The Practice of Ethical Thinking

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Abstract

Ethical theories are usually treated as self-contained, to be applied in a variety of situations. I propose that moral considerations assume good intentions – the intent to obtain an ethical result of moral deliberations. By using Kant's Deontological approach of reasoning categorically, and then adding Utilitarian methods, we can decide how best to act. We can then validate our reasoning, and check results against intentions to provide a closed-loop process that is self-correcting, and provides a basis for precedents as rules or guidelines for future moral considerations.

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The Practice of Ethical Thinking

Ethical theories are often treated as closed models with each type of ethical system presented as a fait au complete. But this fails to extend theoretical models into practical actions in the practical world.

It is usual in ethical considerations that when we find ourselves in a situation, call it situation X, our first question is, what I should do in this situation? Theorists then try to apply an ethical theory to that situation to determine what action "ought" to lead to an ethical result within the criteria specified by the theory.

All of this is based on a single assumption that we intend to do good deeds, however we define the word 'good'. This is what Kant called *good intentions*. If we do not have good intentions, why would we even ask about what we should do in any situation. All ethical acts depend on this, at least to some extent, so it would be useful to understand exactly what this might mean. The phrase 'good intentions' is a notoriously vague idea. How could we define this better? We could characterize the idea with what are called *indicator behaviors*.

Let's consider a non-moral example to illustrate this idea of indicator behaviors[1]. Another fuzzy idea would be the word *attitude*. Suppose you are my boss, and you say to me, "Carruthers I'll have to fire you. You have a bad attitude." What could you possibly mean?

I ask, "What in my behavior leads you to conclude that I have a bad attitude?" You respond, "You are often late for work. Your dress is inappropriate for the office environment, and people complain that your work is late."

I can now respond, "So if I show up on time, properly dressed, and present my work on time, you will agree that I have improved my attitude?

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[1] Take from Robert F. Mager, Goal Analysis Pages 15-22.

You will have no choice but to agree, since that is how you defined your complaint. The point is, if you can do this for something as vague as attitude, we can do it for anything, including ‘good intentions’.

So, what might be the indicator behaviors of good intentions? I propose a list something as follows:

1. Honesty (veracity)
2. Integrity
3. Genuine concern for the welfare of others,
4. Social responsibility
5. Accountability

It turns out that we already have an ethical discipline that defines these indicator behaviors – virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is grounded in the Greek idea of Eudaimonia – human flourishing. The idea is to build the kind of character that follows the virtues for a “well-lived life”. While there is considerable variation in what should be on the list – what constitutes a virtue - there is a general consensus on the 5 items in my list. In practice we can add to this list as we go. The idea would be to garner consensus on a base list that is more extensive than mine, that we can use as a general guide to good intentions.

With this starting assumption, I propose that we move question 1, “What ought I to do in situation X?”, to question number three. We can now develop a standardized process for getting to an ethical result.

Question number one is Kant’s question. Kant’s primary question is, how do we need to think to be able to correctly answer question number 3?

Kant's ethical theory as presnted in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is based on two assumptions that arer the results of his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

1. All experience is phenomenal. As such, it is inherently subjective. Our primal subjectivity is a core condition of having experience. For example, we each experience the world from an absolute ontological perspective or point of view. No one can experience the world through my eyes or perspective except me. This inherent subjectivity exposes us to charges of solipsism in epistemology. But we don't believe in solipsism for a very good reason. We are able to transcend the subjectivity of personal experience to derive causal laws. A causes B causes C, regardless of individual or personal points of view or perspectives. This is how science works. It tunes out all subjective factors. If you present your hypothesis correctly (do the math correctly) and provide empirical observational results following accepted scientific empirical procedures, the result is scientific. It does not matter what language you speak, the color of your hair or skin, your race, sex, creed, religious belief, or sexual orientation. These are all irrelevant to the scientific proceedings. On the other hand, if you bring in any of these subjective factors the "science" is questionable.
2. We cannot escape the subjective conditions of experience, but we can and do transcend it. There must be a "transcendental logic" that enables us to do this. This is the point of Kant's whole program. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant thinks he has worked out how we accomplish this is with his categories of pure reason. This is how we get to true objective understanding. We transcend the conditions of experience by reasoning "categorically".

While I don't pretend to know how exactly how the categories enable such a transcendental outcome (Hegel didn't either – he thought the categories are just empty forms), it is clear that Kant considers this a prerequisite for proper reasoning, hence proper moral thinking. That is, correct moral thinking is scientific using the categories.

This is how Kant answers question number one. To correctly answer what I have called question number three, it is imperative that we transcend the uniqueness of our subjective experiences. To do this it is imperative that we reason categorically, that is scientifically. This is the definition of the *categorical imperative*. We must tune out all subjective aspects of our experience. Language, race, color, sex, creed, religious belief, sexual orientation etc. are irrelevant to how we will correctly answer question number 3.

This sets the stage for how to think, but does not tell us what to think about.

