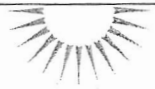
2 - moral theories

CHAPTER 4



The Power of Moral Theories

Recall that Part 1 (Fundamentals) gave you a broad view of our subject, outlining the major concerns of moral philosophy, the function of moral judgments and principles, the nature of moral problems, the elements of our common moral experience, and the challenges of moral relativism and emotivism. Part 2 (Moral Reasoning) covered ethics at the ground level—the fundamentals of critical reasoning as applied to everyday moral claims, arguments, and conflicts. Here in Part 3 (Chapters 4–7) we touch again on a great deal of this previous material as we explore a central concern of contemporary ethics: moral theory.

THEORIES OF RIGHT AND WRONG

Whatever else the moral life entails, it surely has moral reasoning at its core. We act, we feel, we choose, and in our best moments, we are guided by the sifting of reasons and the weighing of arguments. Much of the time, we expect—and want—this process to yield plausible moral judgments. We confront the cases that unsettle us and hope to respond to them with credible assessments of the right and the good. In making these judgments, we may appeal to moral standards—principles or rules that help us sort out right and wrong, good and bad. Our deliberations may even work the other way around: moral judgments may help us mold moral principles. If we think carefully about our own deliberations, however, we will likely come to understand that this interplay between moral judgments and principles cannot be the whole story of moral reasoning. From time to time we step back from such considerations and ask ourselves if a trusted moral principle is truly sound, whether a conflict of principles can be resolved, or if a new principle can handle cases that we have never had to address before. When we puzzle over such things, we enter the realm of moral theory. We theorize—trying to use, make, or revise a moral theory or a piece of one.

A **moral theory** is an explanation of what makes an action right or what makes a person or thing good. Its focus is not the rightness or goodness of specific actions or persons but the very nature of rightness or goodness itself. Moral theories concerned with the goodness of persons or things are known as *theories of value*. Moral theories concerned with the rightness or wrongness of actions are called *theories of obligation*. In this text, we focus mostly on theories of obligation and, unless otherwise indicated, will use the more general term *moral theories* to refer to them. A moral theory in this sense, then, is an explanation of what makes an action right or wrong. It says, in effect, that a particular action is right (or wrong) because it has *this* property, or characteristic.

Moral theories and theorizing are hard to avoid. To wonder what makes an action right is to theorize. To try *not* to think much about morality but to rely on your default moral theory—the one you inherited from your family or culture—is of course to live by the lights of a moral theory. To reject all moral theories, to deny the possibility of objective morality, or to embrace a subjectivist view of right

Moral Theories versus Moral Codes

A moral theory explains what makes an action right; a moral code is simply a set of rules. We value a moral theory because it identifies for us the essence of rightness and thereby helps us make moral judgments, derive moral principles, and resolve conflicts between moral statements. A moral code, however, is much less useful than a moral theory. The rules in a moral code inevitably conflict but provide no means for resolving their inconsistencies. Rules saying both "Do not kill" and "Protect human life," for example, will clash when the only way to protect human life is to kill. Also, rules are always general—usually too general to cover many specific situations that call for a moral decision—yet not general enough (in the way that theories are) to help us deal with such an array of specifics. How does a rule insisting "Children must obey their parents" apply when the parents are criminally insane or under the influence of drugs, or when there are no parents, just legal guardians? To make the rule apply, we would have to interpret it—and that gets us back into the realm of moral theory.

The point is that moral codes may have their place in the moral life, but they are no substitute for a plausible moral theory. Rules are rules, but a moral theory can help us see beyond the rules.

and wrong is to have a particular overarching view of morality, a view that in the broadest sense constitutes a moral theory or part of one.

A moral theory provides us with very general norms, or standards, that can help us make sense of our moral experiences, judgments, and principles. (Some moral theories feature only *one* overarching standard.) The standards are meant to be general enough and substantial enough to inform our moral reasoning—to help us assess the worth of less general principles, to shed light on our moral judgments, to corroborate or challenge aspects of our moral experience, and even to generate new lower-level principles if need be.

