

Methods of Ethical Inquiry

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ANY METHOD is a *way* of proceeding. As a *way* it proceeds from or toward something fixed: principles. A method is a path for the movement of the mind; principles are points of departure or destinations of this movement.

The principles of ethical theories can be divided into two broad classes. In one group are human goods conceived as ends. In the other group are all other sorts of principles. Let us consider first and very briefly the second group, the one that looks for principles to something other than human goods considered as ends.

One method reduces ethical questions to some principles that are conceived as given and unalterable. For example, a traditionalism will simply investigate what has been regarded as right or wrong, confident that there is some fixed standard that can be discovered, perhaps by reviewing the sayings contained in tribal wisdom or by consulting the old men of the tribe. A theological traditionalism will investigate what God has revealed to be right or wrong, confident that His will can be discerned, perhaps by consulting the records of earlier efforts of the Christian community to discern it, or by listening to the *magisterium* of the Church.

I wish to make no judgment on this method of ethical inquiry, except to observe that it is non-philosophic. The philosopher must regard himself as a participant in a common human enterprise, limited by the reason and experience generally accessible to all men. The traditionalist regards himself as the recipient of a special privilege, inasmuch as he participates in a community that provides access to principles not accessible to general human reason and experience.

Another method reduces ethical questions to the actual wishes or interests or desires of men. For instance, a theory like that of R. B. Perry suggests that there is no standard of human good apart from interests. Ethical questions must be resolved by appealing to interests. Of course, the interests must be enlightened, and an interest in resolving conflicts must be considered together with other interests.

A theory of this sort is certainly philosophical. The question is whether it provides an ethics. Psychological and sociological studies of people's actual desires, together with technical inquiries into the most efficient way of satisfying these desires, provide much useful information. But such studies cannot settle the question whether the interests are sound, whether the desires are right. One might simplify such an ethical method by merely asking people to vote on what they consider desirable or undesirable conduct. Is there no possibility of criticizing what the majority conceives to be right and wrong? When we consider how individuals go about casting votes, it seems difficult to

accept that the meaning of human existence should rest upon such an arbitrary, subjective, and relative a point of departure.

Another method reduces ethical questions to a formal standard for the mode in which one must reason and will. Thus, for Kant, if one's reasoning and willing would have to be inconsistent with itself in the doing of an act or in diverse acts subject to the same rule, then such a rule must be considered unsound, and all acts relying on its authorization must be considered immoral.

A great deal of nonsense has been written in criticism of theories of this sort. But proponents, especially Kant himself, are partially responsible for the nonsense, since they often state the position in a confused way. Kant seems to have imagined that acts naturally fall under one and only one rule. He overlooked the ambiguity often present in human action, and the possibility of reinterpretation by which we commonly remove our less sterling performances from a moral class under which they would be condemned—e.g., racial discrimination becomes “protecting the value of my property.”

Kant also ignored the arguability of the issue whether some kinds of acts do involve inconsistency in the moral agent. For example, does masturbation involve such inconsistency in reason and willing? Kant attempted to settle issues such as this by appealing to the dignity of human nature, and by offering something that looks very much like a perverted-faculty argument.¹ His treatment of such issues often is marked by an evident determination to find justification for the morality he learned at his mother's knee.

It seems to me that Kant's basic requirement is sound but extremely inadequate. One must be consistent in his moral reasoning and in the application of moral rules to particular cases; one may not discriminate among persons. One also must be sincere, not pretending to hold as a moral norm what one is not willing to follow oneself and have others follow too.

I think most people admit that these requirements belong among moral norms of conduct. If I am attacked for inconsistency or insincerity, I do not admit the charge yet still maintain I am justified in being inconsistent or insincere. Instead I try to show that I am not really inconsistent or insincere, or I admit that I am so and that my action is unjustifiable—that I should change.

However, it seems obvious to me that there must be other moral norms of conduct. One can be perfectly consistent and sincere while burning witches, or practicing the art of brain-washing, or maintaining a nuclear deterrent, or making public programs of contraception a condition of granting foreign aid. Are these acts clearly justified? Or is their morality at least arguable on bases other than the norm of consistency and sincerity? I think it is significant that those using ethical methods like Kant's make few criticisms of accepted moral norms.