As with good scientific practice, we should observe the situation as completely as possible to garner the facts of the case. We make our observations and gather our facts as objectively as possible. We want to avoid missing relevant facts that might prejudice our choice of actions about what to do. We also want to gather facts in an unprejudiced way so we understand them objectively. We want to understand situation X as completely as possible. The intent would be a profound understanding of situation X. How would we characterize situation X? How did this situation arise? Who else is involved, or could be impacted in this situation? What are my choices of possible actions? It is this last consideration that allows us to move forward.

Let's consider that we have applied good scientific observational skills to situation X, and we think we understand the situation well enough to consider possible actions. We determine that there are three possible course of action that could yield an ethical outcome. We could do action A, action B, or action C. How to decide which action to do?

The answer is to examine potential consequences in the light of normative criteria. These are based on what we called “good intentions”. You desire to bring about a moral result. Mill and Bentham provided the answer for how to do this.

Mill and Bentham supposed that we must examine all available alternatives in situation X and select the action that maximizes positive good. We want to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number. We at least want to minimize potential harms. With this in mind, we can evaluate our options, A, B, and C, to determine as best we can, which course of action best meets our criteria. That is, which action appears to best meet our intention to do good.

While how we define ‘good’, is not clear, we can continue to use indicator behaviors to clarify what we mean. Utilitarian ethics looks for potential benefits described in terms of utility or happiness, and using a kind of normative calculus advocates actions that bring about the greatest benefits to the greatest number. This seems to be a good description of what we might mean by the consequences of good intentions.

Let’s say that we gather all the facts about situation X, and decide on action A as the correct thing to do. As good scientific thinkers (categorial reasoners), how can we verify or not that we have made the correct or best choice? First, we consider our choice of action A to be an hypothesis. Being good scientific reasoners, we need to validate our hypothesis. However, we are now in what we might call normative space rather than descriptive space, so we can’t conduct experiments to validate or refute our hypothesis, so we need some other method.

To validate that we reasoned correctly – that we did tune out all subjective factors is akin to checking our math in descriptive science. We do this by assessing for any subjective factors. Would you have everyone, regardless of language, race, sex, color, creed, religious beliefs, and

sexual orientation etc. do action A when in situation X? This is the first test that you are reasoning correctly to answer question 3.

We can then examine the actual consequences that obtained, and assess whether we did indeed achieve a greater good, or minimized harms. This provides an empirical validation of our well-reasoned hypothesis about action A.

We can now put this together as a structured process. Assuming good intentions, you apply categorical reasoning to gather all relevant facts regarding situation X. With objective understanding, you now have an idea of your options for potential action. By next examining the potential consequences of each potential action, measured against your good intentions to maximize good and prevent potential harms, you select your action. In this case you selected action A as best meeting the criteria of your good intentions. This action appears to maximize overall good with minimum harms.

We do action A as selected.

But the process does not end there. We can do an empirical test of the results of our decision. By introducing consequences, we can now go into descriptive space and check to see if we did get the positive result we intended. Did our choice of action meet the criteria of our intended decision? This is an empirical test of the results of our deliberations and actions.

Overall, we must, being of virtuous character, first have good intentions. From here, we must reason objectively, and select the option that best aligns with our good intentions. We can then check both that we reasoned correctly and that we achieved the results we intended. If we failed, we can now examine why we failed.

Were we less than honest? Did we not understand situation X correctly? Were there potential consequences we didn't see? Did we fail to act with appropriate integrity? Was it what we intended or the how we tried to get there that failed? And so on.

The point is, that this thinking is closed loop in the sense that it is based on our virtuous character, and desiring a moral outcome, which prompted us to ask the moral question to begin with. We have a methodology that includes correct reasoning, assessing potential courses of action, and criteria for choosing what to do and how to do it. We also have two methods for reviewing our behavior (right reasoning and examining consequences) that provide feedback on what worked and what didn't. All of this is a basis for continuous improvement towards better and better moral decision making. The process is, like science, self-correcting.

This also reinforces the opportunities to understand precedents. Both Rule Utilitarian and Rule Deontological ethics develop rules or moral guidelines for characterizing various similar situations. In such and such situations, following rule R1 tends to result in a consequent that meets the requirements of good intentions. While such rules are really guiding principles of behavior, they provide a basis for some consistency in ethical behaviors. Rules also simplify action selection. If we have an objective understanding of situation X, we can now ask if the rule applies. If so, we have a better understanding of likely consequences. In situations like X, action A tends to result in consequence C1 – which more often than not, tends to be the ethical result we intended.

Of course, we cannot jump to rule behaviors in the absence of understanding that situation X does indeed qualify for the rule, or blindly enforce rules without having completed the requisite objective analysis. However, precedents do provide a minimum rule of thumb decision criteria to consider in step 2 of the ethical decision process.

With this approach, we move ethical reasoning from self-contained theories that we have difficulty applying, to a structured methodology that blends the best of the three major ethical theories in a practical way such that each compliments the others. The thinking process is closed loop that allows us to take corrective action, learn from our mistakes and build up a set of real-world precedents that can function as moral rules to guide our future decision process. When we publish these precedents we establish a set of moral precepts for the community that everyone can follow.

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