**Ethics: Ethical Normative Systems**

**The *Golden Rule* is part of 13 different religious/philosophical traditions, below are a few:**

*Do to others as you would have them do to you. Luke 6:31 (Christian)*

*Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others. Shayast-na Shayast 13:29 (Zoroastrian)*

*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. Udana-Varga 5:18 (Buddhist)*

*Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you. Analects 15:23 (Confucian)*

*Do not wrong or hate your neighbour. For it is not he who you wrong, but yourself. Pima proverb (Native American)*

The quotations above are all variations of what is known as ***'The Golden Rule'***. This principle is common to a wide range of ethical systems from around the world. It expresses a very simple moral principle, known as **'reciprocity', or the 'reciprocal principle'** that can be used to guide one's actions:

* **Should you lie?**   
  Reciprocal principle: Would you want to be lied to?
* **Should you steal?**   
  Reciprocal principle: Would you want to be stolen from?
* **Should you drive you car in a manner that endangers the life of other drivers on the road?**   
  Reciprocal principle: Would you want to be on the road when someone is driving in such a manner that it endangers other drivers on the road?

The Golden Rule **assumes that people, by nature, don't like dishonesty, being robbed, or having their life imperilled, which is a pretty safe assumption**. It is based on the ideas of empathy and of self-interest, and it encourages people to **examine the consequences and implications of their actions**. You can extend this simple idea to cover a wide range of situations.

**Ethical normative systems** can be based on simple principles, such as the Golden Rule. However, life can be more complex and situations not as straightforward as the three examples above. **Normative systems provide more depth and a wider range of principles than a single simple statement.**

As in most things philosophical, there is more than one answer to the question: What should I do?

Ethical normative systems can be divided into three broad categories: **virtue ethics, duty ethics, and consequential ethics**.

#### Virtue Ethics

Virtues are desirable qualities that a person should possess such as honesty, courage, kindness, and loyalty. Ethical systems based on virtue emphasize the moral character of the individual arguing that a person who possesses virtues will act virtuously, that is, goodly. People need to work at developing habits of good behaviour, meaning training their moral sense much as an athlete would train for a sport. Education and 'practical wisdom' are key in virtue ethics.

#### Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics in the western tradition traces its roots to Aristotle. His ideas about virtue were based in the notion that all things have a proper function; the proper function of humans is their faculty of reason. If you perform your proper function well, you will find satisfaction and happiness, called eudaemonia. There is no notion of an 'afterlife' in which you are rewarded for your good deeds; the reward comes from the satisfaction you will get from fulfilling the purpose for which you were designed.

Doing the right thing would be acting in accordance with good habits, virtues, which you have acquired by applying your sense of reason to practical moral situations. There are no 'guidelines' for moral action that tell you what to do for a particular situation: a virtuous person will automatically choose the right action. It is almost the same as having a trained 'moral reflex'.

But how do you acquire these habitual virtues? In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle set out a system known as the Golden Mean. He analyzed 11 human vices, arranging them in pairs, such as cowardice and foolhardiness, and stinginess and extravagance. The vices consist of extremes consisting of too much or too little of the desirable action. For example, when a charitable group asks for your help, it is not good to be stingy and refuse to help them; on the other hand, it is not good to give away all that you have. What you should do is act according to the situation, that is, do what is appropriate for the situation. The Golden Mean is a sort of 'steer between the ditches' approach to morality, meaning the vices lie on either side of your path and you must find the best course. The 'middle path' between cowardice and foolhardiness is courage; between stinginess and extravagance, generosity.

But how much generosity is appropriate? The virtuous person will know what to do based on study, reason, and the practical wisdom that comes from experience. There is no guidebook or internet site which you can consult to tell you what to do in every situation (duty theory). There is no calculation of pros and cons (consequentialism). Virtuous people will know what is best because they are virtuous.

Incidentally, according to Aristotle, women cannot be virtuous because they lack the ability to reason. (The Ancient Greeks tended towards misogyny.) Modern virtue ethicists have built on Aristotle's ideas, and most would argue that women are capable of higher thinking functions.

##### *Thomistic Ethics*

St. Thomas Aquinas was an influential, though controversial, Christian scholar of the 13th century. His great work was the Summa Theologica, addressed many of the great questions about Christianity, such as the existence of God and the nature of truth.

Aquinas based his ethical system on Aristotle's concepts of human rationality, purpose, and eudaemonia. However, some of Aristotle's ideas contradicted Christian beliefs. Aquinas integrated Christian ideas into an Aristotelian scheme. Aquinas argued that the ultimate purpose of humans is to return to God: all good actions tend towards this goal. Humans use their faculties of reason to determine what are proper behaviours, using an innate sense of goodness provided them by the Supreme Being. To come closer to God, people should cultivate virtuous behaviours, particularly the Four Cardinal Virtues: prudence, temperance, justice, and courage. These are not the only virtues one should cultivate, but they are the most critical, for other virtues rely on them. If one develops virtuous habits, one will take the right action and be a good person, fulfilling the purpose for which one was designed-to get back to God. Of course, if one doesn't act in accordance with these virtues... well, bad things will happen.

