

A Primer on Moral Concepts and Vocabulary

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Abstract:

This article is an introduction to moral concepts. Its purpose is to introduce and explain vocabulary that can be used both in examining ethical theories, and in talking about the ethically significant aspects of concrete situations. We begin by distinguishing descriptive and normative claims, and explaining how moral claims are a special type of normative claims. We then introduce terms for the moral evaluation of actions, states of affairs, and motives. Focusing on the question ‘what should be done?’, we talk at some length about factors that influence the moral evaluation of actions, such as rights, duties, and consequences. We also cover related concepts such as justifications, excuses, praise, and blame. Finally, we discuss ethical reasoning and the roles played therein by principles, values, and theories.

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Introduction

This article is an introduction to moral concepts. Its purpose is to introduce and explain vocabulary that can be used both in examining ethical theories, and in talking about the ethically significant aspects of concrete situations. If you're paying attention, you'll have noticed that the first sentence above used the term *moral* and the second the term *ethical*. For the purposes of this article, these two mean the same thing. Some people think there are differences between 'moral' and 'ethical', but we'll ignore this subtle and contested distinction. This will be a common theme throughout. For every term introduced here, you could find someone who uses it slightly differently from the way it's defined here. That's the nature of language in general and philosophy in particular. The aim is to introduce the terms so they can be usefully employed in ethical reasoning.

Two notes of caution: first, as just mentioned, people use terms differently. Thus, we need to be careful not to impose our own use of terms on the statements of others. When reading or listening to others making moral claims, we need to understand how they're using important words and phrases, and engage them accordingly. Pretending or assuming they're using our definitions, when they're not, won't lead to a fruitful exchange of ideas. Second, there'll be lots of examples of moral claims in this article. They've been chosen to be minimally controversial, but readers might still disagree with some of them. This shouldn't matter. Nothing hinges on these examples being correct. They're merely used to illustrate the way important ethical terms

are being used. So, if you disagree that torturing kittens is wrong (as asserted in section 2.1), you should still be able to understand the way the concept of an action being wrong is defined there.¹

1. What are Moral/Ethical Claims?

Our first task is to get a sense of what terms like ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ mean. And to do this, we first must distinguish between *normative* and *descriptive*² claims.

1.1 Normative vs Descriptive Claims

Compare two things you might say about a car: “this is a green car” and “this is a bad car”. Saying a car is green is to make a descriptive claim – you’re describing the car without making any kind of evaluation. Saying a car is bad, by contrast, is to make an evaluation – you’re saying the car falls short of some standard. This is an example of a normative claim. Another way of marking the distinction is to say that descriptive claims describe the way the world is, while normative claims are statements about how the world should be. So, when you say a car is bad, you’re saying the car should be different from what it is (saying the car is good, means the car is as it should be).

¹ This even holds if you think that some moral terms can never be correctly applied. Thinking, for example, that people have no positive rights at all should be no impediment to understanding how such rights are supposed to work (as explained in section 3.2).

² In some contexts, the term ‘positive’ is used instead of ‘descriptive’. This is different from the sense in which ‘positive’ is the opposite of ‘negative’. We use ‘descriptive’ to avoid this potential confusion.

1.2 Different Kinds of Norms and Standards

There are a lot of different kinds of normative claims. This is, first, because there are all kinds of standards we can use to make evaluations. Many of these are quite specific and have to do with the purpose of the thing being evaluated. For example, whether you think your new phone is a good one depends on the kinds of things you want to use it for, and whether it allows you to do them efficiently. There are also formal standards such as the ones authorized by a religious community or the government. In that sense it's bad to eat certain foods if you're a member of a certain religion, or to jaywalk if that's forbidden in your jurisdiction. Similarly, social practices such as sports will impose their own normative standards (e.g. using your hands to score is prohibited in soccer). There is also a general standard anchored in your own *self-interest*. You might think, for example, you should study for your exams because it's good for you to actually learn the things you're paying to study (and to get high grades). In philosophical ethics, you might see this thought expressed with alternative terms for 'self-interest' such as *welfare*, *well-being*, and *prudential value* (to say that something enhances your welfare or well-being, or that it is prudentially valuable for you is equivalent to saying that it is good for you in a self-interested sense). Finally, there is the standard of morality or ethics. This is the sense in which we say that it's good to help others in need, bad to break your promises, and so on. This is also the standard we usually have in mind when saying that someone is a good or bad person.

