

PUTTING ETHICAL THEORY TO WORK

In this lesson, we'll be looking at four historically important approaches to ethics, and how these approaches can help you become a better ethical decision-maker. By the end of lesson, you should be able to answer the following:

- 1. What exactly is *virtue ethics* or *deontology*? How does this differ from *utilitarianism* with which its sometimes mistaken?
- 2. What is *virtue ethics* and how does it differ from consequentialism? What's the big deal about Kant's *categorical imperative*?
- 3. What is *virtue ethics* and its close relative, *character education*? How does one become more virtuous?
- 4. How does the *virtue ethics* approach ethics? What are the advantages of this approach? The disadvantages?
- 5. Besides ethical theory, what else does one need to consider when attempting to resolve an ethical dilemma?

It's important to remember that the ethical theories we'll be learning about today are intended to be *tools* to help you make better decisions. So, you don't (necessarily) need to think that a particular theory gets "everything right" in order to make good use of it. Instead, you'll want to consider which sorts of approaches work best in which sorts of situations, what the limitations of each approach is, and how the different approaches can be combined to make good decisions.

ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING: AN OVERVIEW

While the ethical theories we'll be learning about have intimidating sounding names, the basic ideas behind them should be familiar to nearly everyone, regardless of culture, religion, etc. The basic ideas are as follows:

- 1. An ethical action is one that, in the long run, benefits the greatest number of people. An ethical action should reflect the sort of person I want to be. People aren't born ethical, but become so by repeatedly practicing good/bad actions.
- 2. An ethical action is one that, in the long run, benefits the greatest number of people.
- 3. An ethical action is one that, in the long run, benefits the greatest number of people.
- 4. An ethical action follows the sorts of rules that everyone would *agree* to follow, if they were allowed to choose without fear or bias. Ethics is, in essence, a sort of agreement to "play by the rules."

In what follows, we'll be looking at each of these approaches in a little more detail.

highly unequal ones). For this reason, consequentialism plays a major role in public policy as it regards healthcare, economics, business, etc.

While consequentialism is a simple theory, it can be tough to apply in practice, since it requires we make long-term predictions about the effects of our actions. Many critics have also argued that it is too demanding (i.e., it requires we devote our lives to helping the worst off, since this is what "maximizes happiness") and that it lead us to treat others unjustly (when we sacrifice someone "for the greater good"). While many critics think that consequentialism captures *part* of what it means to behave ethically, they argue that it also leaves something fundamental out.

When people first hear that utilitarians care only about "happiness," they sometimes think that is a *selfish* theory, which justifies doing whatever you want. Nothing could be further from the truth. Utilitarians (unlike egoists) care about happiness, and not merely your happiness. In fact, one common criticism of utilitarianism is that it is far too demanding, since it seems to require that people donate massive amounts to alleviate povcriticism of

have almost *no* duties to help strangers (“the rich have no duty to give money to poor”), while others (such as most religious versions of deontology) hold that we have much stronger obligations in this regard. A committed deontologist will need to give an argument why her particular version of deontology should be preferred to others—the mere fact that it “feels right” to her (and to people like her) obviously won’t count for much.

Pure deontologists like Kant argue that the consequences of an action are *completely irrelevant* to judging its rightness or wrongness. People often find this counterintuitive, since we tend to think that actions like lying or killing are wrong, at least in part, because of how they affect others (lies might lead the person lied to make a bad decision, killing leads to a person being dead). Kant argues this is a bad approach, however, since the effects of our actions almost always depend on factors outside of our control.

A staple scene in many action movies gives the hero of the movie a chance to kill the (temporarily defenseless) villain, which the hero refuses to take, because it would “make them just like the villain.” So, for example, Superman refuses to kill Lex Luther, even though it would be easy for him to do so, and Lex will *obviously* do bad things if he isn’t killed. According to a consequentialist, this sort of thinking is absurd—after all, the hero has every reason to believe that, if the villain manages to escape (which is always a possibility), they will inevitably kill a large number of people. However, the deontologist feels that there are some rules—such as “don’t kill a defenseless person”—that simply cannot be broken, regardless of how bad the long-term consequences may be.

VIRTUE ETHICS: BECOMING A BETTER PERSON

holds that the right action is the one that a *virtuous person* would do in this situation. Where utilitarianism and deontology focus on “doing the right thing,” virtue ethics focuses on “being a better person.” In general, this means choosing a *role model* (who may or may not be a real person), and then *practicing* behaving like this person until we can do so consistently. Virtue ethics requires that we try to acquire a HABIT of DOING THE RIGHT THING for the RIGHT REASONS. So, for example, being an *honest* person (a virtue) requires that one tell the truth without second thought, and that we do so in manner appropriate to the situation (no telling three-year-olds that Santa isn’t real). It also requires that we do so *because* we think the other person deserves to know and not because we are afraid of getting caught lying, or we want to get something out of the other person. Becoming honest is NOT something that can be done in a day (in fact, the first few times you tell the truth in a difficult situation, you are often caught lying, or wep