Undoubtedly, other methods of ethical inquiry can be proposed, but it seems to me that they are likely to fall victim to one of the three lines of

¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1964), pp. 85-87.

criticism outlined above unless they appeal to human goods, considered as ends, for their principles. Without this appeal either they will be non-philosophic, or they will fail to provide ethical justification, or they will provide only an inadequate criterion of morality. Let us therefore consider two methods of ethical inquiry that do regard human goods, considered as ends, as principles.

One such method considers the actual efficiency of acts for achieving such goods as the norm of their morality. This method looks to the experienced consequences of acts. Of the alternatives that happen to be open in a given situation, the act offering the most net benefit will be regarded as good.

Let us call this first method "utilitarian." The end in terms of which benefit is measured need not be pleasure or satisfaction; we are not here concerned with the specific content of the principle but with the method of ethical inquiry that is based on human goods conceived as ends to be efficiently achieved. Utilitarianism may defend a code of moral principles, for they can provide helpful guides in practice. Even general rules may be defended as helpful technical aids for obtaining good consequences. But the criterion remains the good consequences. For utilitarians, the end does justify the means. Nothing else could.

Clearly a theory of this kind can define classes of acts in terms of its own criterion, and then declare that all acts falling in such classes have a definite moral character. But if acts are classified independently, the variety of situations and other factors will make it impossible to say that any kind of act is intrinsically evil.

Utilitarianism takes a variety of forms, and utilitarians of diverse schools are their own severest critics. Here I am only trying to sketch a broad outline, so I will not attempt to distinguish the various forms of utilitarianism, but will offer some criticisms applicable to all of them.

First, either the ends in terms of which rightness of action is determined must be very limited and definite, or the proposed method demands a knowledge never possible for us men. If one assumed that a simple athletic feat were the be-all and end-all of human life, then one could tell with some accuracy what would efficiently promote its performance. But if the goods are reasonably various and indefinite—as is required to make the theory plausible—then there is no possibility of calculating the greatest net benefit. If justice, health, and true knowledge are all included together with contentment, for example, there is no possibility of calculating, since these incommensurables cannot be weighed against one another.

The utter impossibility of calculation may not strike us with full force if we imagine that in a given situation the possibilities of action are already predefined. Shall a pregnant girl get an abortion or not? A good question in the abstract. Concretely, at a given moment, her options are to ring the number of an abortionist suggested by a friend, or to go out for a walk, or to have a sandwich, or to finish reading the movie magazine she started before her friend called, and so on *ad infinitum*. The friend may consider seeking abortion the only relevant option; the girl herself may not even care to think about this possibility.

Second, utilitarianism inevitably is arbitrary, not only in the estimation of benefits, but also in the determination of recipients to be considered. Clearly, actual benefits must be to someone. Who is to count? If only myself, then egoism, although I may claim that enlightened egoism often is generous. If only my in-group, then a ghetto mentality, tribal morality, or racial discrimination. If all men, then humanitarianism. But will it be all men now living, or also those yet to live. Not only issues about population control, in which many regard possible persons as pure non-entities, but also issues about conservation or fallout, in which many insist on the rights of those possibles who will be permitted to come to be, directly depend on this question. And if all men are to be considered in counting the recipients of benefits, why not also consider other sentient creatures? Here we see why utilitarians often support looser abortion laws but oppose experimentation on healthy animals.

The agent himself always is included in the magic circle—utilitarianism always counts benefits to the agent and sometimes counts benefits to more or fewer others. But there seems to be no rational way of settling the issue about how large the circle should be. The chief distinction is between simple egoism and altruism. Utilitarianism always has been beset by this issue, and there seems to be no rational way of settling it. Lately some proponents of utilitarianism call themselves Christian ethicists and propose to settle this issue, which appears to them to be the most significant issue in ethics, by adopting from the Bible the norm of neighbor-love. Theologians who advocate this “new morality” might do well to examine whether the ground on which the issue arises is not unsound, whether Christian love is not altogether incompatible with every sort of utilitarianism.

A third criticism of utilitarianism is that it offers no real guidance in actual cases. Not only are alternative possible acts infinite and actual consequences incommensurable, but the ambit of the situation to be considered is indeterminate. Anything one does has endless consequences. One must draw a line around the situation somewhere, or there is no end to reflection. For example, if the results of bombing are the standard for judging its morality, it makes a great difference whether or not possible retaliation is considered among the results. The consequences for post-war politics introduce a whole new set of factors. Utilitarians may advocate taking a “broad and long view.” But utilitarianism puts a premium on the judgments of experts, who notoriously take a narrow and short view. And the theory can never settle the question: how broad and long a view is broad and long enough?

