By Geethana Yogarajah
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Introduction

This is a handbook on how to be good. Living a good life is living a life full of righteousness and morality. But what is morality? What is right? What is wrong? Your ideas about morality, right and good depends upon the kind of person you are and how you were brought up and everyone thinks about this differently. This handbook will explain four ethical systems: St Thomas Aquinas’ Natural Law Ethics, Immanuel Kant’s duty-based ethics, Joseph Fletcher’s Situation Ethics and Jeremy Bentham and Utilitarianism.

Ethics

Ethics, derived from the Greek word *ethos* (which can mean custom, habit, character or disposition), is a system which has rules on morality. As I’d mentioned before, people have different views upon morality which then means that there are different ethical systems.

Ethics is used to help people answer question which involves doing good or bad, how to live a good life and to help them make the right and moral decisions. However, ethical systems don’t always give the right answer—it gives you the choice to make it and this depends on what kind of person you are.
St Thomas Aquinas’ Natural Law

Law - a concept which many such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Aquinas and lots more were interested by. The philosopher who we are interested by is St Thomas Aquinas. He was born in Naples, which is in Italy. In 1245, Aquinas joined the Dominican Order, which is an order of preachers founded by Dominic de Guzman. Afterwards, he taught in Paris, Rome, Naples and Orvieto. He died on March 7 at Cistercian Abbey of Fossa Nuova. In 1323, he was canonized by Pope John XXII. If you canonize someone, you officially declare that that person (who has to be dead) to be a saint. We are interested by Aquinas as he is the one which Natural Law Ethics is mostly associated with. Aristotle was the one who had some ideas about it but Aquinas developed these ideas further.

St Thomas Aquinas believed that our faith in God is important in order to help us understand our purpose. He believed that we were created by God in God’s image. The rules that God governs us by is called ‘Eternal Law’. Natural Law is a part of Eternal Law but Natural Law is about human moral choices. By following Natural Law, we get closer to God and will lead a good life. Aquinas said that all humans have a purpose and part of that purpose is to do good and avoid evil. This is part of everyone’s nature. By doing so, one lives a happy life and fulfils their purpose. This is called the Synderesis Rule. The word “synderesis” is a term that signifies the natural principle in everyone’s moral consciousness to do good and avoid evil. By being honest, you are being good and by lying, you are being bad, even if you are lying for a good reason. Natural Law says that one must always do good actions even if the bad actions result in good outcomes. Therefore, Natural Law is a deontologist theory- it is based on duty and concentrates more on the actions of one than its consequences.

Primary Precepts

In Natural Law, there are five primary precepts and these are developed from the ‘Synderesis Rule’. These precepts describe the purpose of our lives. They are:

- To worship God
- To live in an ordered society
- To learn
- To reproduce
- To defend the innocent

Secondary Precepts

The secondary precepts in Natural Law are absolute- this means that they are definite and cannot be one or the other. Secondary precepts come from primary precepts. One of the primary precepts is to reproduce. By aborting, one is not reproducing, thus an example of a secondary precept is ‘do not abort’. Another is ‘do not thieve’ because by stealing, you are not defending the innocent.

Double Effect

Double effect is when you do something that result in an unintended outcome as well as an intended outcome, so it will result in both bad things as well as good. When this occurs, it
may be considered okay, depending on the situation. As long as your first intention is good according to the primary concept, you can’t be blamed for the consequences. For example, a woman can have an abortion if she will die if she has a baby. The effect that’s intended is to save the woman’s life and the death of the baby is not directly intended. It’s not her fault that her pregnancy went wrong and she didn’t want her baby to die. If she does have the baby, it’s very likely that both she and the baby would die which means two lives would be lost. It would be better for her to abort and save a life rather than lose both. The important thing when there is a double effect is to see whether the good effect outweighs the bad effect and to see whether they are proportionate.

