What Is a Moral Theory?

The Main Concepts: The Right and the Good

Intrinsic value: something's being valuable because of features inherent to it.

Extrinsic value: something's being valuable (at least partly) because of how it relates to something else that is intrinsically good.

Two Main Aims of a Moral Theory

Theoretical aim: theory should explain what makes right actions right and wrong actions wrong.

Practical aim: theory should offer practical guidance for how we might arrive at correct or justified moral verdicts.

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What Is a Moral Theory?

The Role of Moral Principles

Moral principles are of two sorts: principles of right conduct and principles of value.

Principles of right conduct: moral principles that specify conditions under which an action is right (or wrong).

Principles of value: moral principles that specify conditions under which something is intrinsically good (or bad).

The structure of a moral theory

Value-based moral theories

Duty-based moral theories

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Seven Essential Moral Theories

A. Consequentialism

Main idea: Right action is to be entirely understood in terms of the overall intrinsic value of the consequences of an action compared to the overall intrinsic value of the consequences associated with alternative actions an agent might perform instead.

Different versions:

Utilitarianism

Perfectionism

Act- and rule-based versions of each

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Seven Essential Moral Theories

B. Natural Law Theory

Main idea: An action is right if and only if (and because) in performing the action one does not directly violate any of the basic values.

Aquinas’s version of this theory:

Four basic values are human life, human procreation, human knowledge, human sociability.

The doctrine of double effect

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Seven Essential Moral Theories

C. Kantian Moral Theory

Main idea: We can derive all specific moral requirements from what Kant called the categorical imperative.

Two formulations of the categorical imperative:

The humanity formulation: an action is right if and only if (and because) the action treats persons (including oneself) as ends in themselves and not as mere means.

The universal law formulation: an action is right if and only if (and because) one can both (a) consistently conceive of everyone adopting and acting on the maxim of one's action and (b) also consistently will that everyone act on that maxim.

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Seven Essential Moral Theories

D. Rights-Based Moral Theory

Main idea: An action is right if and only if (and because) in performing it either (a) one does not violate the fundamental moral rights of others or (b) in cases where it is not possible to respect all such rights because they are in conflict, one's action is among the best ways to protect the most important rights in the case at hand.

The role of moral judgment in applying a rights-based moral theory

Rights-focused approaches to moral issues

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Seven Essential Moral Theories

E. Virtue Ethics

Main idea: An action is right if and only if (and because) it is what a virtuous agent (acting in character) would not avoid doing in the circumstances under consideration.

Virtue vs. vice

Virtue is more basic than right action (i.e., right action is to be understood in terms of virtue).

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Seven Essential Moral Theories

F. Ethics of Prima Facie Duty

Main idea: There is a plurality of basic moral principles of right conduct. The basic moral principles give us moral reasons to perform actions. These reasons can compete with and outweigh one another.

W. D. Ross’s version

Four basic intrinsic goods: virtue, pleasure, pleasure in proportion to virtue, and knowledge

Seven prima facie duties (i.e., basic moral principles of right conduct)

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Seven Essential Moral Theories

G. Social Contract Theory

Main idea: Correct moral principles are ones that result from some sort of social agreement—whether the agreement is conceived as being actual or hypothetical.

John Rawls’s version

Important concepts: the original position, the veil of ignorance

The Principle of Greatest Equal Liberty

The Difference Principle

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Coping with Many Moral Theories

Evaluating a moral theory

Explanatory power

Practical guidance

Moral theory and moral illumination

Moral theory can help focus and sharpen our moral thinking about particular issues, and it can thereby provide a kind of insight and illumination of moral issues that is otherwise easily missed.

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