

Ethical Toolbox



"Live so that when your children think of fairness and integrity, they think of you."

H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

DOMAINS OF ETHICAL ASSESSMENT

At this point, it might seem that ethics concerns itself entirely with rules of conduct that are based solely on evaluating acts. However, it is more complicated than that. Most ethical analysis falls into one or more of the following domains: (1) action, (2) consequences, (3) character, and (4) motive. Again, all these domains will be examined in detail in later chapters, but an overview here will be helpful.

Let's examine these domains using an altered version of the Kitty Genovese story. Suppose a man attacks a woman in front of her apartment and is about to kill her. A responsible neighbor hears the struggle, calls the police, and shouts from the window "Hey you, get out of here!" Startled by the neighbor's reprimand, the attacker lets go of the woman and runs down the street where he is caught by the police.

Action

One way of ethically assessing this situation is to examine the *actions* of both the attacker and the good neighbor: The attacker's actions were wrong whereas the neighbor's actions were right. The term *right* has two meanings. Sometimes, it means "obligatory" (as in "the right act"), but it also can mean "permissible"

(as in "a right act" or "It's all right to do that"). Usually, philosophers define *right* as permissible, including in that category what is obligatory:

1. A *right act* is an act that is permissible for you to do. It may be either
 - (a) obligatory or (b) optional.
 - a. An **obligatory act** is one that morality requires you to do; it is not permissible for you to refrain from doing it.
 - b. An **optional act** is one that is neither obligatory nor wrong to do. It is not your duty to do it, nor is it your duty not to do it. Neither doing it nor not doing it would be wrong.
2. A *wrong act* is one you have an obligation, or a duty, to refrain from doing. It is an act you ought not to do; it is not permissible to do it.

In our example, the attacker's assault on the woman was clearly a wrong action (prohibited); by contrast, the neighbor's act of calling the police was clearly a right action—and an obligatory one at that.

But, some acts do not seem either obligatory or wrong. Whether you take a course in art history or English literature or whether you write a letter with a pencil or pen seems morally neutral. Either is permissible. Whether you listen to rock music or classical music is not usually considered morally significant. Listening to both is allowed, and neither is obligatory. Whether you marry or remain single is an important decision about how to live your life. The decision you reach, however, is usually considered morally neutral or optional. Under most circumstances, to marry (or not to marry) is considered neither obligatory nor wrong but permissible.

Within the range of permissible acts is the notion of **supererogatory acts**, or highly altruistic acts. These acts are neither required nor obligatory, but they exceed what morality requires, going "beyond the call of duty." For example, suppose the responsible neighbor ran outside to actually confront the attacker rather than simply shout at him from the window. Thus, the neighbor would assume an extra-risk that would not be morally required. Similarly, while you may be obligated to give a donation to help people in dire need, you would not be obligated to sell your car, let alone become impoverished yourself, to help them. The complete scheme of acts, then, is this:

1. Right act (permissible)
 - a. Obligatory act
 - b. Optional act
 - (1) Neutral act
 - (2) Supererogatory act
2. Wrong act (not permissible)

One important kind of ethical theory that emphasizes the nature of the act is called *deontological* (from the Greek word *deon*, meaning "duty"). These theories hold that something is inherently right or good about such acts as truth telling and promise keeping and inherently wrong or bad about such acts as lying and promise breaking. Classical deontological ethical principles include the Ten

Commandments and the Golden Rule. Perhaps the leading proponent of deontological ethics in recent centuries is Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who defended a principle of moral duty that he calls the categorical imperative: “Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law.” Examples for Kant are “Never break your promise” and “Never commit suicide.” What all of these deontological theories and principles have in common is the view that we have an inherent duty to perform right actions and avoid bad actions.

Consequences

Another way of ethically assessing situations is to examine the *consequences* of an action: If the consequences are on balance positive, then the action is right; if negative, then wrong. In our example, take the consequences of the attacker’s actions. At minimum he physically harms the woman and psychologically traumatizes both her and her neighbors; if he succeeds in killing her, then he emotionally devastates her family and friends, perhaps for life. And what does he gain from this? Just a temporary experience of sadistic pleasure. On balance, his action has overwhelmingly negative consequences and thus is wrong. Examine next the consequences of the responsible neighbor who calls the police and shouts down from the window “Hey you, get out of here!” This scares off the attacker, thus limiting the harm of his assault. What does the neighbor lose by doing this? Just a temporary experience of fear, which the neighbor might have experienced anyway. On balance, then, the neighbor’s action has overwhelmingly positive consequences, which makes it the right thing to do.

Ethical theories that focus primarily on consequences in determining moral rightness and wrongness are called **teleological ethics** (from the Greek *telos*, meaning “goal directed”). The most famous of these theories is *utilitarianism*, set forth by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), which requires us to do what is likeliest to have the best consequences. In Mill’s words, “Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”

Character

Whereas some ethical theories emphasize the nature of actions in themselves and some emphasize principles involving the consequences of actions, other theories emphasize *character*, or virtue. In our example, the attacker has an especially bad character trait—namely, malevolence—which taints his entire outlook on life and predisposes him to act in harmful ways. The attacker is a bad person principally for having this bad character trait of malevolence. The responsible neighbor, on the other hand, has a good character trait, which directs his outlook on life—namely, benevolence, which is the tendency to treat people with kindness and assist those in need. Accordingly, the neighbor is a good person largely for possessing this good trait.

Moral philosophers call such good character traits **virtues** and bad traits **vices**. Entire theories of morality have been developed from these notions and are called **virtue theories**. The classic proponent of virtue theory was Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who maintained that the development of virtuous character traits is needed to ensure that we habitually act rightly. Although it may be helpful to have action-guiding rules, it is vital to empower our character with the tendency to do good. Many people know that cheating, gossiping, or overindulging in food or alcohol is wrong, but they are incapable of doing what is right. Virtuous people spontaneously do the right thing and may not even consciously follow moral rules when doing so.

Motive

Finally, we can ethically assess situations by examining the motive of the people involved. The attacker intended to brutalize and kill the woman; the neighbor intended to thwart the attacker and thereby help the woman. Virtually all ethical systems recognize the importance of motives. For a full assessment of any action, it is important to take the agent's intention into account. Two acts may appear identical on the surface, but one may be judged morally blameworthy and the other excusable. Consider John's pushing Mary off a ledge, causing her to break her leg. In situation (A), he is angry and intends to harm her, but in situation (B) he sees a knife flying in her direction and intends to save her life. In (A) he clearly did the wrong thing, whereas in (B) he did the right thing. A full moral description of any act will take motive into account as a relevant factor.

CONCLUSION

The study of ethics has enormous practical benefits. It can free us from prejudice and dogmatism. It sets forth comprehensive systems from which to orient our individual judgments. It carves up the moral landscape so that we can sort out the issues to think more clearly and confidently about moral problems. It helps us clarify in our minds just how our principles and values relate to one another, and, most of all, it gives us some guidance in how to live. Let's return to questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, some of which we should now be able to better answer.

What is the nature of morality, and why do we need it? Morality concerns discovering the rules that promote the human good, as elaborated in the five traits of moral principles: prescriptivity, universalizability, overridingness, publicity, and practicability. Without morality, we cannot promote that good.

What is the good, and how will I know it? The good in question is the human good, specified as happiness, reaching one's potential, and so forth. Whatever we decide on that fulfills human needs and helps us develop our deepest potential is the good that morality promotes.