**Strengths**

- It has an approach which requires people to use their common sense.
- Belief in God isn’t needed as it is to do with human choices
- It’s about how everything has a purpose
- It has rules that do not take into account one’s individual desires but it’s more about thinking about others
- The double effect helps people to solve very conflicting questions
- It gives us the space to think and reason
- It gives us some room to think about what’s right and what’s wrong

**Weaknesses**

- Humans do not have a particular purpose that cannot be changed. We can make a purpose for ourselves individually
- You need to believe in God, because it says that by following Natural Law one becomes closer to God
- It gives us an optimistic view as Aquinas says that we are born wanting to do good and to avoid evil
- There are many people who do evil in the world, for example terrorists. One may also argue what is the definition of evil. Is killing people really a bad thing? It also has a good effect as it decreases the population which helps contribute to solving our problem of our ever-growing population
- It can lead to immoral outcomes. Natural Law says bans contraception but this has bad effects in many places. For example in Africa, this results in the spreading of AIDs
- Natural Law does not regard consequences, which is very important

**EVALUATION**

Natural Law is an ethical system that makes it easier for people to answer very conflicting questions. However, it says that everyone has a purpose, which we may have but we do not know for sure what that purpose is. Also, it disregards consequences which to many human beings is a very important. It is an interesting ethical system which like many ethical systems has quite a few important weaknesses.
Immanuel Kant’s duty-based ethics

Immanuel Kant was born in 1724 in a Prussian city. He was a German philosopher. He was a scientist who specialized in many areas such as mathematics, astrophysics, geography and anthropology. He passed away in 1804 at an age of 80.

Kant believed that all rational beings follow moral laws, which they obey instinctively as they were rational beings. He believed that human beings did not have to rely on God as we can think for ourselves and decide our answers for many arguments such as what is right and what is wrong. He believed that people have autonomy- we can make our own laws.

Kantian ethics is about duty and doing the right thing. Therefore it is a deontologist theory. It is based on the view that good will is a good thing and is about duty to the moral law.

The Categorical Imperative

Kantian Ethics is about something called the ‘categorical imperative’. Kant says that the ‘categorical imperative’ is the basis of all the other rules and is always right whatever the situation. It is used to test rules. You need to think before you act and think about on what principle you are acting.

The categorical imperative comes in two parts which Kant said are just two different ways in explaining the categorical imperative but either way the rule stays the same.

Moral laws must be able to be made universal

This is about how there is a need for moral laws to be made universal. In order to do this you need to act in such a way that the rule becomes natural to you, for example ‘do not lie’. By doing this, everyone else does this as well. A good example is breaking promises. You shouldn’t break promises because you wouldn’t want anyone to break a promise that they made to you, would you? Likewise you should do the same. A universal rule is a rule that everyone follows without having to consider it even for a second unless it is in a tricky situation.

Moral rules must respect human beings

Kant believed that all human beings should be treated with respect and equality. You should treat others the way you would like to be treated yourself. You should treat them as an end and not a means. Don’t use others to get what you want. Two examples of treating people as means and not ends; treating someone as if they were a tool/object, tricking someone or lying to them to get what you want. By treating people and humanity as an end you are being moral.

Autonomy

Kant’s formula of autonomy is about how a moral agent (a moral person with the capacity to act morally) has to follow the Categorical Imperative, because of their rational will. They do so without any influence from others. As I mentioned above, Kant believed that everyone has autonomy as we can make up our own moral laws.
Kingdom of Ends

The kingdom of ends is a formulation derived from the Categorical Imperative. The kingdom of ends is a thought experiment that creates a metaphorical realm where those who are acting and those who are being acted upon with accordance to moral law belong. This metaphorical realm consists completely of rational beings who are able to act morally. If one wants to be part of the kingdom of ends, they need to be rational and need to choose a principle that is an absolute necessity. Through this, they can make their own decisions and judge themselves. They need to think of themselves as the sovereign when creating these universal laws as well as subjects when they act according to them.