Moral theories and moral arguments often work together. A statement expressing a moral theory may itself act as the moral premise in an argument. More often, an argument's moral premise is ultimately backed by a moral theory from which the moral premise (principle or rule) is derived. Testing the premise may require examining one or more supporting principles or perhaps the most general norm (the theory) itself.

Classic utilitarianism (covered in the next chapter) is an example of a simple moral theory, one based on a single, all-encompassing standard: right actions are those that directly produce the greatest overall happiness, everyone considered. What matters most are the consequences of actions. Thus in a particular situation, if there are only two possible actions, and action X produces, say, 100 units of overall happiness for everyone involved (early utilitarians were the first to use this strange-sounding notion of *units* of happiness) while action Y produces only 50 units, action X is the morally right action to perform. The theory therefore identifies what is thought to be the most important factor in the moral life (happiness) and provides a procedure for making judgments about right and wrong actions.

Should we therefore conclude that a moral theory is the final authority in moral reasoning? Not at all. A moral theory is not like a mathematical axiom. From a moral theory we cannot derive in strict logical fashion principles or judgments that will solve all the problems of our real-world cases. Because moral theories are by definition general and theoretical, they cannot by themselves give us precisely tailored right answers. But neither can we dispense with moral theories and rely solely on judgments about particular cases and issues. In the field of ethics, most philosophers agree that carefully made moral judgments about cases and issues are generally reliable data that we should take very

seriously. Such opinions are called *considered moral judgments* because they are formed after careful deliberation that is as free of bias as possible. Our considered judgments (including the principles or rules sanctioned by those judgments) by themselves, however, are sometimes of limited use. They may conflict. They may lack sufficient justification. A moral theory provides standards that can help overcome these limitations.

So where does theory fit in our moral deliberations? Theory plays a role along with judgments and principles or rules. In trying to determine the morally right thing to do in a specific case, we may find ourselves reflecting on just one of these elements or on all of them at once. We may, for example, begin by considering the insights embodied in our moral theory, which give some justification to several relevant principles. In light of these principles, we may decide to perform a particular action. But we may also discover that our considered judgment in the case conflicts with the deliverances of the relevant principles or even with the overarching theory. Depending on the weight we give to the particular judgment, we may decide to adjust the principles or the theory so that it is compatible with the judgment. A moral theory can crystallize important insights in morality and thereby give us general guidance as we make judgments about cases and issues. But the judgments—if they are indeed trustworthy—can compel us to reconsider the theory.

The ultimate goal in this give-and-take of theory and judgment (or principle) is a kind of close coherence between the two—what has come to be known as *reflective equilibrium.*[1] They should fit together as closely as possible, with maximum agreement between them. This process is similar to the one used in science to reconcile theory and experimental data, a topic we address in more detail later in this chapter.

[1]John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1999).

MAJOR THEORIES

Moral philosophers have traditionally grouped theories of morality into two major categories: consequentialist (or teleological) and nonconsequentialist (or deontological). In general, **consequentialist** moral theories say that what makes an action right is its *consequences.* Specifically, the rightness of an action depends on the amount of good it produces. A consequentialist theory may define the good in different ways—as, for example, pleasure, happiness, well-being, flourishing, or knowledge. But however good is defined, the morally right action is the one that results in the most favorable balance of good over bad.

Nonconsequentialist moral theories say that the rightness of an action does *not* depend entirely on its consequences. It depends primarily, or completely, on the nature of the action itself. To a nonconsequentialist, the balance of good over bad that results from an action may matter little or not at all. What is of primary concern is the *kind* of action in question. To a consequentialist, telling a lie may be considered wrong because it leads to more unhappiness than other actions do. To a nonconsequentialist, telling a lie may be considered wrong simply because it violates an exceptionless rule. Thus by nonconsequentialist lights, an action could be morally right—even though it produces less good than any alternative action.

Consequentialist Theories

There are several consequentialist theories, each differing on who is to benefit from the goods or what kinds of goods are to be pursued. But two theories have received the most attention from moral philosophers: utilitarianism and ethical egoism.

