is that we generally only ascribe moral worth to things we can control. I cannot control the outcomes of my actions; the only thing I can control is what maxim I choose to act on, so that has to be what is ultimately of moral worth.
The Categorical Imperative

▶ Moral claims are imperatives.
▶ There are two kinds of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical.
▶ A *hypothetical* imperative is conditional. It says “if you want to get X, then you should do Y”
▶ A *categorical* imperative is unconditional. It says “You should do Y”
▶ According to Kant, only one imperative could rise to the level of being a categorical imperative; hence it is the categorical imperative
▶ The Categorical Imperative: Act only on maxims that you can simultaneously will to become a universal law
▶ This is sometimes put, “don’t make an exception of yourself.”
▶ To put it another way, suppose that any time you acted it instantly became the case that everyone else acted in the same way (acted on the same reasons). If you could not coherently still act in that way, or if you would no longer desire to act in that way, then you should not act on that reason.
Why think that the Categorical Imperative is true?

If we act, we are acting on a principle

A principle is something like “one should hurt those who hurt you” or “one should try to make others happy”

If I think that principle is true, then it would be irrational for me to think that others should not act on it. That is, if I think it is right to act on the principle “take what you can, give nothing back” then by the very nature of it being a principle, I also think that others should act on it.

If I cannot coherently will everyone to act on a principle, then I cannot will myself to act on that principle. Principles are not the sorts of things that can apply to one individual.
Act only on maxims that you can simultaneously will to become a universal law

- Why think that the Categorical Imperative is true?
- It is irrational to think that I should act a certain way while thinking that society should be held to a different standard.
- There are no moral principles we must act on other than the principles that we give ourselves. But there are rational requirements on the principles such that morality is not just whatever we want it to be or think it should be.

“the laws to which [one] is subject are only those of his own giving, though at the same time they are universal, and that he is only bound to act in conformity with his own will; a will, however, which is designed by nature to give universal laws” —Kant
Applying the Categorical Imperative

Act only on maxims that you can simultaneously will to become a universal law

There are primarily two ways Kant thinks we can fail to follow the categorical imperative.

1. We can act on a principle which we cannot consistently conceive of as a universal law. Here he gives two examples:
   - Suppose one has no desire to live. She wants to act on a principle that she kill herself because it would be helpful to herself; but the very idea of helping oneself implies not harming oneself, so this is an incoherent desire.
   - Suppose a man needs to borrow money which he knows he will not be able to pay back. If he were to desire that everyone who needed money borrow it with no intention of paying it back, then he is in fact imagining a scenario in which no one lends money. He thus cannot consistently desire that everyone borrow money without intending to pay it back, because this is conceiving an inconsistent scenario.
Act only on maxims that you can simultaneously will to become a universal law

There are primarily two ways Kant thinks we can fail to follow the categorical imperative.

(1) We can act on a principle which we cannot consistently **conceive** of as a universal law. Here he gives two examples:

(2) We can act on a principle which we cannot consistently **will** to be a universal law. Again, he gives two examples:

- Suppose a woman could further work hard and develop her talents to benefit society, but instead she desires to be lazy and self-centered. She cannot consistently desire to be lazy instead of developing herself, because then she would be desiring to have never developed any talents (which she does not desire).
- A man has extra money but doesn’t want to give to the needy. He cannot consistently will this, because if he were to be needy, he would not will this, so he cannot in fact desire that everyone do likewise.
The Categorical Imperative

- Kant actually states the categorical imperative 3 different ways.
- The 3rd is very similar to the first, so we won’t worry about it.
- The second, however, is “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.”
- The basis for this is that humans are rational creatures, therefore we have aims/desires.
- One should always treat rational creatures as equals, as fellow moral agents with their own desires and purposes.
- Kant does not say that we cannot use people as means to an end, but merely that we must also always treat them as ends in themselves.
- Kant thinks that this second formula is equivalent to the first, and goes through his cases again to show that it gives the same results.
What would the deontologist say to do in the following scenario?

**Root Canal**

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Should I ever get a root canal?

Should a dentists ever perform one, knowing she is going to cause someone excruciating pain?
Scenario 2

What would the deontologist say to do in the following scenario?

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However, it was estimated that in an invasion of Japan, the U.S. would lose 250,000-1,000,000 people. Additionally, the war poverty in Japan was extreme; extreme enough that they would give a village one grenade so that everyone could come around and end their suffering together. It is estimated that between the fighting and the poverty, about 5,000,000-10,000,000 Japanese would have died from an invasion. Should we have dropped the bombs?

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Scenario 3

What would the deontologist say to do in the following scenario? Divorce

Suppose Barney and Robin have been married three years, and have been growing apart every since they got married. They don’t fight much, and neither one has cheated on the other. Nonetheless, given the way their interests have changed, they both now think that they will be happier not being married. Should they get divorced?

What if, if they stay married Robin will be miserable and Barney will be moderately happy, while if they get divorced Barney will be miserable and Robin will be incredibly happy?
Scenario 4

What would the deontologist say to do in the following scenario?

