Traditional Types of Ethical Theories: General Definitions

There are about as many definitions of ethics as there are ethicists. Nevertheless, the definitions tend to share certain features. In Discovering Right and Wrong, philosopher Louis P. Pojman provides a definition of ethics that merits our close attention:

"Ethics" (or "moral philosophy," as it is sometimes called) will be used to designate the systematic endeavor to understand moral concepts and justify moral principles and theories. It undertakes to analyze such concepts as "right," "wrong," "permissible," "ought," "good," and "evil" in their moral contexts. Ethics seeks to establish principles of right behavior that may serve as action guides for individuals and groups. It investigates which values and virtues are paramount to the worthwhile life or to society. It builds and scrutinizes arguments in ethical theories, and it seeks to discover valid principles (for example, "Never kill innocent human beings") and the relationship between those principles (for example, does saving a life in some situations constitute a valid reason for breaking a promise?).

Exponents of traditional ethics approve of Pojman's definition. They also praise him for claiming, as he later does, that moral principles play the role that legal statutes, rules of etiquette, and religious commandments play in their respective domains and that to count as a moral principle, a principle must be (1) prescriptive, (2) universalizable, (3) overriding, (4) public, and (5) practicable.

A prescription is a formula or recipe that a person needs to follow if certain ends are to be obtained. For example, I take my antibiotics prescription to the pharmacist. If she manages to decipher my physician's
is to help us secure what Pojman identifies as the four interrelated purposes of morality:

1. To keep society from falling apart
2. To ameliorate human suffering
3. To promote human flourishing
4. To resolve conflicts of interest in just ways

Because we need to know what morality demands of us before we can do it, traditional ethicists have carefully examined (1) the nature of actions (are they required, forbidden, or merely permitted?); (2) the consequences of actions (are they good, bad, or merely indifferent?); and (3) the motives behind action (are they self-directed, other-directed, or both?). Because traditional ethicists have come to very different conclusions about the nature, consequences, and motives of moral actions, they have divided themselves into several schools of ethical thought, two of the major ones being utilitarianism and deontology.

**UTILITARIANISM: THE ETHICS OF THE GROUP'S GOOD**

Utilitarianism is based on the principle of utility: An act is morally right if and only if there is no other act the agent could perform instead that would produce more good. Utilitarians consider both the utility-producing (good) and disutility-producing (bad) features of a set of possible actions, determining to perform the action most likely to produce the most good. For example, given a choice between aborting or not aborting her fetus, a woman must decide whether she will produce more good by terminating or not terminating her pregnancy. Assume that this woman comes from a very religiously conservative family; that her husband wants a child more than anything else in life; and, finally, that her program of graduate studies in philosophy (of all things!) will be interrupted if she has a child at this time. If less harm will be done to her if she quits graduate school than will be done to her family and husband if she terminates her pregnancy, utilitarian tenets obligate her not to terminate her pregnancy. What matters is not simply what is best for her but what is best on the whole.

Because most people do not believe that morality requires extreme levels of self-sacrifice, they may perceive utilitarianism as too demanding.
They may also regard it as impracticable in another sense. On what sort of scale is the woman described above supposed to weigh her good against that of her family and husband? In response to such a query, philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) constructed a hedonic calculus. He urged reflective individuals to refer to his calculus's seven components—intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent—to determine the utility yield of particular actions for particular individuals. Bentham's mathematics of morality worked better in the abstract than in the concrete, however. Few, if any, people seemed able to assign numerical values to their good and bad experiences.

Bentham's failure to measure utility—particularly people's subjective experiences of good—provoked his successor, philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), to distinguish between quantity and quality of pleasure. What the woman in the above example should weigh is the kind of good she will experience when she receives her Ph.D. against the kind of good her husband will experience when he becomes a father. If judges who have experienced both of these happinesses would prefer "fatherhood" over "doctorhood," then "fatherhood" is a qualitatively better happiness than "doctorhood." We should, says Mill, trust the verdict of these judges since, other things being equal, no experienced, reasonable person would ever choose a lower good over a higher good. But what makes a judge "reasonable"? When a group of experienced judges identifies Dante reading as a better pleasure than bingo playing is this because Dante reading is indeed objectively better than bingo playing, or is it simply because these judges have enough power to transform their personal preferences into universal law? Are Mill's experienced, reasonable judges impartial judges, or are they instead partisan judges, more than likely propertied and privileged men, intent on affirming the values of the group they call their own?