Utilitarianism says that the morally right action is the one that produces the most favorable balance of good over evil, everyone considered. That is, the right action maximizes the good (however *good* is defined) better than any alternative action, everyone considered. Utilitarianism insists

that *everyone* affected by an action must be included in any proper calculation of overall consequences. The crucial factor is how much net good is produced when everyone involved is counted.

Moral philosophers distinguish two major types of utilitarianism, according to whether judgments of rightness focus on individual acts (without reference to rules) or on rules that cover various categories of acts. **Act-utilitarianism** says that right actions are those that *directly* produce the greatest overall good, everyone considered. The consequences that flow directly from a particular act are all that matter; rules are irrelevant to this calculation. In act-utilitarianism, each situation calling for a moral judgment is unique and demands a new calculation of the balance of good over evil. Thus, breaking a promise may be right in one situation and wrong in another, depending on the consequences. **Rule-utilitarianism,** on the other hand, says that the morally right action is the one *covered by a rule* that if generally followed would produce the most favorable balance of good over evil, everyone considered. The consequences of generally following a rule are of supreme importance—not the direct consequences of performing a particular action. Specific rules are justified because if people follow them all the time (or most of the time), the result will be a general maximization of good over evil. We are to follow such rules consistently even if doing so in a particular circumstance results in bad consequences.

Ethical egoism says that the morally right action is the one that produces the most favorable balance of good over evil *for oneself.* That is, in every situation the right action is the one that advances one's own best interests. In each circumstance, the ethical egoist must ask, Which action, among all possible actions, will result in the most good *for me?* Ironically, it may be possible for an ethical egoist to consistently practice this creed without appearing to be selfish or committing many selfishly unkind acts. The egoist may think that *completely* disregarding the welfare of others is not in his or her best interests. After all, people tend to resent such behavior and may respond accordingly. Nevertheless, the bottom line in all moral deliberations is whether an action maximizes the good for the egoist. This approach to morality seems to radically conflict with commonsense moral experience as well as with the basic principles of most other moral theories.

Nonconsequentialist Theories

Nonconsequentialist (deontological) theories also take various forms. They differ on, among other things, the number of foundational principles or basic rules used and the ultimate basis of those principles.

By far the most influential nonconsequentialist theory is that of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant wants to establish as the foundation of his theory a single principle from which all additional maxims can be derived, a principle he calls the **categorical imperative.** One way that he states his principle is "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[2] (Kant insists that he formulates just one principle but expresses it in several different forms; the forms, however, seem to be separate principles.) The categorical imperative, Kant says, is self-evident—and therefore founded on reason. The principle and the maxims derived from it are also universal (applying to all persons) and absolutist, meaning that they are moral laws that have no exceptions. **Kant's theory,** then, is the view that the morally right action is the one done in accordance with the categorical imperative.

For Kant, every action implies a rule or maxim that says, in effect, always do this in these circumstances. An action is right, he says, if and only if you could rationally will the rule to be universal—to have everyone in a similar situation always act

[2]Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals,* trans. H. J. Paton (1948; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 88.

according to the same rule. Breaking promises is wrong because if the implied rule (something like "Break promises whenever you want") were universalized (if everyone followed the rule), then no promise anywhere could be trusted, and the whole convention of promise making would be obliterated—and no one would be willing to live in such a world. In other words, universalizing the breaking of promises would result in a logically contradictory state of affairs, a situation that makes no moral sense.

Notice again the stark contrast between utilitarianism and Kant's theory. For the former, the rightness of an action depends solely on its consequences, on what results the action produces for the individuals involved. For the latter, the consequences of actions for particular individuals never enter into the equation. An action is right if and only if it possesses a particular property—the property of according with the categorical imperative, of not involving a logical contradiction.

Another notable nonconsequentialist view is the theory of natural law. **Natural law theory** says that the morally right action is the one that follows the dictates of nature. What does nature have to do with ethics? According to the most influential form of this theory (traditional natural law theory), the natural world, including humankind, exhibits a rational order in which everything has its proper place and purpose, with each thing given a specific role to play by God. In this grand order, natural laws reflect how the world is as well as how it should be. People are supposed to live according to natural law—that is, they are to fulfill their rightful, *natural* purpose. To act morally, they must act naturally; they must do what they were designed to do by God. They must obey the absolutist moral rules that anyone can read in the natural order.