The truth of the matter is that utilitarian deliberation proceeds in the opposite direction. If I have determined a possible act and my moral judgment on it, then I shall have no problem delimiting the situation at some point to provide a plausible justification of my position. If less or more were considered, my act might not seem justified. Thus utilitarianism is essentially a method of rationalization. If I stop at just the right place, I will receive from ethics the justification I want.

A fourth criticism of utilitarianism is that it promotes enthusiasm for superficial change, but stifles more profound dynamism. Utilitarian moral reflection begins only after the goods, assumed to be the ends, are posited and conceded.

The consideration of what constitutes an end and the consideration of how to obtain it are sharply divided into two quite distinct studies. If deliberation begins from an assurance about certain definite ends, then a program will be designed to achieve them in an efficient way. Whatever interferes with carrying out the program will be regarded as an obstacle to be removed. The technical reflection will not lead to a re-examination of ends, but rather will systematically exclude it. If we are considering how to prevent babies, taking it for granted that intercourse will occur, we are hardly likely to wonder whether our attitude toward intercourse is sound. If we are trying to discourage nuclear attacks on us by a threat of retaliation, we are not likely to wonder whether national divisions must not yield now to world polity, however far from our ideal the world polity immediately realizable might be.

A sounder theory would lead to a pattern of moral reflection in which there would be a constant dialogue between means and ends. The consideration of acts in the light of the transcendence of ends to any limited effort should lead to a moderation of enthusiasm; meditation on the goods which are ends should lead us to a deeper commitment to them and should arouse our creativity to invent new ways of pursuing these goods. The pattern of thought that belongs to engineering predominates in reflection inspired by utilitarianism. The pattern of deliberation peculiar to creative art provides a better analogy for true moral judgment, for the ideal of beauty inspires the creativity of the artist, but this same ideal is concretely communicated although it is never exhausted by the meditation of the creative spirit.

A fifth criticism of utilitarianism is that it is unable to account for certain facts of common moral experience. I do not appeal to generally accepted value judgments; that would beg the question. What I mean is that common moral experience includes distinctions between the good and the better and between the good and the heroic. A utilitarian theory suggests that an act is justified by good consequences, by the net benefit it will yield compared with alternative possible acts. However, in many cases there are many alternatives that would be accepted as right, and all of us admit that it is possible for men to do better than they are obliged to do.

Almost any act causes some benefits and some harms. The utilitarian is committed to justifying the harms simply by the weight of the benefits. The procedure, if it were possible, would perhaps seem reasonable as long as one maintained that only the maximum net good can rightly be sought. But if he wishes to maintain this position, the utilitarian will be forced to deny the facts just mentioned. On the other hand, if he admits that something less than the maximum good may rightly be sought, we are entitled to ask him by what principle he justifies this departure from the standard of good consequences. His only answer must be that the generality of mankind do not do better; therefore, he cannot demand more. The result is that utilitarianism approaches very near to that morality which simply determines right and wrong by taking a vote, and judging the issue by the opinion of the majority.

Utilitarianism, however, is not the only method of ethical inquiry which considers human goods, as ends, as its principles. Another method is possible. This method does not attempt to determine the moral value of acts by assess-

ing their actual consequences. Instead, it examines whether these acts are compatible with an upright will—that is, with a sound love of true good. The moral judgment of conscience depends upon right reason. Reason is right if it is rooted in sound principles. And these principles, in turn, are sound if they ultimately reduce to insights into the goods that man's heart loves if he loves the Good Itself, God, above all things.

Some ends of human activity are not goods that perfect man in himself. Property is an example. Such ends are subordinate and derived; they are not sought for themselves. Some ends are goods that are considered in separation or abstraction from the unity of man. Pleasure is an example. It is a good state of consciousness, but it is considered by itself only when the state of consciousness is dualistically abstracted from the metaphysical unity of sense and intelligence, self and body. But there are certain goods that are intrinsic to man, that are sought for themselves, and that are not defined by abstraction from the unity of man.