In order to avoid the problem of Mill's judges, twentieth-century preference utilitarians argue that the best way to make intersubjective comparisons of utility is to construct a scale on which people can rank their pleasure preferences from highest to lowest. It is not clear, however, that such a scale can be constructed or that people are able, let alone willing, to identify and reveal their true preferences on it. When people are polled about their preferences, they frequently make mental distinctions between their ideal and actual preferences, reporting the former rather than the latter to pollsters. For example, even though a feminist may prefer Harlequin romances to Ms. magazine, because she knows that she ought to prefer just the opposite, she may reveal her ideal preference (Ms. magazine) to pollsters rather than her actual preference (Harlequin romances).

Preference utilitarians also face the problem of so-called "unacceptable preferences." Because preference utilitarians do not want to defend people's racist or sexist preferences, for example, they attempt to distinguish between unacceptable and acceptable preferences, arguing that whereas the latter preferences are rational, the former ones are irrational. Unfortunately, it is no easier to distinguish rational from irrational preferences than it is to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable preferences. Although the word rational has a more objective connotation than the word acceptable does, it tends to have the same denotation, namely, "that which most people do and/or think." And even if preference utilitarians were able to provide a more convincing account of rationality than "that which most people do and/or think," they, like all other utilitarians, would still need to prove that the individual should be prepared to sacrifice his or her good to that of the group if doing so will produce more total good.

Utilitarians' apparent willingness to sacrifice the rights of one or a few individuals in order to secure the happiness of many individuals weakens their moral credibility. Consider the hypothetical case of Sally, a homeless woman, who is dying in a hospital but whose heart, kidneys, and other bodily organs could be used to save the lives of six other patients currently in the hospital. Assume that Sally's contributions to society are minimal and that she is without family and friends, whereas the other six patients are major social contributors with large families and many friends. Also assume that only Sally can provide the needed organs, since alternative organ sources are not available. Finally, assume that Sally has expressed on several occasions a sense of her own worthlessness. However tempting these circumstances may be, most people will resist the conclusion, "Kill Sally now and save six more worthy lives." Committed utilitarians, however, will not be nearly as resistant. They will view Sally and the six other patients who need her organs as some sort of collective superperson whose aggregate utility demands to be maximized. They will be prepared, therefore, to justify Sally's killing as an unfortunate but necessary means to maximize the group's overall happiness. Individual rights, even the right to life, must give way to the group's good.
In contrast to so-called *act* utilitarians—and so far we have been discussing only those utilitarians who hold that the principle of utility should be applied to particular acts in particular circumstances—so-called *rule* utilitarians do not believe that we may violate the rights of a feeling and thinking individual in order to serve the "good" of some un-feeling and unthinking, indeed nonexistent, superperson. On the contrary, rule utilitarians maintain that even if an isolated violation of an individual's rights produces overall good today, a rule permitting—let alone requiring—such violations would not produce more overall good in the long run. Because no one can ever be sure who is going to get he short end of the stick, rational persons would not choose to live in a society that routinely or randomly harms one individual in order to benefit many individuals.

In the course of a careful analysis of utilitarianism, philosopher H. J. McCloskey elaborates on the major difference between act and rule utilitarians. Without indicating whether the utilitarian he has in mind is an act or rule utilitarian, McCloskey asks us to consider the following scenario:

Suppose a utilitarian were visiting an area in which there was racial strife, and that, during his visit, a Negro rapes a white woman, and that race riots occur as a result of the crime, white mobs, with the connivance of the police, bashing and killing Negroes, etc. Suppose too that our utilitarian is in the area of the crime when it is committed such that his testimony would bring about the conviction of a particular Negro. If he knows that a quick arrest will stop the riots and lynchings, surely, as a utilitarian, he must conclude that he has a duty to bear false witness, causing the punishment of an innocent person.

