

## **BASIC THEORIES OF NORMATIVE ETHICS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MORALITY AND JUDGEMENT OF HUMAN ACTIONS**

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### **Abstract**

As regards human behaviour and conduct, there are theories in ethics that serve as yardsticks for evaluating the rightness or wrongness of our actions, as well as other questions these theories pose for us. These theories are grouped under theories of normative ethics. This paper aims to show the implications of these theories for the morality and judgment of human actions. This study applies the analytical method to show the implications of these theories for the morality and judgment of human actions. This research studies the theories of normative ethics- Determinism, Free-Will Theory (libertarianism), Deontology, Consequentialism, and virtue ethical theory, and some of the questions they pose for us. Questions such as the basis for the rightness or wrongness of human actions. These theories, replete with certain strengths and weaknesses, can offer us some guidance in our approach to our moral judgment of human actions and behaviours. In conclusion, it is only by a good understanding of these theories and their implications for ethical judgment that one can properly evaluate the morality of human actions.

**Keywords:** Ethics, morality, judgement, freedom, and determinism.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Normative ethics is one of the branches of ethics concerned with establishing norms and standards for evaluating the morality human actions. It poses questions such as, “are humans praiseworthy and blameworthy”, “what is the basis of rightness and wrongness of human actions”, and what is of ultimate value” (Kelly, 2004, p.52). My main focus in this paper will be on the questions of “Are humans praiseworthy and blameworthy”, and “what is the basis of rightness and wrongness of human actions”. These questions are what the following theories, Determinism, Free-Will Theory (libertarianism), Deontology, Consequentialism, and virtue ethical theory, under discussion will attempt to answer. I will explore these theories and their implications for ethical judgment.

### **DETERMINISM**

Determinism is one of the normative ethical theories that tends to answer the first normative ethical question of whether the human person can be held morally responsible for his or her actions. In other words, whether the human person should be praised or blamed for his actions. At the center of this question is the issue of human freedom, the free will – is the human person free to choose to act this way rather than that way. To this, Determinism as a theory says no – the human person is not free. What then is Determinism?

Determinism is a theory that holds that all events, including human actions are ultimately caused by factors over which man has no control (Kelly, 2004, p.56). In other words, according to determinism, the human person lacks free-will, and therefore cannot be held morally responsible, praised or blamed for his/her actions. It definitely “entails that, in a situation in which a person makes a certain decision or performs a certain action, it is impossible that he or she could have made any other decision or performed any other action. In other words, it is never true that people could have decided or acted otherwise than they actually did”(Britannica, n.d) Determinism believes that every event in our lives is caused by a force outside us, over which we have no control (Hardie, February 25, 2009. Pp 274-278)

Consequently, to the moral question of moral accountability, praise and blame, it follows that, because people are not in control of their actions which are controlled by external forces outside of themselves they should not be held morally responsible, praised or blamed, punished or rewarded for their actions. These external forces that exert control over man range from natural (psychological, sociological, and genetic factors) to non-natural (divine and astrological factors) (Kelly, 2000) This, by implication, means that man never takes responsibility, nor is he held responsible for any action- good or bad- in other words cannot be praised for doing the right thing or punished for doing the wrong thing. Consequently, man must always put blame on his psychological factors (early child upbringing), sociological brainwashing or influence, inherited genes, the Supreme Being, or the stars for his behaviors. The implication on the society would be enormous- there would be no rewards and motivations, and no laws, courts, punishments, correctional centers or measures, and finally there is no need for heaven and hell. You can imagine the state of our human society if it were so- chaos.

## **FREE-WILL THEORY**

The whole idea of moral accountability and responsibility, praise and blame, reward and punishment, which the first question of Normative Ethics addresses, is based on the notion of the free-will as propounded by free-will theorists – theologians and philosophers alike. Man can only be held responsible, accountable, praised, blamed, punished, and rewarded for his actions only if he can choose to act one way other than the other; if he is in control of his actions rather than being controlled by external forces. In other words, if he is free. Hence, free will, in philosophy and science, (is) the supposed power or capacity of humans to make decisions or perform actions independently of any prior event or state of the universe. Arguments for free will have been based on the subjective experience of freedom, on sentiments of guilt, on revealed religion, and on the common assumption of individual moral responsibility that underlines the concepts of law, reward, punishment, and incentive. In theology, the existence of free will must be reconciled with God’s omniscience and benevolence and with divine grace, which allegedly is necessary for any meritorious act (Duignan, 2022).

