

University and the Russell Sage Foundation, “Wilbert Moore represents a model of sociological inquiry at its best. He had an enduring vision of the integrative intellectual tasks of the field, high respect for evidence and rigorous thought, an enormous capacity for sustained effort, and a deep sense of the importance of close acquaintance with the complexity of historical processes. . . .” Moore died in 1987.

Moore’s approach to social indicators is carried forward in a number of journals and periodicals that use social indicators as the basis of many of their empirical reports.

### Cross-References

- ▶ Demography
- ▶ Social Change
- ▶ Social Indicators
- ▶ Sociology

### References

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### Moral Philosophy

- ▶ Ethics

### Moral Statistics

- ▶ Conviction Statistics as Measures of Crime

## Moral Theories

Sharlene Swartz<sup>1</sup> and Duncan G. Scott<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Human and Social Development/Sociology, Human Sciences Research Council/University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Queens University Belfast, Belfast, UK

### Synonyms

Normative ethics

### Definition

Ethics is conventionally divided into three sub-disciplines, namely, metaethics (the foundations of ethics), normative ethics, and applied ethics (Macintyre, 1998; Singer, 2003). Normative ethics attempts to answer the questions “how should we make ethical judgments?” and “what is the aim of moral behavior?” Is it to fulfill one’s purpose as a moral being, to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, or is it merely to follow a set of rules since that is one’s duty? At the heart of normative ethics is the examination of what is morally good behavior. Plato describes the ideal moral responses of the young guardians in *The Republic*; the Ten Commandments of the Pentateuch and the Sermon on the Mount of the New Testament offer religious foundations for moral behavior; the domestic law and constitution of a country and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights provide legal bases for right and good conduct. The values espoused by our communities and their traditions give further guidance.

### Description

The three main theoretical branches of normative ethics – deontological approaches, teleological or utilitarian approaches, and virtue ethics – will be considered in turn.

### **Deontological Moral Theories: The Ethics of Duty**

Deontological ethics are based on the concept of duty (or obligation) and are associated with the thinking of Immanuel Kant (Kant, Müller, & Noiré, 1881). Obligations may be towards a number of relationships or criteria such as an obligation to duty, respect, rights, conscience, or to what has been commanded by a divine authority. Deontological or Kantian ethics maintain there is an inherent rightness in an action, which is the motivation for acting, regardless of the outcome of the action. Because an action is inherently right, it ought to be chosen by all rational beings, and it ought to be executed without regard for their wants, feelings, or desires. This rationale underpins Kant's famous categorical imperative, which is to act only on that maxim whereby one could at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

According to Kant, ethics are universal, applying to all people at all times. Ethics are also transcendent, appealing to some form of authority as originator of duty. Kant maintained that freedom is only to be found in rational action. Action is arrived at by applying practical reason as well as using the moral imagination, i.e., envisaging what would happen if everyone behaved in such a way. Kantian ethics are often associated with the Golden Rule of reciprocity; his insistence that people should never be treated as a means to an ends stands in opposition to the instrumentalism of utilitarian theories and forms the basis of practical guidance for how people ought to live. Furthermore, Kant was strongly opposed to any affective basis for morality, such as benevolence or sympathy, and called action based on desires a hypothetical imperative – an imperative grounded in the desire for a particular outcome. Numerous other normative ethical theories have been expounded, all of which may all be classified as Kantian in nature. These include, among others, natural law ethics (Finnis, 1980), the ethics of conscience (Hinman, 1994), contractual ethics, and rights theories (Dworkin, 2000; Nozick, 1993).

### **Teleological Theories: The Ethics of Utility**

Teleological theories answer the question of what is morally right by considering the value of an action according to its consequences. There is therefore no such thing as inherent rightness or goodness; something is right or good because it has a good or right outcome. Principles are arrived at by reasoning, and moral action is that which provides authenticity, utility, ► justice, and power for the highest number of people. Accordingly, the means of an action are subordinate to its consequences. ► Utilitarianism, first articulated by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Mill, Bentham, Austin, & Warnock, 2002), is based on a search for happiness or pleasure for the most people. As such, it is also referred to as universal hedonism. Bentham maintained that whatever increases the net surplus of pleasure over pain is right and whatever decreases it is wrong. Utilitarian decision making often demands self-sacrifice in order that the highest number of people may benefit. In this sense it is altruistic. A number of variations of utilitarianism exist, namely, ethical egoism, evolutionary ethics, Nietzschean ethics, existential ethics, the ethics of justice, and ethical pragmatism.

Utilitarian or deontological normative ethical theories have waned in popularity as philosophers have become increasingly disillusioned with the emphasis placed by the so-called Enlightenment project on rationality and individual freedom (Macintyre, 1984; Peters, 1981). Instead, the notion of virtue ethics has gained prominence as a compelling vision of human thriving, best suited for a pluralistic world. Also popular are feminist approaches to ethics and moral thinking, especially that which has come to be termed “the ethics of care.” As a prominent theory useful to social scientists researching individual and collective well-being, the ethics of care will be discussed as an extension of virtue ethics.