##### *Buddhism*

*The eight-spoked Dharmachakra. The eight spokes represent the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism.*

This is an example of a non-Western virtue ethics system. This philosophical tradition developed in India in the 6th century BCE. One of the basic tenets of Buddhism is 'The Four Noble Truths' based on the idea that life is a cycle of suffering. How does one break the cycle? Buddhists follow the Noble Eightfold Path, a statement of virtues related to proper conduct. As with Aristotle's ethics, education and wisdom are required to know the right action to take. However, the Noble Eightfold Path is somewhat more explicit in telling you what to do and what not to do. The end result of following the Noble Eightfold Path is Nirvana; the state of release from the suffering of this world.

##### *Confucianism*

Confucianism developed in China about the same time as Buddhism in India several centuries before Aristotle. Confucianism has no afterlife or other-worldly dimension. Confucianism is a humanistic philosophy, and its ethical system revolves about relationships between people in society.

The goal of Confucian ethics is to promote harmony in society. Everyone has a place and a proper way of behaving towards others, based on the relationships between individuals: parent to child, ruler to subject, husband to wife. Each of these individuals has a role, with obligations towards the others. If all people perform their roles properly, then social harmony will result, which is good. If, on the other hand, people decide to act outside their proper roles, social chaos will result, which is not good. The individual is less important than the community, and acting selfishly, acting to increase your own happiness without considering the wider social ramifications, will lead to bad results for the community. The highest good is social harmony, and a virtuous person will always act to promote it: recall that Confucianism uses the Golden Rule as a basis of its morality.

How does one know how to behave properly? Study of ancient wisdom based on the teachings of sages will allow one to cultivate virtues to guide proper behaviour. This will take time. A good person will need to acquire three important virtues:

* *Jen: humanity, kindness, goodness*
* *Li: propriety, respect for others, acknowledging proper social relations*
* *Yi: right action, duty, to do what is fitting*

A person who cultivates their moral senses properly will be able to determine the right action to take. Confucianism is often seen as advocating a rigid social system intolerant of change or unconventional thinking, but Confucianism allows for someone who is virtuous to challenge the existing social order, particularly in the realm of politics, as moral thinking may be superior to what is currently in place. However, the key good of Confucianism is social harmony, and all actions have to be seen in this context.

#### Duty Ethics

The requirement that one should follow a specified set of rules is known as duty ethics, or deontology. Deontological systems are based on a set of principles that one applies to each situation. The nature of right and wrong comes from outside the individual. This contrasts with virtue ethics, which is based on a sense of what is right and wrong. In addition, duty is something one is obliged to do: it is your "should do". Not doing your duty means committing wrong acts. As well, the outcome of the action is irrelevant, and duty ethics focuses on the spirit in which the action is done-right intention. This is where duty ethics differs from consequentialism.

##### Theistic Normative Ethics

Theistic Normative Ethics developed from the Divine Command theories of meta-ethics, where the source of right and wrong is the Divine. They are based on the notion of an objective source of right and wrong, in this case, a Supreme Being, who indicates what humans should and should not do. All actions are judged in accordance of how closely they match God's will.

These systems provide simple criteria for determining right and wrong, such as in the Ten Commandments. The same difficulties arise:

* *there may be variant interpretations of what the Divine Creator wishes humans to do, and*
* *the guidelines are of little interest to non-believers.*

##### Kantian Ethics

Immanuel Kant's system of ethics is usually known as the Categorical Imperative. It is based on the notion that there are rules of right and wrong that can be found, and that right behaviour requires that a person always follow these rules. The rules set out situations, courses of action, and reasons for these courses of action. For example:

*When faced with the situation of telling the truth or telling a lie, always tell the truth because it will lead to greater trust and honesty in the world, which is a desirable outcome.*

How does one arrive at the rules? Through reason, one can develop a set of rules, maxims, to guide behaviour. These maxims need to take into account possible situations, courses of action available, and the outcome that is desirable. Based on reason, these maxims will be universal to all persons who think about problems hard enough, and, in fact, will be self-evident. As the maxims are arrived at through reason, they cannot be wrong and are not open to interpretation. They are categorical. A rational basis also makes them a duty that you are bound to carry out imperative. Thus, we arrive at the categorical imperative, a set of rules that are binding on everyone, always.

This is usually summarized in the statement:

*Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law*.