Hence to this debate of moral accountability, free-will theorists opine that man is indeed free, and therefore, capable of choosing his actions. Since he chooses his actions; anytime he chooses to do the right action, when he has the option and ability to choose the wrong one, and does that right action, he should be praised and rewarded. However, anytime he chooses the wrong action, when he has the option and ability to choose the right one, and ends up doing the wrong action, he should be held accountable, blamed or punished.

However, man is not always and at every time one hundred percent free. There are times when that freedom is modified by certain factors, “as when they are physically coerced or mentally or emotionally manipulated” (Duignan, 2022); as when they are acting believing that what they are doing is actually right when in actual fact it is actually wrong (ignorance); as when they have performed the same action persistently, consistently and repeatedly overtime that they automatically perform the act (habit); and as when they are overwhelmed by a certain passion, or desire, or obsession, or concupiscence (Kelly, 2000). In the above instances, man, though a free

being, that freedom has been diminished, by the above circumstances, and hence, can't be held morally responsible for actions performed under those circumstances. Since our free choices come with responsibilities or consequences-rewards and punishments- man must make effort to choose rightly, and the society would be better off for it.

## **DEONTOLOGY**

Deontology is one of the normative ethical theories that tends to answer the second normative ethical question of the rightness and wrongness of human actions. This question is all about moral rightness and wrongness. When we say an action is right or wrong how did we arrive at that ethical judgment? This is where Deontology and consequentialism come in.

Deontology is an ethical theory that determines the rightness or wrongness of actions by focusing on duties, obligations, and inherent clear set of universal rules guiding the actions irrespective of their effects or consequences. In other words actions are right or wrong based on adherence to rules. As a result, deontologists “believe that there are certain acts that are wrong in themselves, and thus morally unacceptable means to the pursuit of any ends even ends that are morally admirable, or morally obligatory” (Singer, 1993. P.205)

Therefore, actions are right or wrong not because of the good effects or consequences they produce but because they are right or wrong in themselves. No good ends are good enough to justify the performance of a wrong act (Obasi, 2009. P.16). In other words, deontology holds that an act is performed because of its intrinsic goodness independent of the consequences. The rightness or wrongness of an act is independent of the consequences that it produces. The act is simply good or evil and of itself. The fact that we are getting positive fruit from an evil process does not justify the evil process, it remains evil. No amount of good results can justify an evil means according to the deontologists.

For the philosopher Immanuel Kant, one of the proponents of deontology, the best way to determine or analyze the rightness or wrongness of actions from the deontological stand point is to scrutinize the actions under one of his categorical imperatives, which states that one should ““act

only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it became a universal law'. In lay terms, this simply means that if you do an action, then everyone else should also be able to do it" (Muscente, 2020)

## CONSEQUENTIALISM

Consequentialism can be said to be the opposite of Deontology. Both theories tend to answer the normative ethical question of rightness and wrongness of actions. While Deontology asserts that actions are right or wrong irrespective of their ends, effects or consequences, Consequentialism, on the other hand, states that the rightness and wrongness of actions depends on the end, effect, and consequences produced or caused by the actions. If the ends, effects, or consequences of the action are good or positive then the action is good, and if it produces bad and negative effects, ends, or consequences, then the action is bad.

Consequently, no act is apriori good or bad, we need to wait till the finish of the act to know what type of ends, effects, results, consequences, or its impact on the greater number of people before determining whether the act is good or bad. If the act ends with a positive outcome, result and impacts on the greater number of people then the action is good, if not it is bad.

Consequentialism is sharply opposed to deontology because "it denies that moral rightness depends directly on anything other than consequence...that there are special kinds of acts that are right or wrong in themselves" (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2003), rather for consequentialist "the rightness or wrongness of our acts is determined by a comparative assessment of their consequences" (Singer, 1993.p.205). This consequentialist's view succinctly summarized one authors view on the politico-moral dilemma over Chris Ngige and Peter Obi, the Anambra (a state in Nigeria) people found themselves as a result of the so-called 2003 election in that state, thus: The panacea, I would suggest is a political solution... Dr. Chris's and Mr Obi's camps should close ranks, come together as brothers for the good of the State. Dr. Ngige should find political settlement for Mr. Peter Obi and if possible foot the bills of his electoral campaigns, because Mr. Obi was already cruising fast into the Government House before the magic wonder of Aso Rock, rocked the boat in favor of Dr. Ngige. This certainly may be a bitter pill for Mr. Obi to swallow, looking at how popular he was

during the election and knowing fully well too that majority of the Anambrarians voted for him.... What is the goal of leadership in the political enterprise? Is it not for the provision of good governance to the people? And if that is true, is Dr. Chris Ngige providing those essentials of governments? And if he does, can we please allow him continue with the good work, many good number of Anambra people are bearing witnesses to.... To rest my case, I would say please let Dr. Chris Ngige be! (Obasi, 2009, pp.9-10).