Strengths

- The respect for all beings is needed
- There are hardly any loopholes, if the theory that moral absolutes cannot be violated is right
- You have rights and dignity
- Everyone is unique
- It’s one’s duty to find their happiness by using reason. They must do this whilst being moral
- Equality

Weaknesses

- What if someone’s trying to help others but by doing so, they are making that person unhappy?
- What if someone lies to help someone else? Lying with good reason at heart- is this bad?
- Everyone has lied in their lives- does this make them immoral?
- Ignores the outcome of one’s action completely
- Reason does not discover moral rules
- Reason is not good enough to motivate one to carry out their duty
- We do not know for sure whether the Categorical Imperative is consistent

Evaluation

This is an ethical system where respect is needed for all human beings and there to be equality between all. These are very important qualities that human beings need. It also gives one the right to make their own moral laws. However, some people’s ideas about morality could be wrong as everyone has different ideas on the topic of morality. Also, Kantian ethics is a deontologist theory and is based on duty, which is then based on one’s reason. However reason is not enough for someone to carry out their duty. This is a very interesting ethical system which hardly has any loopholes.
Joseph Fletcher’s Situation Ethics

Joseph Francis Fletcher was born on April 10th in 1905 in New Jersey. He was an American philosopher and a pioneer in bioethics. Bioethics is the ethics of biological and medical research. He came up with his theory of situation ethics in the 1960s and therefore was and still known as the ‘Father of Situation Ethics’. He wrote 10 books and many articles and reviews. In 1974, he was named the Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Association. From 1974 to 1976 he was the president of the Euthanasia Society of America which was later renamed to the Society for the Right to Die. He passed away on October 28th 1991 in Virginia.

Situation ethics is based on the principle that ethics is about acting in agape which means love. Agape is giving love all the time and unconditionally, not taking into account the actions of the one you love. It is about good will. In Fletcher’s situation ethics, there are four working principles and six fundamental principles. It is in between antinomianism and legalism. Antinomianism states that no principles or guidelines or love can tell us whether one’s action is right or wrong. Legalism states that all laws that are decided in advance should be put to action when they are related to the case at hand. Situation ethics is about how there are no universal laws or rights and that each situation is unique and important in itself and how each situation has its own solution.

Four working principles

Fletcher’s situation ethics are based on the following four working principles:

1. Pragmatism: what is good must be judged according to the love influenced in it and on what basis it works on.
2. Relativism: this is what situation ethics is based on-relativism. It still has the principle of agape but it doesn’t mean that everything is relative. You have to approach a situation with a relative attitude. It means that absolutes do not always apply depending on the situation.
3. Positivism: You have to start with a positive view and choice- you need to want to do good.
4. Personalism: putting people first- people are more important than rules.

Six fundamental principles

-Nothing other than love is always good

-Love is the only rule; it is better than the law. Everything is done in the name of love.

-“Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed, nothing else”. This means that there is no justice without love. For example think about a child starving and a man who is arrested without charge. This is a result of a lack of love. If love was shared equally then injustice would not exist.

-“Love wills the neighbour’s good whether we like him or not”. In order to love you do not particularly like someone. You need to love without expecting someone to love you in return.
“Only the end justifies the means; nothing else”. Only the result of one’s actions can justify their actions. If good comes out of one’s actions then its right but if bad comes out it’s wrong.

Actions and decisions should be made according to the situation. There are no rules on what to do in a situation. You make a decision there and then on what is the most loving thing to do.

**Strengths**

- It is simple
- There is only one rule; love
- It puts people before rules
- It’s flexible and this allows personal responses to certain situations
- It’s pragmatic; it says that solutions work
- It focuses on the result of an action
- It is up to date; it allows one to change with the ideas of the time such as sexuality, marriage etc
- It allows one to act freely but according to love
- It is very positive and focuses on love

**Weaknesses**

- It’s vague and some people can be very indecisive.
- It’s very difficult to know what the most loving thing is when situations change
- Allow terrible things in the name of love (adultery, theft, lying, murder etc)
- Can be misleading; the end does not always justify the means
- It gives one more authority than the Bible and the Church
- We cannot be trusted to do the right thing
- Just because you are acting in the name of love, it doesn’t mean that you are doing the right thing

**Evaluation**

Fletcher’s situation ethics is a very simple ethical system and consists of only one rule; love. It puts people before the rules. All one has to do is act in the name of love. However it allows terrible things in the name of love; adultery, theft, lying, murder and so on. On the whole, it is a very simple ethical system which has as many weaknesses as strengths.
Jeremy Bentham and Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham was born on February 15th in 1748 in London. He was a British philosopher, jurist and social reformer. He passed away on June 6th, 1832 aged 86. He is known as the one who found utilitarianism. As well as founding utilitarianism, he showed how it worked. He also brought many social reforms. He argued for the equal rights of women, to end slavery, the right to divorce and so on.