A natural law theorist might reason like this: Lying is immoral because it goes against human nature. Truth telling is natural for humans because they are social creatures with an inborn tendency

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moral theory—An explanation of what makes an action right or what makes a person or thing good.

consequentialist theory—A theory asserting that what makes an action right is its consequences.

nonconsequentialist theory—A theory asserting that the rightness of an action does not depend on its consequences.

utilitarianism—A theory asserting that the morally right action is the one that produces the most favorable balance of good over evil, everyone considered.

act-utilitarianism—A utilitarian theory asserting that the morally right action is the one that directly produces the most favorable balance of good over evil, everyone considered.

rule-utilitarianism—A utilitarian theory asserting that the morally right action is the one covered by a rule that if generally followed would produce the most favorable balance of good over evil, everyone considered.

ethical egoism—A theory asserting that the morally right action is the one that produces the most favorable balance of good over evil for oneself.

categorical imperative—An imperative that we should follow regardless of our particular wants and needs; also, the principle that defines Kant's ethical system.

Kant's theory—A theory asserting that the morally right action is the one done in accordance with the categorical imperative.

natural law theory—A theory asserting that the morally right action is the one that follows the dictates of nature.

divine command theory—A theory asserting that the morally right action is the one that God commands.

to care about the welfare of others. Truth telling helps humans get along, maintain viable societies, and show respect for others. Lying is therefore unnatural and wrong. Another example: Some natural law theorists claim that "unnatural" sexual activity is immoral. They argue that because the natural purpose of sex is procreation, and such practices as homosexual behavior or anal sex have nothing to do with procreation, these practices are immoral.

Another critical aspect of the traditional theory is that it insists that humans can discover what is natural, and thus moral, through reason. God has created a natural order and given humans the gift of rationality to correctly apprehend this order. This means that any rational person—whether religious or not—can discern the moral rules and live a moral life.

One of the simplest nonconsequentialist theories is the **divine command theory,** a view discussed in Chapter 1. It says that the morally right action is the one that God commands. An action is right if and only if God says it is. The rightness of an action does not depend in any way on its consequences. According to the divine command theory, an action may be deemed right even though it does *not* maximize the good, or deemed wrong even if it does maximize the good. It may incorporate one principle only (the core principle that God makes rightness) or the core principle plus several subordinate rules, as is the case with divine command views that designate the Ten Commandments as a God-made moral code.

EVALUATING THEORIES

We come now to the question that moral philosophers have been asking in one way or another for centuries: Is this moral theory a *good* theory? That is, Is it true? Does it reliably explain what makes an action right? As we have seen, not all moral theories are created equal. Some are better than others; some are seriously flawed; and some, though imperfect, have taught the world important lessons about the moral life.

The next question, of course, is, How do we go about answering the first question? At first glance, it seems that impartially judging the worth of a moral theory is impossible, since we all look at the world through our own tainted lens, our own moral theory or theory fragments. However, our review of subjectivism and relativism (Chapter 2) suggests that this worry is overblown. More to the point, there are plausible criteria that we can use to evaluate the adequacy of moral theories (our own and those of others), standards that moral philosophers and others have used to appraise even the most complex theories of morality. These are what we may call the *moral criteria of adequacy.*

The first step in any theory assessment (before using these criteria) is to ensure that the theory meets the minimum requirement of *coherence.* A moral theory that is coherent is *eligible* to be evaluated using the criteria of adequacy. A coherent theory is internally consistent, which means that its central claims are consistent with each other—they are not contradictory. An internally consistent theory would not assert, for example, both that (1) actions are right if and only if they are natural; and (2) it is morally right to use unnatural means to save a life. Contradictory claims assert both that something *is* and *is not* the case; one statement says X and another says not-X. When claims conflict in this way, we know that at least one of them is false. So if two substantial claims in a theory are contradictory, one of the claims must be false—and the theory is refuted. This kind of inconsistency is such a serious shortcoming in a moral theory that further evaluation of it would be unnecessary. It is, in fact, not eligible for evaluation. Ineligible theories would get low marks on each criterion of adequacy.