Yet, even if an *act* utilitarian would lie under such circumstances, a *rule* utilitarian would not. Rather, s/he would argue that from the point of view of utility (total good), people are likely to be much better off in a society with the rule "Don't punish innocent persons" than in a society that lacks such a rule. However tempting it is to punish one innocent person in order to spare many innocent persons from harm, it is morally wrong to do so. Utility will not be maximized in the long run if the rule "Don't punish innocent persons" is broken.

In its respect for rules, rule utilitarianism represents an improvement over act utilitarianism. Still, it is doubtful whether rule utilitarians always honor their utility-maximizing rules. In determining the morality of rules, the principle of utility is, after all, determining the morality of the *actions* those rules govern. If a rule utilitarian could save the whole world from total destruction by punishing one and only one innocent person, would not s/he be permitted/obligated to do so? Are there not exceptions, such as this one, to the generally utility-maximizing rule "Don't punish innocent persons"?

**DEONTOLOGY: THE ETHICS OF DUTY**

The question of when, if ever, to make an exception to a good rule brings us to a discussion of deontology, a set of closely related ethical theories largely based on the work of philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Unlike utilitarianism, deontology is a nonconsequentialist ethical theory. Whereas utilitarians insist that an action's moral worth depends on its utility-maximizing consequences, deontologists maintain that it depends on some feature inherent in the action itself.

In the deontologist's world, it does not matter how much or how little utility (good, pleasure, or happiness) one produces as the result of one's actions. Instead, what matters is whether one's actions are motivated by the intent to do one's duty because it is one's duty. Kant himself argues that an action is *morally worthy* only when a person performs it simply because s/he knows it is required, as when a shopkeeper gives the correct change because of the moral law against cheating. The action is *morally unworthy* when a person performs it even though s/he knows it is forbidden, as when a shopkeeper gives less than the correct change despite the moral law against cheating. The action is *morally nonworthy* (neither morally worthy nor morally unworthy) when a person performs it for nonmoral motives, as when a shopkeeper gives the correct change not because of the moral law against cheating but because s/he wants to be perceived as an honest person so that more people do business with her/him.

Because obeying moral rules, or doing one's duty because it is one's duty, is so important for deontologists, they take care to explain precisely what makes a rule a *moral* rule. According to Kant, the rules that we propose to live by are *moral* if they meet all three conditions of the so-called "categorical imperative":

1. Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law;
2. Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end; and

3. Never . . . perform an action except on a maxim such as can also be a universal law, and consequently such that the will can regard itself as at the same time making universal law by its maxima.

The first version of the categorical imperative sketches a procedure for deciding whether an act is morally permissible. Suppose, says Kant, that a man needs to borrow money, and he knows that no one will lend it to him unless he promises to repay it. He therefore faces a decision: In order to persuade someone to loan him the money he needs, should he promise to repay the debt even though he knows that he cannot do so? If he were to contemplate making a "lying promise," the rule he would be proposing to act on (what Kant calls a "maxim") would be, "Whenever I need a loan, I will promise to repay it even though I know I cannot do so." Now he must ask himself whether his maxim is one that can be universalized into the law "Whenever anyone needs a loan, s/he will promise to repay it even though s/he knows that s/he cannot do so." Apparently, he cannot universalize his maxim because in doing so he would generate a major inconsistency. Were "lying promises" to become a universal practice, no one would any longer believe "promises," and so no one would continue to make loans to bogus "promise-makers." As Kant himself puts it, "No one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such assertion as vain pretense." 8

With respect to the second version of the categorical imperative, Kant reasons that if we judge any object to have value—for example, Leonardo's Mona Lisa—the value of that object depends on our valuing it. Were no one of us to place a value on that object, it would literally be worthless. Thus any object that has value only because and in so far as it is valued by some person has merely conditional worth; that is, its worth is completely dependent on the condition that some person values it.