Normative standards can conflict with each other. A hydrogen bomb might be a good tool for its intended purpose, but that doesn't make it morally good. Stealing from the rich to give to the poor (like Robin Hood) is illegal, though it might be morally good (though people disagree about that). Conversely, there is usually nothing legally wrong with belittling people in front of

their friends, but that doesn't mean it's ethically unproblematic. And there can also be conflicts between morality and self-interest. Taking more than my fair share, when I can get away with it, might serve my self-interest but seems unethical.

The realm of moral claims, then is a proper subset of the realm of normative ones. All ethical claims are normative claims, but not all normative claims are ethical claims.



Figure 1: Ethical Claims as a Subset of Normative Claims

2. Ethical/Moral Evaluations of Actions, States of Affairs, and Motives

In principle, we can make an ethical evaluation of just about anything. In practice, the ethical evaluations we're most concerned with are of **Actions**, **States of Affairs**, and **Motives**. In the following subsections, we introduce moral concepts that apply to each of those.³

³ Our main focus will be on what philosophers call *thin moral concepts*. These tell us the ethical status of something without saying anything about why it has that status. *Thick moral concepts*, by contrast, combine a moral evaluation with some descriptive content. Examples are 'fair' and 'courageous'. Saying that someone acted courageously combines a description (they acted in a way that exposed them to danger) with an evaluation (they acted in a commendable way) (Williams, 1985).

2.1 Actions

The most common evaluative moral terms when it comes to actions are *right* and *wrong*. The rough meaning of these terms is familiar. When saying it's wrong to torture kittens, we mean people shouldn't torture kittens. When we say keeping a promise is the right thing to do, we mean people should do it. When we have to choose between two courses of actions, we might call the morally better one the right choice, and the morally worse one the wrong choice.

However, the vocabulary of right and wrong is often not enough to adequately describe our moral evaluations of actions. Suppose, for example, you won \$400 at a charity auction and are wondering what to do with the money. You consider several options: (a) giving the money right back to the charity; (b) giving the money to a different charity who, you think, does more important work; (c) buying a nice present for your mother; (d) buying some kittens to torture in your basement. Now (d) is clearly wrong, but there seems nothing obviously wrong with any of the others. But we cannot call all of these options 'right' because that would imply we should do all of them which is impossible. But if only one of them is the right action in this situation, this means you shouldn't do either of the other two rendering them wrong. That seems a little harsh (it would give the same moral evaluation – “wrong” – to donating the money to a charity as to torturing kittens).

So, we need more nuanced language for ethically evaluating actions. For actions that really shouldn't be done we can use the term *impermissible* (alternatively, we can use *prohibited*, *forbidden*, or we can stick with 'wrong'). Keep in mind, though, that we're using these terms here in the context of moral evaluations. Thus, an action being ethically forbidden, doesn't necessarily mean there is anyone who forbids it (other than morality itself).

On the other end of the spectrum are actions that absolutely should be done. Those we call **obligatory** actions. But then there are actions that are in the middle. We may perform them, but we don't have to. Those actions we can call **permissible**. Going back to the example in the last paragraph, we can then say that torturing kittens is ethically impermissible, while the other options are ethically permissible. All obligatory actions are permissible, but not all permissible actions are obligatory. We can call actions that are permissible but not obligatory **merely permissible**. Whenever there is an obligatory action, however, all alternatives are automatically impermissible.

Note that the action that is ethically best is not necessarily obligatory. Perhaps, in the example above, (b) is best, but you're still permitted to do (a) or (c). One reason why the best action isn't automatically obligatory is that we often think that there is nothing wrong with doing something good, even if we could've done something even better (cleaning up a local park is fine, even if it means you're not spending that time saving lives). Another reason why the best action isn't automatically obligatory is that we typically think there is a limit to how much morality requires us to sacrifice our own self-interest. For example, if you can rescue my life by calling an ambulance after seeing me get hit by a bus, doing so is obligatory. It would be an ethical violation to just keep walking. Contrast that with a situation where you can save my life by giving me one of your kidneys. Doing so might be the morally best action. But because it requires a significant personal sacrifice on your part, we hesitate to call it obligatory. To describe actions which are morally good but not obligatory, ethicists use the term **supererogatory**.