### **Virtue Ethics: Including Communitarian Theories**

Virtue ethics (Foot, 2002; Hursthouse, 1997; Macintyre, 1984; Nussbaum, 1990; Slote, 1997)

considers the criteria for moral action to be the virtuous character of the agent. Its unique approach results from its shift in emphasis from right *action* to right *character*, from learning to *do* good to learning to *be* good. In this tradition, Hursthouse describes virtue as “a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well” (Hursthouse, 1997, pp. 228–229). Unlike teleological or deontological ethics, virtue ethics insists that there is no *obligation* to act morally and that it is not based on individual principles or duties. MacIntyre therefore asserts that virtues are qualities necessary to achieve “a complete human life lived at its best. . . *within an ongoing social tradition*” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 273, 144, emphasis added). Such an emphasis away from the individual to the life of the community has meant that virtue ethics has gained popularity among communitarian philosophers (Etzioni, 1998; Gutmann, 1999; Sandel, 1996; Taylor, 1992). Indeed, Hursthouse (1997, p. 243) argues that one of the attractions of virtue ethics is that different societies may articulate different theories of human thriving, as long as there is some consistency in the basic understanding of what constitutes virtuous living on the good life. There is, however, some contention over whether this understanding can be achieved (MacIntyre, 1984).

Virtue ethicists claim common inspiration from Aristotle and Aquinas. The former defines virtue as a habitual disposition to act well, and his ethics highlights the importance of character, means, motive, action, and ► altruism (Aristotle, Ross, Urnson, & Ackrill, 1980, p. 59). Since the field of virtue ethics is still relatively new, its proponents are divided on the nature of human thriving; a consensus has yet to be reached on a catalogue of virtues. Thus, one finds that some commentators preclude self-sacrifice from virtue ethics (Gilligan, 1982), while others foreground self-sacrifice, compassion, and empathy. MacIntyre tentatively mentions *phronesis* (an appropriate sense of judgment), friendship, and consistency of “moral character in different social contexts” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 318) as foundational to virtue ethics.

### The Ethics of Care: Feminist Moral Theories

The ethics of care provides a coherent moral framework in a secular age, one in which the Enlightenment project of hyper-individualism and hyperrationality has failed. It is a paradigm which some have argued is an extension or component of virtue ethics (Nussbaum, 2001; Slote, 1997). Proponents of an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) have articulated the approach in opposition to the impartial, principle- and rule-based theories of utility, justice, rights, and equality which, they argue, prevail in a male-dominated world. Instead, they describe a type of caring which takes account of emotion, relationships, and connectedness. This results in a relational ethic which foregrounds care for the other on their terms, as opposed to reciprocity. The free extension of the self on behalf of the other, though not at the expense of the self, is paramount. In this regard, several commentators have written of the need for freedom in an ethic of care: the freedom both to care and not to care (Haegert, 2000).

In this vein, Carol Gilligan argues that the self-sacrifice often demanded of women is harmful to a woman’s development (Gilligan, 1982). She initially wrote in response to the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, who consistently placed women at the third stage of his six-stage theory of moral development, in which moral judgment is located within interpersonal relationships. Gilligan points out the contradiction that “the very traits that traditionally have defined the ‘goodness’ of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 18). She argues that women choose different priorities to men. In making moral decisions, they prioritize care and responsibility in relationships rather than the absolute of fairness. Gilligan is at pains to describe responsibility as responsiveness to others that does not impede a recognition of self (Gilligan, 1982). Despite its feminist origins, male authors have increasingly written about care as the basis of human morality (Bauman, 1993; Levinas, 1998). An argument has also emerged regarding

extending care to others outside of one's close relationships (Slote, 1997).

- ▶ Individualism, an Overview
- ▶ Utilitarianism
- ▶ Virtues

## Discussion

Clear connections exist between virtue ethics, ▶ communitarianism, the ethic of care, and moral realism. Macintyre's (1984) articulation of virtue ethics and the communitarian critique of the Enlightenment project are strengthened by the organizing schema of Noddings and Bauman's ethic of care, while moral realism (Brink, 1989; Heinaman, 1995; Sayre-McCord, 1988), with its insistence on objective moral values tempered with a dose of humility, offers a defensible moral framework. Moral realism argues for the existence of moral judgments outside of ourselves: our task is to discover goodness. Of course, the difficulty arises in our limited capacities to recognize goodness when we encounter it, as well as choosing between the competing standards of goodness which exist. How one chooses to act matters, even though one cannot be sure of acting correctly. With regard to quality of life research in the social sciences, an integrated perspective has the potential to employ a kaleidoscope of approaches. For example, a paradigm that incorporates aspects of each of the ethical theories discussed here may be termed a feminist communitarian realist approach. It has a feminist character because it focuses on relationships, intuition, and emotional responses; it is a communitarian ethic because it circumscribes human relationships in collective, local contexts; and it is a realist stance because it subscribes to the tenet that moral acts exist as part of the fabric of the universe. Most noticeably, a compound theory avoids the intractable definitional questions that arise when considering each paradigm individually.

## Cross-References

- ▶ Altruism
- ▶ Communitarianism
- ▶ Ethics

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