Some of these goods have a definite content in themselves; they are not defined by reference to something else. Truth that is known for its own sake, esthetic qualities appreciated for themselves, activities (such as play) engaged in on their own account, and the very process of human life itself—its initiation and its continuance—are examples of such goods. Other goods are defined by reference to something; they are forms of harmony or integration. The integration of the personality, which includes the traditional virtues of temperance and fortitude, is one example. Another is the integration of the agent and his own action, which includes the virtues of practical wisdom and sincerity. The harmony of men with one another, which includes justice and friendship, and the harmony of man with the sources of reality, which is the object of religion, are other examples.

These goods can be discerned by objective inquiry, for in a sense they are given, but they do not become moral principles merely in virtue of their givenness. Rather, they are moral principles inasmuch as we understand them, prior to any practical reasoning, as possible ends, as goods from which reason can begin the work of creating human life and culture. If a man is to do anything by his intelligence and freedom, he must act within the ambit of these goods (or, if the list is not complete, others like them).

But if *all* human acts originate in these principles, how can some acts be wrong, while others are right? Surely the very same principles cannot determine contrary moral values. The point is well taken. I can, in fact, act toward one of these goods in two radically diverse ways.

In one way, I pursue the good, or something subordinate to it or an abstracted aspect of it, inasmuch as it is *such* a good, *this* good, *here-and-now* good, *for-me* good. In the other way, I seek that which is a particular good of a certain sort, that happens to be good for me here and now, precisely and only insofar as it is *good*. In the former case, my affection for the limited good sets up a barrier to my transcending it; I am engaged without being detached, like the fly on the flypaper. In the latter case, my affection for the limited good precisely arises from my love of the Good Itself of which this good appears to me as a participation.

The very goodness that makes me commit myself to this makes me also appreciate and respect a commitment to that; the goodness shining through friendship causing me to pursue it also shines through truth and causes me to respect it; the goodness of what delights me must also be shared with you; the achievement of what is possible here and now also demands detachment for the sake of what transcends this situation.

Moral evil, therefore, consists precisely in that disordered affection by which I foreclose myself against some good. Evil is that foreshortening of love by which I treat what is not the Good Itself as if it were. Evil is defining for myself a limited and definite good, that can be attained by limited and definite means, and considering this delimited end to be the sole relevant norm of my action. Moral evil is treating the good consequences of my act as its sufficient justification. In fact, although a man of upright will loves good consequences, he loves the Good Itself more, and his orientation is determined toward the goodness of consequences in the concrete only because he sees them as particular realizations of those human goods that make up the whole ambit of the possibility of human pursuit and achievement.

Ideally, if a person loved the Good Itself perfectly and wholeheartedly, and if his personality were perfectly integrated around that love, then whatever he did would always be morally right. No moral issues would arise, for all inclinations would be to love, to pursue, to act toward particular goods in a properly measured way. Some advocates of situationism, which usually is merely a specific type of utilitarianism, seem to be proposing their theory as a morality for persons of this sort. They are quite right; they err only in supposing that we, who can be led into temptation, are of this sort. Follow love—that is a fine direction, provided I find only one love in my heart. It is useless if I find there two or more in conflict with one another.

To determine whether a certain mode of action is right or wrong, then, we must make a rational consideration of whether it is in accord with upright will or not. In terms of certitude, the results always favor the negative. That is, we can never determine by reflection that an act is certainly right, for it may still contain some concealed defect, some fault of intention. But we can tell by reflection that some sorts of action and omission are incompatible with an upright will.

Certainly, for example, if we loved the good, we would consider the possibilities of good that are open to us, and not ignore them in our reflection. Consequently, it is always wrong to act in a way that clearly infringes on fundamental goods, and to simply ignore that fact. One cannot rightly ignore the fact that his action impinges upon human life, for example.

Again, if we love the good, we will pursue it when opportunity offers, provided there is no reason not to do so. Consequently, it is wrong to sink into apathy when there are opportunities for achieving some goods. Of course, this does not mean that we must always be working, taking “working” in its narrow sense, since some of the goods are achieved in leisure activities, and much sharing takes place in repose.