In contrast to this state of affairs, the persons who bestow value on objects must regard themselves as belonging to an entirely different category of entities than the entities to which they give conditional worth. Persons cannot easily conceive of themselves simply as objects. To be sure, they can conceive of their bodies as mere objects that have value only to the degree that they serve certain useful functions, but they can-not conceive of their persons (what Kant terms "humanity") as mere objects. To do so, any one person would have to view her/his person as worthless unless it happened to be valued by some other person. But then that person would be the source of value, and there is no reason why one person should be such a source of value and not another (namely, one's self). So each person, as a person, must regard herself/himself as well as all other persons as having unconditional worth: the kind of value that does not depend on any value giver over and above one's self.

It follows from this line of reasoning that if one person treats another person as a mere object, valuable only because of the useful purposes s/he serves, the former person treats the latter person disrespectfully and inconsiderately. Nevertheless, one person can serve the ends of another person and yet not be treated only as an object or mere means by that other person. For example, patients go to physicians to regain their health. In one sense then, patients use physicians as means to their own ends, but they are not thereby using physicians as mere means to their own ends. To do that patients would have to treat their physicians as less worthy of respect and consideration than they take themselves to be. In other words, they would have to exploit their physicians in some manner or another, for example, by refusing to pay them for their services or by manipulating them in any number of ways without any concern for their own happiness and self-development.

The third version of the categorical imperative instructs people that unless agents act autonomously, their "right" actions as well as their "wrong" actions are morally worthless. When people act heteronomously, they see themselves as being coerced or forced to obey a rule that they have no reasons to obey and therefore no moral obligation to obey. In contrast, when persons act autonomously, they see themselves as having reasons to obey a rule. Because it is their own will—not any-one else's—that prescribes this rule, they see themselves as under a moral obligation to follow it. Moreover, because their reasons for obeying this rule are the same reasons any autonomous person would have, they prescribe it for themselves.

Like the principle of utility, the categorical imperative is not unproblematic. If the universalizability condition is applied to lies in general, a clear inconsistency can be derived. An equally clear inconsistency can-not be derived in the case of each and every specific lie, however. We may not be willing to universalize the maxim "Lie in order to get rich quick," but we may be willing to universalize the maxim "Lie in order to save your child from ruthless kidnappers."
Second, although slave owners certainly treat their slaves as mere means to their own ends, infertile couples who contract women to gestate their embryos do not necessarily treat these women merely as "things," as rented wombs. On the contrary, they may show these women much respect, attending to their wants and needs. Whereas a slave has no say whatsoever about the conditions of his/her servitude, a gestated mother may have considerable say about the conditions of her employment.

Third, and finally, we tend to think that when we act autonomously, we are following the imperatives of our own subjectivities. Had Kant not told us otherwise, it would never have dawned on us that to act autonomously is to follow the "imperative" of a universal and objective order that arguably transcends and judges our particular subjectivities.

Beyond the specific problems that weaken each version of Kant's categorical imperative, there exist general problems that tend to weaken most formulations of deontology. Because of their stress on the absolute character of moral rules, deontologists struggle to adjudicate so-called "conflicts of duty." If both the rule "It is wrong to lie" and the rule "It is wrong to permit the murder of innocent people" are absolute, then I may fall prey to an irresolvable moral dilemma on some occasion or another. For example, assume that I am hiding a battered woman from her husband. If this man comes to me, brandishing a loaded gun, and asks me if I know where his wife is hiding, I can lie to him, or I can tell him where his wife is. In either event, I will have done something "wrong." To be sure, deontologists could argue that one or the other of these rules is not really absolute; or that God would never permit two really absolute moral rules to conflict; or that a moral rule is absolute only in the "abstract" and not in the context of certain concrete circumstances. But none of these strategies enables me to prioritize genuinely absolute but also conflicting moral rules.

