

Determining Morality

Moral theories provide justification and guidance when making decisions about right and wrong. Judith Boss says that moral theory not only provides the reasons behind decisions, but also “requires consistency in our thinking and the weeding out of those commonly held beliefs about morality that are inconsistent.” Boss also thinks that “a good theory offers guidance or signposts for thinking about and resolving moral issues” (Boss, p. 3). A few of the major moral theories are utilitarianism, deontology, and natural rights theory. Each one has strengths and weaknesses. Although none of these theories offers a complete explanation of all moral issues, combining aspects of each may lead to a more complete moral theory.

Utilitarianism is based on the Greatest Happiness Principle. As stated by John Stuart Mill, the principle “holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness and wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (Boss, p. 47). Utilitarianists believe that certain actions are morally justified because they yield a positive net benefit. Utilitarian theory is good because it considers the happiness of all people equally. Also, because only happiness is considered, judgment concerning the morality of an action is largely impartial. On the other hand, the theory falls short because it often goes against common sense. A commonly used example is a situation in which a healthy person goes to see a doctor. At the same time, there are five other people in the doctor’s office, each needing an organ transplant (heart, kidney, lung, etc.). This example comes to the conclusion that killing one healthy patient to save a few others is morally justified. This example also shows that utilitarian theory often underplays the rights of individuals. While the theory seems simple to apply, determining one’s happiness and comparing the happiness of different people can be difficult.

Deontology is characterized by Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative: “act only on the maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Boss, p. 25). Kant believes all moral laws should hold in every situation and there should be no exceptions. People should act morally because it is their duty. Another form of the Categorical Imperative states, “act as to treat humanity . . . in every case as an end in itself, never as a means only” (Boss, p. 25). Here, Kantian philosophy values human dignity and life above all else. The universal nature of the Categorical Imperative makes deontology consistent in its application. If the application of this theory to a situation is understood, the appropriate moral decision and moral boundaries become clear cut. However, its application to real life situations is often unclear. Real life situations sometimes include conflicting moral messages, whose resolution is also unclear under deontology.

One natural rights theorist, John Locke, thinks people should have “freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit” (Boss, p. 59). Locke believes in the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. By building these rights into every person, Locke protects people and their freedom. Although many people agree that these rights are necessary, some think they are incomplete. Furthermore, the justification for natural rights (the claim that humans have rights because they were created in the image of God) is often shaky.

Because any of these moral theories are incomplete on their own, the construction of a more complete theory is warranted. Each of the above theories has something different to offer; and each takes something different into consideration when judging morality. It stands to reason that a theory which takes into account and compares these differences might be more complete.

In order to make this comparison, a suitable framework is necessary. I propose a framework based on dollar values and mathematics. Every action has consequences. I propose that a dollar value be assigned to every consequence and the sum of those dollar values be used to determine the morality of an action. (For convenience, I will refer to

this proposal as the “proposed theory”). Some people may wonder why use a framework based on numbers. This is because comparisons with words and reasoning are more susceptible to personal biases and not always clear to everyone. Numbers are universally understood and numerical operations are not subject to person bias. An action will be moral if it has the highest dollar value out of all of the alternatives. Consequences can be immediate effects as well as future implications of an action. Future implications are not definite and should thus be weighted by their probability.

Every action has three types of consequences (also known as costs or benefits): monetary, emotional, and moral. Monetary consequences are consequences that have a direct connection to money or possessions that are worth money. For example, the monetary consequence associated with losing \$500 is \$500. An emotional cost is the dollar value of a person’s emotional reaction. The emotional cost of losing \$500 might be the dollar value of the embarrassment someone feels. Emotional costs are determined by asking people (or finding by some other method) what portion of their net worth they are willing to give up to prevent or allow an action. Moral consequences result only from the external, active, and unwanted violation of a person’s natural rights (as specified by Locke).

Because all people’s opinions should be considered equally, it is necessary to normalize emotional costs. Suppose someone makes a mistake in pronouncing the word “fool” and becomes embarrassed. If an average person is asked how much they would give up to save themselves the embarrassment, the answer might be a few dollars. However, if Bill Gates is asked how much he would give up, the answer might be a few million dollars. Normalization is necessary to compare the emotional costs of different people. Let a person’s normalized emotional cost be the emotional cost (raw dollar value) divided by the person’s net worth, multiplied by the average net worth per capita of the group in question. The proposed theory can be applied to different groups of people. Multiplication by the average net worth per capita allows for a comparison between emotional and other types of consequences.