The largest part of our obligations are duties; they fall upon us because of our roles in institutions. An institution is an ordering of persons and their acts

into a unity on which the attainment of some good depends. Very frequently, the fact that we are in an institution or our specific role in it depends upon our own commitment. Nevertheless, obligations fall upon us, because we have delimited the possible meaning of our actions and omissions in such a way that failure to fulfill the duties of our role in the institution cannot easily be interpreted except as a foreshortening of the love of the good. We may care only for the good we derive from the relationship, and show little interest in the good others should derive. This shows that we care about our own good, but not about the Good Itself.

Will any acts be revealed as always wrong if we pursue this method of ethical inquiry? The question cannot be answered unless we take into account that the human act is not to be identified with the behavioral performance. The human act is the *whole* that is excogitated by intelligence and realized through choice. I think that on the theory I have been outlining, some kinds of human act are intrinsically evil. And I am not merely making the vacuous statement that acts defined in terms of the virtues—e.g., *stealing* defined as “the unjust taking of another’s property”—are always wrong.

Nevertheless, a human act is the reality excogitated by intelligence. It is not simply given, with already established characteristics. And it must be excogitated relative to basic goods. But I may form for myself the project of doing something as a means that involves the direct violation of a fundamental good. My willingness to perform the act depends solely upon the ulterior motive; my willingness to violate a basic good shows that it is not the *goodness* of the ulterior motive that appeals to me, but its specific character, its particularity. This is what happens, for instance, when human beings are killed, and this violation of life is accepted as pure means to some ulterior end—e.g., when an abortion is performed to prevent the birth of an abnormal baby.

Of course, it will be pointed out that we can redefine our behavior and omissions, and thus alter our human acts without altering our performances. Sometimes this is, indeed, a possibility. Often, if it is not merely an insincere effort to avoid guilt without foregoing evil, the redefinition of our behavior and omissions leads us to discern new possibilities and to alter our conduct.

But we must notice that the possibility of redefining behavior and omissions is not unlimited. Our acts do not gain their character simply by “free meaning-giving.” We must, in the first place, be consistent. We ought not initiate a project with one good in view, but redefine some of the behavior involved in order to make the project morally acceptable when we submit it to ourselves for moral evaluation. Moreover, we ought not define our acts and omissions ignoring clearly relevant goods. I can hardly say that I am merely killing flies if I am using a sledge hammer to swat one that has landed on a colleague’s forehead. I can hardly say that I am merely balancing the budget if I accomplish the feat by providing no more food for the baby. Many specific rules limiting the freedom of our meaning-giving could be formulated. We may not, for example, define our act in terms of what is necessarily a distinct act, for instance, the response of another. Thus we cannot say that we are only deterring aggression when we do it by threatening to kill the innocent.

These remarks and examples, brief as they are, should be enough to suggest

a method of ethical inquiry quite distinct from any sort of utilitarianism, although the two methods are similar in being based upon love of human goods. The alternative to situationism, and other forms of utilitarianism, is not a cold, hard, rigid legalism. The alternative is an ethics that can account for insights that mankind is gradually winning into the immorality of acts such as enslavement, abortion, adultery, the use of terror, and the perversion of theoretical truth.

It is understandable that the philosopher who does not think there is anything transcendent to man should adopt some form of utilitarianism—absurd as it is. For if there really is no good beyond man how can man subject himself to the Good Itself, why should he not aim at the best good there is in reality, the actual goods men can achieve?

But the philosopher who knows there is a Good transcendent to man, and who rightly understands that human good is a participation in this higher Principle, can adopt a utilitarian theory only by falling into the most profound and deplorable confusion. For such a philosopher should realize that to be a man, one must hope, and one need not suppose that human reason is the ultimate source of meaning in reality. He should realize that to be a man, one must love, and one need not suppose that the good is too narrow to comprehend both me and you. He should realize that to be a man, one must be humble, and one need not imagine that the ultimate ends that our acts achieve or attain can ever exhaust the Supreme Good to which our hearts aspire. He should realize that to be man, one must detach himself even from that to which he is committed, and one need not suppose that the gradual expenditure of man's powers and resources is the only permanent evidence of progress—toward the melancholy end projected by physics, a dead universe. He who knows there is a Good transcendent to man should realize, he most of all should realize, that to be man one must be free, not with that freedom from law which is slavery to immorality, but free with that freedom of love of the Good, which leads the lover to surpass himself in love, acting with a generosity and heroism beyond all calculation of consequences.

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