Finally, some versions of deontology, especially Kantian ones, claim that our feelings neither add nor subtract from the moral worth of our actions. It is this point, more than any other, that weakens the credibility of deontology. If it is possible for me to fulfill my parental duties to my sons either grudgingly or cheerfully, it strikes me that doing so cheerfully is morally preferable to doing so grudgingly. Doing the right thing counts for a lot but not as much as doing the right thing with the right feelings. Reading to our children, buying them quality clothes, and sending them to the best schools all out of a sense of "duty" cannot make up for a lack of emotion and love. No one wants to feel cared for out of a sense of "obligation." Indeed, the realization that our parents or guardians labored to raise us only because they felt morally compelled to do so can psychologically scar us. A sense of duty devoid of emotion may be worse than no sense of duty at all. Contrary to Kant, I think that our feelings can and do contribute, either positively or negatively, to the moral worth of an action, so much so, that I also think that duty alone is not always enough to make an action morally worthy.

### TRADITIONAL ETHICS CHALLENGED

The claims of traditional ethics are indeed powerful. When I began graduate school, I was convinced that if I could only combine the best points of utilitarianism and deontology, I would be able to create the ideal ethical theory. My theory would be equally attentive to the consequences of and motives for action; it would be no more concerned about group happiness than about individual rights; and it would bring everyone somehow closer together. (The last thought was my own; my ethics professors would have regarded it as "sentimental" or worse.)

After a semester or so, I gave up. I wondered how all the bizarre hypothetical cases presented in my classes related to me or anyone else I knew. My ethics classes began to bore me, even alienate me.

We spent enormous amounts of time trying to decide if what made an action right was its intended, actual, or projected consequences: If Harry Truman intended to maximize utility by dropping an A-bomb on Hiroshima—as it seemed at the time it would—was his action still "right" years later when his intent had, in fact, produced more harm than good to humankind? We also spent hours cleverly wording obviously immoral maxims that could nonetheless be universalized as laws of nature: Whenever anyone is 5 feet 4 inches tall, is blond-haired and green-eyed, has a birthmark on her upper left arm, has two crooked teeth, and so on, then she will promise to make good on her promises knowing full well that she cannot. We debated whether persons were really obligated to do an action simply because it would add one more "hedon" (unit of pleasure or well-being) to the pile of overall good: If society will get 70 hedons if a woman gives up her brilliant career so that she can be the best mommy ever, but only 70 hedons if she keeps on working full time, cutting a maternal corner here and there, does she have to limit her professional potential to provide that one extra hedon to society? And we debated whether persons were always obligated to follow the categorical imperative no matter the consequences: If "Thou
shall not kill" is a universal law, but a man much stronger than you is raping your four-year-old daughter, do you have to stand by and watch? Under such circumstances, don't you have the right to shoot—and possibly kill—him to stop the violation? It was all so rational, so distant from real life, so tidy on paper.

Yet even though I was convinced that utilitarianism and deontology were flawed ethical theories, I could not quite articulate what they lacked until I started to study a variety of feminine and feminist approaches to ethics. Some of these works aimed to reinterpret traditional ethics, to move its boundaries closer to feminine and/or feminist territories. Others sought to supplement the traditional ethics of justice and rights with an ethics of care and responsibilities. Still others worked to replace traditional ethics with new approaches to ethics based on a nondualistic worldview (that is, a worldview that does not split reason from emotion, self from other, nature from culture, and so on).

As we will repeatedly see, these three specific projects — reinterpretation, supplementation, and replacement—intersect, as do the more general projects of developing feminine and feminist approaches to ethics. Nevertheless, these general projects are distinct from each other. By appreciating and analyzing the ways in which feminine and feminist approaches to ethics make up for what traditional ethics lacks, we can meet the challenge that currently confronts us: reconceiving ethics on the basis of an ontology, epistemology, and politics that have been corrected to incorporate women's ways of being, knowing, and doing.

NOTES
1. Louis P. Pojman, Discovering Right and Wrong (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1990).
2. Ibid., 13.
5. Ibid., 9.
8. Ibid., 40.