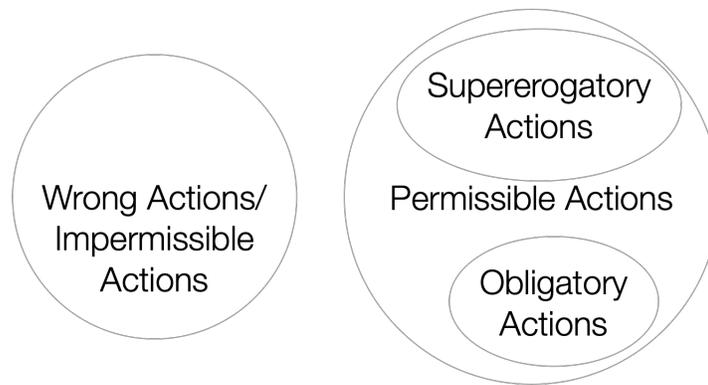


Figure 2: Terms for Morally Evaluating Actions

2.2 States of Affairs

States of affairs are ways things are (or could be) in the world. For example, it's a state of affairs that housing prices in Toronto are higher than they were five years ago. Another state of affairs is that you're currently reading section 2.2 of this article. And yet another state of affairs is that everyone in the world is currently happy. The last example is different from the first two: it's not true that everyone in the world is currently happy. But a state of affairs isn't necessarily the way that the world actually is. Many states of affairs are simply ways the world could be. We can say that a state of affairs **obtains** or is **instantiated** if the world actually is as the state of affairs describes it (so, the state of affairs that you're reading this section obtains). Obtaining states of affairs can also be called **facts**. But evaluating obtaining states of affairs (facts) isn't enough. If we consider changing some part of the world, for example, we want know whether the world would be better or worse after the change. So, we also need to evaluate states of affairs that don't obtain.

The basic terms for evaluating states of affairs are **good**, **bad**, and **indifferent**. Everyone has an intuitive understanding of what it means to evaluate a state of affairs as good or bad. Most

would agree that world peace is a good state of affairs (one that doesn't obtain) and we all understand what such an evaluation means (even if we disagree about how to evaluate a given state of affairs). Calling a state of affairs 'indifferent' means it's neither good nor bad.

Sorting states of affairs into good, bad, and indifferent, however, is only the crudest form of evaluating them. We're often interested not just in evaluating but in comparing different states of affairs, and frequently the states of affairs we want to compare fall in the same evaluative category. Imagine, for example, you're the executor of your grandmother's will and she has instructed you to give \$5,000 to a charity of your choice. In deciding which charity to give the money to, you might want to compare the states of affairs likely to obtain as a result of each possible decision. Giving to one charity may lead to students from poor families having greater access to education, another to fewer people contracting malaria, and a third to your local church upgrading its facilities. All of these are probably good, but you want to know, for each pair, which one is **better** and, for the whole set, which one is **best**. While it's natural to use 'better' and 'best' in a context in which all states of affairs are good, we could also use **worse** and **worst** without changing anything. All of these terms are purely comparative and imply nothing whatsoever about the absolute level of evaluation – getting an F and being caught plagiarizing are both bad, but one is still better than the other.

Another important distinction about the evaluation of states of affairs is the distinction between 'good' and **good for** (as well as between 'bad' and 'bad for', 'better' and 'better for', etc.). An easy way to understand the distinction is to consider the state of affairs of a murderer being arrested. This will usually be a good state of affairs, but a bad state of affairs for the murderer. In other words, being arrested was not in their self-interest. Thus, evaluating a state

of affairs for a particular individual isn't, strictly speaking, a moral evaluation. However, self-interest plays an important role for our understanding of moral concepts. So, we need to keep the distinction between good and good for in mind as we progress. For example, we may think an action that would bring about something very bad for us cannot be obligatory. Or we might think one state of affairs cannot be better than another unless it's better for at least one person.