Eligible moral theories are a different matter. Unlike ineligible theories, they are not guaranteed to fare poorly when evaluated, and testing their mettle with the moral criteria of adequacy is almost

always revealing. But how do we use these criteria? The answer is that we apply them in much the same way and for a few of the same reasons that scientists apply their criteria to scientific theories.

Scientific theories are introduced to explain data concerning the causes of events—why something happens as it does or why it is the way it is. Usually scientists devise several theories (explanations) of a phenomenon, ensuring that each one is minimally adequate for evaluation. Then they try to determine which of these is best, which offers the best explanation for the data in question, for they know that the best theory is the one most likely to be true. To discover which is the best, they must judge each theory according to some generally accepted standards—the scientific criteria of adequacy. One criterion, for example, is *conservatism:* how well a theory fits with what scientists already know. A scientific theory that conflicts with existing knowledge (well-established facts, scientific laws, or extensively confirmed theories) is not likely to be true. On the other hand, the more conservative a theory is (that is, the less it conflicts with existing knowledge), the more likely it is to be true. All things being equal, a conservative theory is better than one that is not conservative. Another criterion is *fruitfulness:* how many successful novel predictions the theory makes. The more such predictions, the more plausible the theory is.

Now consider the following criteria of adequacy for moral theories:

Criterion 1: Consistency with Considered Judgments

To be worth evaluating, a plausible scientific theory must be consistent with the data it was introduced to explain. A theory meant to explain an epidemic, for example, must account for the nature of the disease and the method of transmission. Otherwise it is a very poor theory. A moral theory must also be consistent with the data it was introduced to explain. A moral theory is supposed to explain what makes an action right, and the data relevant to that issue are our *considered moral judgments.*

Considered Moral Judgments

The philosopher John Rawls devised the notion of reflective equilibrium and put heavy emphasis on the quality of moral judgments in his own moral theory. This is what he has to say about the nature of considered moral judgments:

> Now, as already suggested, [considered judgments] enter as those judgments in which our moral capacities are most likely to be displayed without distortion. Thus in deciding which of our judgments to take into account we may reasonably select some and exclude others. For example, we may discard those judgments made with hesitation, or in which we have little confidence. Similarly, those given when we are upset or frightened, or when we stand to gain one way or the other can be left aside. All these judgments are likely to be erroneous or to be influenced by an excessive attention to our own interests. Considered judgments are simply those rendered under conditions favorable to the exercise of the sense of justice, and therefore in circumstances where the more common excuses and explanations for making a mistake do not obtain. The person making the judgment is presumed, then, to have the ability, the opportunity, and the desire to reach a correct decision (or at least, not the desire not to). Moreover, the criteria that identify these judgments are not arbitrary. They are, in fact, similar to those that single out considered judgments of any kind.*

*John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1999), 42.

Recall that considered moral judgments are views that we form after careful deliberation under conditions that minimize bias and error. They are therefore thought to have considerable weight as reasons or evidence in moral matters, even though they can be mistaken and other considerations (such as an established moral principle or a well-supported theory) can sometimes overrule them.

A moral theory that is inconsistent with trustworthy judgments is at least dubious and likely to be false, in need of drastic overhaul or rejection. There is something seriously wrong, for example, with a theory that approves of the murder of innocent people, the wanton torture of children, or the enslavement of millions of men and women. As we will see in the next chapter, inconsistency with considered judgments can be the undoing of even the most influential and attractive moral theories.

Consider Theory X. It says that right actions are those that enhance the harmonious functioning of a community. On the face of it, this theory appears to be a wise policy. But it seems to imply that certain heinous acts are right. It suggests, for example, that if killing an innocent person would enhance a community's harmonious functioning, killing that person would be right. This view conflicts dramatically with our considered judgment that murdering an innocent person just to make a community happy is wrong. Theory X should be rejected.