Three types of moral violations are possible: violation of a right to life, violation of a right to liberty, and violation of a right to property. A violation of a right to life incurs a cost equal to the net worth of the group in question. A violation of a right to liberty incurs a cost equal to half the net worth of the group in question. A violation of a right to property incurs a cost equal to one fourth the net worth of the group in question. I propose that a violation of the right to life be equal to the net worth of the group in question because no amount of property should be worth more than a life. Each violation carries a different cost because certain natural rights are more sacred than others.

Let the expected return of an action be equal to the sum of all the monetary consequences, normalized emotional consequences, and moral consequences. The expected returns of different actions will be compared to determine which action is moral. (See Appendix A if more explanation of the math is needed).

Application of the proposed theory can assist in a better understanding of it. First consider the above situation where five patients need organ transplants, which one healthy patient can provide. Should one healthy patient be killed to provide organ transplants to save the lives of five others? The moral cost of killing the healthy patient under the proposed theory is \$40 trillion¹. There are no moral consequences to saving the five others because allowing them to die is the absence of action. The emotional consequences of saving the five other patients cannot total more than \$750,000². It is safe to say that the monetary consequences³ of saving the five other patients will not total more than \$39.9999925 trillion. Thus, one cannot conclude that the killing of the healthy patient to save the others is morally justified.

¹ \$40 trillion is the net worth of the United States. Although this answer uses the entire country as the population in question, it should be noted that the answer comes out the same regardless of which population is in question.

² This number is obtained using \$150,000 as the average net worth per capita. See Appendix A for further explanation of this calculation.

³ Future productivity of the five patients would be the major factor in the monetary consequences.

One problem that may arise is how to specify people's emotional costs. In some cases markets already exist that can indicate this cost. Consider the issue of the legalization of marijuana. Although it is illegal now, marijuana is still bought and sold. The underground market can be used to estimate the emotional value of marijuana. This would be the total revenue from marijuana sales in the US. This is a reasonable approximation because marijuana is almost always used totally for personal enjoyment. It is not used to produce other goods like steel is used to produce cars and kitchen appliances. Emotional costs can also be obtained from the areas of study such as psychology and economics.

The proposed theory has some strengths. As shown above, it fixes the utilitarian problem of the transplant situation. The high cost associated with the violation of a natural right eliminates most situations where one person's rights are disregarded. The theory preserves the notion of equality in utilitarianism (through the normalization of emotional costs) while providing a way to add the utilities of different people. Although some people may need time to understand the correct application of the proposed theory, once understood, it is very straightforward and consistent. By mathematically modeling different moral theories, they can be combined and compared under one framework. Also, because the theory allows for personal preferences, it provides a possible explanation for cross-cultural differences in moral standards.

Although this theory seems to provide a more complete picture than some alternatives, it has many problems. Some people may not support the idea of assigning a dollar value to emotions and rights. While there is some reasoning behind the costs I have proposed, they can be improved. In addition, Payoffs (especially emotional) can be difficult to determine. The value associated with the emotional benefit of something like free speech is very difficult to estimate and no market exists which would indicate it. However, as fields such as psychology advance, people may gain a better understanding of emotional costs. The use of more complex mathematics in the modeling of costs may also prove useful. Certain things such as animals' emotional costs or the rights of the mentally retarded are not addressed by the proposed theory. The theory, as I have constructed it here, definitely has a bias toward western thinking. Both the bias and animal rights problems can probably be solved by tweaking the math.

APPENDIX A: Expected Return of an Action.

The easiest way to understand this is with an example. Consider the group of all citizens in the United States. The total net worth of the country is about \$40 trillion and the average per capita net worth is about \$150,000. Suppose person A has \$100 and is going to give the money to person B. Person B is starving giving him the money will allow him to buy food and thus save his life. Person B has a net worth of \$7500. The monetary return to person B of receiving \$100 is \$100. If person B gets the money, he will be overjoyed and have an emotional return of \$75. Thus the normalized emotional return (which is the emotional return divided by the person's net worth, multiplied by the average net worth per capita) is $\frac{\$75(\$150,000)}{\$7500} = \1500 . In this case there is no moral return because by saving or not saving person B, person A is not causing an active, unwanted violation of person B's rights. Thus, the expected return of giving \$100 to person B is $\$100 + \$1500 = \$1600$.

On the other hand, if person B is murdered, that incurs a moral cost of \$40 trillion dollars (total net worth of the US).

References

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