It is this these type of suggestions and arguments that make me wonder what type of society we are bequeathing to the future generation: a society that has no principles and values; a society that has lost the values of integrity, truth and honesty; a society that is everyday moving towards a Machiavellian and pragmatic ideologies without ethical sensitivity. Let us pause, for a while, pose and reflect on the following ethical questions: Should we allow willfully illegality to be institutionalized because it seems that there some good results emanating from that? Should we encourage fraud, because there are some benefits to the people by extension? Should we allow a criminal to go scurf free because he used part of the loot he stole to buy some gifts to the children of the owner of the property looted? (Obasi, 2009, pp. 10-11). Imagine a scenario where an armed robber snatched someone's car and the victim cried out for his stolen car. Eventually, the car was found with the robber, however, he (the robber) was using the car to help certain villagers whom the government had neglected without good road or any means of transportation. Would it be right and just to ask the victim to forgo his car for the robber since he (the robber) was using using it for a good work? (Obasi, 2009, p.xviii)

In summary, consequentialism holds that we ought to do whatever maximizes good consequences. It does not matter what kind of thing we do or how we do it. What is of utmost importance is that we maximize good results. One popular kind of consequentialism is classical utilitarianism. The view says that we ought always to do whatever maximizes the balance of pleasure over pain or everyone affected by our action (Obasi, 2009.p.16). It is unfortunate that it seems that it is this theory that is driving our society today where wealth, affluence, promotion, success, election victories are celebrated even though the means and process to them are wrong and corrupted. Today, in our contemporary society, what matters to many people is not how one attains to wealth

or power but the wealth or power itself. It has led to most people, especially the youths, going after wealth or power by all means and at all costs ranging from: drug and human trafficking, human ritual killings, and sacrifices, armed robbery, thurggery etc. After they made the money or attain powerful positions or offices, by these means, no one questions the source and the means, rather they are rewarded and celebrated by the society (Obasi, 2009, p.8).

## **VIRTUE ETHICS**

Virtue ethics is often contrasted with deontology and consequentialism while consequentialism and deontology make the goodness of ends, effects, outcomes, and consequences of an actions, and acting of moral duty and intrinsic rules of actions, respectively, central in determining the rightness and wrongness of an act, virtue ethics emphasize the role of character and virtue in determining the rightness and wrongness of an act. While consequentialism and deontology are concerned with the rightness and wrongness of actions. Virtue ethics is concerned with “who is a good person” and “how should a good person behave”. Central to virtue ethics is character which it believes is more reliable and stable. If one builds a good character, characterized by virtues, over times, there is greater probability that the person would act right most of the time, than when one acts merely out of duty or obligation, or out of benefits. The development of this moral character “may take a whole lifetime. But once it is firmly established, one will act consistently, predictably and appropriately in a variety of situations” (Athanassoulis, 2021).

Virtue ethics ideologically shifts the rightness and wrongness question from actions, where it has always previously cantered, to actors (persons); from what is the right action to who a good person is, and what being good a person requires. Virtue ethnics can be said to affirm or support the biblical dictate that says “a good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit” (Matt. 7: 17-23). In other words, for virtue ethics theorists a good person of character (“a good tree”) must produce good actions (“good fruit”) and a bad person (“a bad tree”) must produce bad actions (“bad fruits”).

So the emphasis should be on cultivating good characters and virtues in persons who in turn will act rightly.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, normative ethics provides frameworks for evaluating the morality of human actions, from outcomes (Consequentialism) to duties (Deontology) and character traits (Virtue ethics). The theories discussed above offer distinct perspectives on what makes an action right or wrong. The understanding of these theories can inform our moral judgments, guide our decision-making, and direct our actions. Ultimately, recognizing the strengths and limitations of each theory can refine our approach to our moral judgment of human actions and behaviors in diverse situations. By considering these frameworks/theories, we can better navigate complex moral dilemmas and cultivate a more informed approach to ethical decision-making.

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