Criterion 2: Consistency with Our Moral Experiences

As we saw earlier, a good scientific theory should be conservative. It should, in other words, be consistent with scientific background knowledge—with the many beliefs that science has already firmly established. Likewise, a plausible moral theory should be consistent with moral background knowledge—with what we take to be the fundamental facts of our

CRITICAL THOUGHT: A 100 Percent All-Natural Theory

Imagine that you come across a theory based on this moral standard: Only actions that are "natural" are morally right; "unnatural" actions are wrong. We can call it the all-natural theory. It defines natural actions as (1) those done in accordance with the normal biological urges and needs of human beings, (2) those that reflect typically human psychological tendencies and patterns, and (3) those that help ensure the survival of the human species. (This approach should not be confused with the more sophisticated and historically important natural law theory.) An all-natural theorist might view these actions as morally permissible: walking, talking, eating, having sex, cooperating with others, caring for loved ones, teaching children, creating art, growing food, building shelters, going to war, solving problems, and protecting the environment. Impermissible actions might include building spaceships, using birth control, using performance-enhancing drugs, being a loner or a hermit, and intervening in reproductive processes (as in cloning, abortion, fertility treatments, in vitro fertilization, and stem cell research).

Is this a good theory? Is it internally inconsistent? (For example, do the three definitions of natural actions conflict? Would applying Definition 3 contradict the results of applying Definitions 1 and 2?) Is the all-natural theory consistent with our considered moral judgments? (Hint: Would it condone murder? Would it conflict with our usual concepts of justice?) If it is not consistent, supply an example (a counterexample). Is the theory consistent with our moral experience? Give reasons for your answer. Is the theory useful? If not, why not?

moral experience. Whatever our views on morality, few of us would deny that we do in fact have these experiences:

- We sometimes make moral judgments.
- We often give reasons for particular moral beliefs.
- We are sometimes mistaken in our moral beliefs.
- We occasionally have moral disagreements.
- We occasionally commit wrongful acts.

As is the case with theories that conflict with considered judgments, a theory in conflict with these experiences is at least dubious and probably false. A moral theory is inconsistent with the moral life if it implies that we do not have one or more of these basic moral experiences.

Suppose Theory Y says that our feelings alone determine whether actions are right. If our feelings lead us to believe that an action is right, then it is right. But this theory suggests that we are *never* mistaken in our moral beliefs, for if our feelings determine what is right, we cannot be wrong. Whatever we happen to feel tells us what actions are right. Our moral experience, however, is good evidence that we are *not* morally infallible. Theory Y therefore is problematic, to say the least.

Could we possibly be mistaken about our moral experience? Yes. It is possible that our experience of the moral life is illusory. Perhaps we are morally infallible after all, or maybe we do not actually make moral judgments. But like our considered moral judgments, our commonsense moral experience carries weight as evidence—good evidence that the moral life is, for the most part, as we think it is. We therefore are entitled to accept this evidence as trustworthy unless we have good reason to think otherwise.

Criterion 3: Usefulness in Moral Problem Solving

Good scientific theories increase our understanding of the world, and greater understanding leads to greater usefulness—the capacity to solve problems and answer questions. The more useful a scientific theory is, the more credibility it acquires. A good moral theory is also useful—it helps us solve moral problems in real-life situations. It helps us make reliable judgments about moral principles and actions and resolve conflicts among conflicting judgments, principles, and the theory itself. A major reason for devising a moral theory is to obtain this kind of practical guidance.

Usefulness is a necessary, though not sufficient, characteristic of a good moral theory. This means that all good theories are useful, but usefulness alone does not make a moral theory good. It is possible for a bad theory to be useful as well (to be useful but fail some other criterion of adequacy). But any moral theory that lacks usefulness is a dubious theory.

Now we can be more specific about the similarities between science and ethics in handling theory and data. In science, the interaction between a theory and the relevant data is dynamic. The theory is designed to explain the data, so the data help shape the theory. But a plausible theory can give scientists good reasons to accept or reject specific data or to reinterpret them. Both the theory and the data contribute to the process of searching for the truth. Scientists work to get the balance between these two just right. They try to ensure a

QUICK REVIEW

The Moral Criteria of Adequacy

Criterion 1: Consistency with considered judgments.