This means that if you feel it is wrong to lie, then you believe it is wrong for everyone to lie, no exceptions. You know this because you arrived at your maxim through vigourous reasoning, so it can't be wrong. If you allowed exceptions to your rule, such as "It is okay to lie when no one will be hurt by my lies", you open the possibility that anyone could lie whenever they judged the lie to be harmless. The potential result of this could lead to a lot of lying. Moral chaos and disorder would result if each person decided for themselves when lying was okay and when it was not okay. As well, if you decided it was okay for you to lie, then it would be okay for anyone else to lie. Again, moral chaos would result.

What is important in determining the rightness or wrongness of actions is their intention, the spirit in which they are done. A good act is one that is done for the right reasons-duty. There should be no consideration of a 'good outcome', and one's personal benefit or harm (or that of others) is irrelevant: regardless of what will happen, you must do what you must do.

The purpose of following these categorical imperatives is to promote the highest good for humanity, which will lead to great happiness for all. This is associated with Kant's ideas about the afterlife and the Divine, which he considered necessary as metaphysical guarantors of reality. The categorical imperative can also be expressed in this way, which takes into account the notion of the Highest Good:

*Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always as an end and never as a means.*

This sounds similar to the Golden Rule. It requires you to think about others, and not just your own interest. It requires that you take an objective view of yourself and arrive at decisions about morality impartially.

##### Pluralistic Theory of Duty

This is a theory associated with 20th century Scottish philosopher W.D. Ross. His theory differs from Kant's deontology because it posits conditional (prima facie) duties that will influence your choices. These duties include (but are not limited to):

* *Fidelity: the duty to keep promises*
* *Reparation: the duty to compensate others when we harm them*
* *Gratitude: the duty to thank those who help us*
* *Justice: the duty to recognize merit*
* *Beneficence: the duty to improve the conditions of others*
* *Self-improvement: the duty to improve our virtue and intelligence*
* *Nonmaleficence: the duty to not injure others*

The duties are not ranked in any order and Ross indicated that he did not feel his list indicated all possible duties.

Ross argues that you have to evaluate the situation that faces you and make a decision about how to act based on these duties. When reason is applied to the situation, the answer, the duty, will be apparent. The advantage of Ross's system over Kant's is that it is more flexible, which is also its disadvantage. For instance, if the categorical imperative tells you that you must always tell the truth, things are easy. With pluralism, you have to decide which duty applies more than the others.

#### Consequentialist Ethics

The theory of normative ethics takes the approach that what makes an act good is not the doer (virtue) or the act itself (duty), but the outcome of the act. The right act is one that leads to good outcomes. This is known as consequentialism, as it is concerned only with the consequences of our actions as a guide to determining how we should act. Of course, there are many varieties of consequentialism.

##### Rational Self-Interest

This ethical theory (also called Ethical Egoism), states that one should act in a manner that will benefit oneself:

*Good things are those that are good for me. Of course, I must use my sense of reason to determine what is in my best interest, and I may conclude that what is best in the long run is not what is best in the short run.*

For example, it might be an advantage for me to lie to you right now, as it would give me an advantage over you or assist me in avoiding bad outcomes. But in the long run, I should be smart enough to know that eventually the habit of telling lies will catch up with me, and I would lose the trust of those close to me, and my life would be friendless, cold, and empty. Thus, it is not in my best interest to tell lies.

One of the chief proponents of rational self-interest was 20th century American Ayn Rand. She wrote several best-selling novels, such as Atlas Shrugged and the Fountainhead, as well as works on philosophy, the most notable being The Virtue of Selfishness. She called her theory of rational self-interest Objectivism (not to be confused with the Objectivism associated with Realism).

Objectivist ethics argues that people are their own ends, their own highest purposes. Thus, doing what is best for you is good, and only each of us can decide for ourselves what this is. Central to Rand's theory is reason, which she views as a necessity to understanding our best interest. Other virtues include justice, honesty, and integrity.

Rand tended towards supporting an economic system of laissez-faire capitalism, in which individuals competed in a virtually uncontrolled marketplace. She saw government regulation as a great evil, and the heroes of Rand's novels were independent-minded rebels who struggled to do what was right in the face of opposition from narrow-mindedness and less talented people. She viewed relations between individuals on the basis of an exchange, or trade, which was in the best interests of each, a sort of reciprocity of mutual self-interest.

#### Utilitarianism

Utility refers to how useful something is. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that evaluates actions on how useful they are to bringing about good, which is defined by utilitarians in terms of pleasure or happiness. The basic tenet of Utilitarianism is that a system of ethics should bring about "the greatest good for the greatest number". Actions that lead to this are good; actions that take away from the general happiness are bad.