**Euthanasia**

*Suppose Carl has just lost his wife of 50 years. Furthermore, he is in incredible pain when he walks, so he no longer gets to do the various things he has enjoyed all his life. Lastly, he has recently been diagnosed with cancer which will kill him in approximately two years. Given that his prospects for pleasure are extremely low, and his potential for pain is extremely high, should he kill himself?*
Scenario 5

What would the deontologist say to do in the following scenario?

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*While the science is still out on the issue, it has been hypothesized that less intelligent people reproduce at much higher rates than more intelligent people. In observation, it is not difficult to see intelligent, successful people choosing to have the standard 1-3 kids, while less intelligent people have 6 or more. The fear is that if we allow this trend to continue, it will result in a much less intelligent human race over time (also unproven). If it were to turn out that both of these were true, how should the utilitarian handle the situation?*
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Problems for Deontology

- Once again, one of the ways we evaluate a normative ethic is if we think it generally tells us the right thing to do in various cases.
- Once again, this evidence appears mixed.
- One noteworthy feature which may be considered bad or good is that the categorical imperative does not always say what to do. Sometimes there may be one forbidden action, but many permissible actions, and Kant does not say which is the best.
- There are other problems, such as Kant’s distinction between acting from duty and acting in accordance with duty, which seems to many to be wrong.
- One remaining difficulty deserves to be especially highlighted: the problem of how broad maxim’s are supposed to be.
Problems for Deontology

- Whether or not we can or do wish a rule to be universalized seems to depend a lot on how specific a maxim is.
- If we consider the case of borrowing money without intending to give it back, then if the maxim on which we were acting were “anyone with my DNA sequence should borrow money with no intention to pay it back” then we probably could coherently imagine and will such a scenario.
- Kant thinks we should not do this, so he needs maxims to be broader claims, such as “one should borrow money without intending to pay it back”; a maxim of that sort plausibly could not be universalized.
Problems for Deontology

- Whether or not we can or do wish a rule to be universalized seems to depend a lot on how specific a maxim is.
- As maxim’s get more general, other moral problems seem to crop up. For instance, “everyone should lie” could not be coherently willed as a universal law, so instead we should act on the maxim “everyone should tell the truth.” This seems fine, until we consider scenarios in which the Nazi’s are at the door and asking if you are harboring Jews in your house...
- Despite these problems, Kant accepts the results. To claim that we have a different moral obligation regarding truth when we are harboring Jewish people from Nazis is just to not understand what it is for a imperative to be “categorical” rather than hypothetical.
Virtue Ethics

The third alternative is quite different from the other two, and owes its existence to ancient Greece; this view is called virtue ethics.

The basis of virtue ethics is the idea of eudaimonia, which means “the good life” or “life lived well” or “flourishing” or “happiness.”

Aristotle distinguishes things that are valuable in themselves, things that are valuable for some other purpose, and things that are both.

Ultimately, there is only one thing which is purely valuable in itself—happiness—and all other things are desirable because they lead to living well/happiness.
What is required to be an excellent teacher is different than what is required to be an excellent soldier, because teachers and soldiers have different functions.

A virtue is a trait which allows one to fulfill one’s function well.

Thus, there are different virtues for teachers, for soldiers, for knives, for clocks, etc.
Virtue Ethics

- Living life well, eudaimonia, involves fulfilling one’s function excellently.
- Thus, one’s happiness/eudaimonia depends on their function/nature.
- Human function has to be something peculiar to humans
- The only thing peculiar to humans is that we think (we are rational animals)
- Therefore, eudaimonia is a life led by reason
- The virtues are how we live this life led by reason
- Thus, eudaimonia consists in a life of practicing virtue
Applying Virtue Ethics

- One of the problems of virtue ethics is that it seems to have a lot less informative answer to normative ethics.
- In short, its rule is: “do what the virtuous person would do.”
- This answer is unhelpful precisely because virtue ethics is not so much interested in giving answers as it is in developing people.

*Scientific exactitude is impossible in treating of particular ethical cases. They do not fall under any art or law, but the actors themselves have always to take account of circumstances, as much as in medicine or in navigation.*
—Aristotle

- Nonetheless, there are things we can say about virtue which can help us in doing virtuous things.
What do we actually know about virtue?

- Virtues are trained habits (like the arts)
- Virtues give us reasons to act in a certain way
- Doing a virtuous action is not the same thing as having a virtue, and the latter is better
- Having a virtue affects not just one’s actions, but one’s thinking, desires, emotions
What do we actually know about virtue?

- Virtues are the mean between two extremes (deficiency and excess)
- Virtues can be closer to one extreme than the other
- To hit the mean, you should aim towards the extreme which is less natural for you
- There is no value in knowing about virtue, only in having the virtue
- Virtues allow us to perform our function well (our function being the activity of the soul in accordance with reason)
- Living virtuously increases one’s understanding of virtue
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Problems for Virtue Ethics

▶ Does virtue ethics generally give us the results we think are right?
▶ Ethics is supposed to tell us what to do, but virtue ethics is often not good at giving a particular answer
▶ It is questionable whether happiness/living well actually consists in living virtuously
▶ Virtue ethics requires that we have a proper function, but it is difficult to justify how we have a way we are supposed to work. How, evolutionarily, would that have come about?