Act Utilitarianism (Jeremy Bentham)

Bentham came from a family of lawyers. He was disgusted at how law was practised back then as it was all about making money and not about bringing justice. Therefore, he wanted to find a moral basis for law that would help everyone. He came across the phrase “the greatest good of the greatest number” whilst reading an essay on Government and shouted out “Eureka!” just as the famous Archimedes had. He applied the principle of utility to many reforming areas such as criminal law, the jury system, registration of births and deaths and so on.

In 1789, he wrote a book called “The Principles of Moral and Legislation”. He divided this book into 3 sections; his view on what is good and what is bad, the principle of utility and hedonic calculus.

Utilitarianism is a theory where one should decide their actions based on whether it would provide the most happiness and the least pain. Therefore it is hedonistic as it is centred on pleasure. It is teleological theory as it looks at the results of one’s action to justify whether the action is good or bad.

Principle of Utility

The principle of utility is the foundation of utilitarianism. It states that an action is morally right if it results in pleasure and morally wrong if it results in pain. This is the basis of Act and Rule utilitarianism; the maximisation of pleasure and happiness and the minimisation of pain and misery.

Hedonic Calculus

Everyone pursues happiness—there’s not a single person who doesn’t. Bentham came up with his idea—Hedonic Calculus. Bentham said that the pleasure and pain consisting in people can made into a calculus of value. The Hedonic Calculus consists of seven factors:

1. Intensity (how intense the pleasure or pain is)
2. Duration (for how long the pleasure or pain occurs)
3. Certainty (how certain or uncertain the pleasure or pain is)
4. Propinquity (how much the pain or pleasure affects you personally)
5. Fecundity (the chances of the same effects being repeated)
6. Purity (the chances of the same effects being unrepeated)
7. Extent (how many people will be affected by the pleasure or pain resulted by the action(s))

Rule Utilitarianism (John Stuart Mill)

John Stuart Mill was brought up by his father, a philosopher called James Mill, strictly according to Bentham’s principles.
John Stuart Mill argued in favour of Bentham’s principles and also offered improvements to its structure, meaning and application. Mill did not agree that it was entirely based on quantity. To Mill it was not about the quantity of pleasure but the quality of happiness. He emphasised the quality of pleasure and distinguished higher and lower pleasures. A higher pleasure is cultural and spiritual pleasures of one’s mind whilst a lower pleasure is what the body needs. He believed that pleasure is more to do with higher pleasures than lower pleasures. Mill wanted to rewrite Utilitarianism to show that all pleasures are not equal. He also wanted to take human nature into account. He believed that happiness was better achieved when it was being used to protect the common good.

**Act and Rule Utilitarianism**

Bentham’s Utilitarianism is known as Act Utilitarianism as it considers and views each act individually each time. Mill focuses more on rules and therefore his is known as Rule Utilitarianism. However many scholars do not like the fact that Mill advocates general rules that could be broken when it needs to be. Therefore, he is often referred to as Weak Rule Utilitarianism.

**Strengths**

- Avoids pain and misery
- Everyone wants to be happy and this encourages this and helps one to achieve happiness, whilst avoiding pain and misery
- Encourages democracy

**Weaknesses**

- It’s hard to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures
- It is very hard to predict consequences
- Bernard Williams said that Rule Utilitarianism was weak. He used the following example: if someone is protecting some Jews by hiding them in his cellar from Nazis and these Nazis come and question him, being a Rule Utilitarian, he would have to follow the rule “do not lie” and so he would have to tell the truth and thus condemn the Jew to a horrible death.

**Evaluation**

This is an ethical system that avoids pain and misery. It helps one to achieve happiness whilst avoiding pain and misery at the same time. However if one lies to avoid embarrassment in utilitarianism it’s considered as bad. Overall, it is a good ethical system.
CONCLUSION

Now that you’ve read about these four ethical systems, you can decide for yourself about which one suits you best. What is your definition of good? Think about all of this and take your time before deciding what you think is good and what you think is the best ethical system? Why not come up with your own ethical system? As long as it’s reasonable, it’s possible! But live a good life by doing good.