An early founder of utilitarianism was Jeremy Bentham, an 18th century English philosopher. Bentham was a materialist and an empiricist, strongly influenced by Hume (who actually coined the term utilitarian). Bentham did not believe in things that could not be physically proven. He argued that human nature had made pleasure and pain our standard by which to measure good and bad: pleasure is good and pain is bad. Right actions are those that increase pleasure and wrong actions are those that create pain. This does not mean that my happiness alone determines what is right and wrong, but that I must consider the general happiness, as my interests are bound inextricably with everyone else's. Thus, the test of right and wrong actions is whether they promote everyone's happiness, not just mine.

Bentham developed what is called the Hedonic Calculus. This rated all actions by how "happy-making" they were. To calculate the rightness or wrongness of a particular action, you need only do the math, weighing out the pleasure and pain it would create according to criteria such as how intense the pleasure or pain would be, how long it would last, and how many other people would be affected by it. This system is known as Act Utilitarianism, since it looks at the effects of each action taken on its own.

A major flaw with Bentham's simple cost/benefit approach is that it takes a quantitative, mathematical view of morality: a small number of people suffering is acceptable if many people are made happy. It can become a moral "tyranny of the majority". For example, it would be morally right under Bentham's system to have a small number of people living in terrible conditions, working to produce cheap clothing that would bring a reasonable amount of pleasure to many people. According to the Hedonic Calculus, this would be okay. Torture, slavery, and injustice of all varieties could be viewed as morally acceptable, so long as the numbers crunched correctly.

John Stuart Mill, Bentham's godson, created a more refined version of the theory, described in his 1863 book, Utilitarianism. Called Rule Utilitarianism, it corrected two major flaws with Bentham's simple Hedonic Calculus approach. Firstly, it did not look at acts in isolation, but considered general rules of moral behaviour. For example, Mill's system is not concerned with a question like "is stealing the car wrong?", but with more general principles such as "is stealing wrong?" If it can be shown that stealing, in general, tends to decrease the general level of happiness, then stealing is wrong in general and in particular. Once proven, the rules are binding.

Secondly, Bentham's system did not distinguish between different varieties of pleasures. He was noted for saying that "pushpin is as good as opera". (Pushpin is a simple child's game.) Bentham implied that there were no differences between the qualities of different experiences. But is this accurate? For example, my grief over the death of a pet fish may be extreme, but is it in the same league as your grief over the death of a parent? Similarly, a long, dull pleasure could be viewed as more desirable than a brief intense pleasure. Mill disagreed that all pleasures are equal: there are 'simpler pleasures' and 'higher pleasures'. Simple pleasures tended to be sensual, while higher tended to be mental, requiring a greater education and refinement to appreciate. As Mill argued:

***It is better to be a human being dissatisfied, than a pig satisfied, better to be Socrates dissatisfied, than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.***

Jeremy Bentham, Practical Ethics, edited by Peter Singer. Cambridge University Press (1993), p. 108.

According to Mill, pushpin is not as good as opera and human pleasures are superior to porcine.

Utilitiarian views are widespread and common today. While most modern utilitarians have moved away from using pleasure alone as a standard to measure right and wrong acts, the idea of minimizing harm and maximizing benefit as a guiding principle is strong.

Utilitarianism's great strengths are its flexibility, its decision-making process, and its focus on outcomes. Its great criticism is that just because something makes many people happy, it isn't necessarily right.

#### Existentialist Ethics

Existentialism argues that there is no objective meaning in the world, that the world is essentially void of meaning, and that we must create the meaning of all things, subjectively, as we live. Existentialists are thus faced with moral nihilism: if I alone decide the value of my actions, how is an existential morality possible, as it would have no reference to other humans?

Jean-Paul Sartre, the leading figure of the existential movement, argued that an existential morality is possible, based on the notion of radical freedom. This is the idea that each of us is responsible for all our actions, a responsibility we cannot avoid. To avoid this responsibility is called "bad faith", pretending that we are not responsible for our decisions. For example, to argue, "I **had** to do something because it was expected of me. I was forced into it" is bad faith because the decision to act was made and responsibility must be taken for the actions.

How then do I decide what to do? I make it up. Sartre uses the example of a young man, a former student of his, in occupied France during the Second World War. His older brother was killed by the German invasion; he was all his mother had left. He wanted to avenge his brother, to leave France and join the Free French forces in England, but he knows it would break his mother's heart if he did. What should he do? How should he decide? Sartre advised him to follow his instincts and do what his heart told him. However, one must be careful to follow your authentic instincts and avoid choices based on what you think others might want you to do. If you are true to yourself, you are acting rightly.

This idea is similar to the idea of Intuitionism, with the difference that existentialism is based on the individual, not on all people. Actions that are right for you may not be right for me, and my moral compass may point in different directions than yours.