Criterion 2: Consistency with our moral experiences.

Criterion 3: Usefulness in moral problem solving.

very close fit between them—so close that there is no need for major alterations in either the theory or the data. In ethics, the link between theory and data (considered judgments) is similar. Considered judgments help shape theory (and its principles or rules), and a good theory sheds light on judgments and helps adjudicate conflicts between judgments and other moral statements. As in science, we should strive for a strong logical harmony between theory, data, and subordinate principles.

Remember, though, theory evaluation is not a mechanical process, and neither is the application of theories to moral problems. There is no formula or set of instructions for applying our three criteria to a theory. Neither is there a calculating machine for determining how much weight to give each criterion in particular situations. We must make an informed judgment about the importance of particular criteria in each new instance. Nevertheless, applying the criteria is not a subjective, arbitrary affair. It is rational and objective—like, for example, the diagnosis of an illness, based on the educated judgment of a physician using appropriate guidelines.

Now suppose you apply the moral criteria of adequacy and reach a verdict on the worth of a theory: you reject it. Should this verdict be the end of your inquiry? In general, no. There is often much to be learned from even seriously defective theories. Many philosophers who reject utilitarianism, for example, also believe that it makes a valuable point that any theory should take into account: the consequences of actions do matter. Judiciously applying the criteria of adequacy to a theory can help us see a theory's strengths as well as its weakness. Such insights can inspire us to improve any moral theory—or perhaps create a new one.

You will get a chance to see firsthand how theory evaluation is done. In Chapters 5 and 6 we will apply the moral criteria of adequacy to several major moral theories.

SUMMARY

A moral theory is an explanation of what makes an action right or what makes a person or thing good. Theories concerned with the rightness or wrongness of actions are known as theories of obligation (or, in this text, simply moral theories). A moral theory is interconnected with considered judgments and principles. Considered judgments can shape a theory, and a theory can shed light on judgments and principles.

The two major types of theories are consequentialist and nonconsequentialist. Consequentialist theories say that what makes an action right is its consequences. Nonconsequentialist moral theories say that the rightness of an action does not depend entirely on its consequences. Consequentialist theories include utilitarianism (both act- and rule-utilitarianism) and ethical egoism; nonconsequentialist theories include Kant's theory, natural law theory, and divine command theory.

Since not all theories are of equal worth, we must try to discover which one is best—a task that we can perform by applying the moral criteria of adequacy to theories. The three criteria are (1) consistency with considered judgments, (2) consistency with our moral experiences, and (3) usefulness in moral problem solving.

EXERCISES

Review Questions

1. Is a moral theory the final authority in moral reasoning? Why or why not? (p. 68)
2. What is the difference between a moral theory and a moral code? (p. 68)
3. How can a moral theory be used in a moral argument? (p. 68)
4. What is a considered moral judgment? (p. 68)
5. What are the two main categories of moral theory? (p. 69)
6. What is utilitarianism? ethical egoism? (pp. 69–70)

7. According to Kant's moral theory, what makes an action right? (pp. 70–71)
8. What are the three moral criteria of adequacy? (pp. 73–76)

Discussion Questions

1. Do you try to guide your moral choices with a moral code or a moral theory or both? If so, how?
2. Suppose you try to use the Ten Commandments as a moral code to help you make moral decisions. How would you resolve conflicts between commandments? Does your approach to resolving the conflicts imply a moral theory? If so, can you explain the main idea behind the theory?
3. What considered moral judgments have you made or appealed to in the past month? Do you think that these judgments reflect a moral principle or moral theory you implicitly appeal to? If so, what is it?
4. Would you describe your approach to morality as consequentialist, nonconsequentialist, or some combination of both? What reasons do you have for adopting this particular approach?
5. Give an example of a possible conflict between a consequentialist theory and a considered moral judgment. (Show how these two may be inconsistent.)
6. Provide an example of a conflict between a nonconsequentialist theory and a moral judgment based on the consequences of an action.
7. Using the moral criteria of adequacy, evaluate act-utilitarianism.
8. Using the moral criteria of adequacy, evaluate natural law theory.