The last claim in the previous paragraph might seem obviously correct. After all, how could one state of affairs (A) possibly be morally superior to another (B) if nobody is better off in A than in B? If there is an answer to this question it must appeal to ethical considerations beyond the isolated interests of individuals. We might find such considerations in some patterns of the distribution of resources and rights within a society. For example, many people think *equality* is an important moral good, and if that's true, a state of affairs in which everyone is poor might be better than a state of affairs in which almost everyone is poor except for a small obscenely rich elite. We might also think this depends on whether the rich people deserve to be so much better off than everyone else. This would invite the difficult question as to the basis of such *desert* (do people deserve a better life because they work harder? make great contributions to society? are supremely talented or good-looking? born to rich parents? have the right skin-colour, birthplace, or gender?). We might also think a state of affairs needs to be evaluated with regards to *justice*. It's difficult to give a concise and uncontroversial definition of justice but, roughly, justice is achieved when everyone receives what they're due. This accommodates the natural thoughts that justice is served when murderers are punished, or that societies are unjust when they fail to provide the same basic rights to all their members. Finally, some people think that the moral importance of *freedom* goes beyond people using their freedom to achieve better lives. The old

American slogan “give me liberty or give me death”, for example, implies that literally any state of affairs in which people are free is better than any in which they’re unfree.

So, when evaluating states of affairs, one important consideration is how good these states of affairs are for individuals. Some people think that’s all that matters. Others think we also need to take account of such things as equality, desert, justice, and freedom (or further values such as biodiversity or natural beauty).

2.3 Motives

In addition to actions and state of affairs, we also morally evaluate *persons* or their *characters*. However, when judging someone to be a good or a bad person or that they have a good or bad character, we typically mean that they tend to act from certain motives or *intentions*. We could use the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ for evaluations of motives. But, since we’re using those terms for the evaluation of states of affairs already, let’s avoid confusion by using slightly different language. We can call motives we find commendable *noble*, and motives that we think poorly of *wicked*.⁴ When someone reliably acts from a certain kind of motive, we might think this is an important part of their character. A stable disposition to act from noble motives can be called a *virtue* while a stable disposition to act from a wicked motive is a *vice*.

Similar actions can be performed from different motives. For example, I might give a large amount of money to cancer research because I want to help those suffering from cancer. This is presumably a noble motive. I might also give a large amount of money to cancer research,

⁴ There is no widely agreed convention for denoting positively and negatively evaluated motives. As noted, some philosophers use ‘good’ and ‘bad’ inviting confusion with states of affairs. Other philosophers use ‘virtuous’ and ‘vicious’ which invites a different confusion: in some traditions ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’ have a more specific meaning, often related to conforming (or not) with prohibitions regarding sexuality (and other kinds of bodily pleasure).

because I want my nemesis to know how rich I am hoping this makes them feel bad. Here my action springs from a wicked motive.

Both examples just given involve direct concern for other people (helping cancer patients/hurting my nemesis). Such concern tends to be regarded as either noble or wicked. When trying to help others, our motive is **altruistic**, which is typically considered noble; when trying to hurt others, we act from a **vindictive** (vengeance-seeking) or **hateful** motive which is typically considered wicked. Of course, we often aren't motivated by direct concern for others, but simply pursuing our own goals and ambitions. Such **self-interested** motives, by themselves, are typically neither noble nor wicked, but rather **neutral**. There's normally nothing either good or bad about wanting to feed yourself, stay warm, or read a book you're interested in. However, there might be situations where morality makes caring about others mandatory. In such situations acting self-interestedly can be wicked. For example, while it's fine to try to get home in a speedy manner, we need to make sure we're not endangering others using the same road. To ignore such constraints would be **negligent** and thus wicked. In other situations, we ought to be motivated by the plight of others directly (not just as a constraint on self-interested behaviour). For example, if you could help someone in great need at a small cost to yourself, but failed to do so because you were entirely focused on pursuing your own self-interest, this would render your self-interested motive **callous** and hence wicked.⁵

⁵ Another interesting type is the motive to act as morality requires, whatever that may be. Philosophers refer to this as **moral motivation de dicto**, and disagree whether such motives are noble, wicked, or neutral.

3. Common Considerations in the Evaluation of Actions

There are all kinds of ethical questions. Most of the time, however, the most pressing one is: “what should be done?” Thus, the ethical evaluation of actions is central to our moral concerns. We’re often interested in the ethical status of states of affairs and motives, for example, only insofar as it affects our evaluation of actions. In this section, we’ll take a look at these connections, as well as at some other features of the moral landscape that determine the status of actions.

3.1 Actions and States of Affairs

Actions lead to states of affairs obtaining. (Actions aren’t the only things doing that; an avalanche isn’t an action, but it also brings about states of affairs). This is just to say that actions have **consequences**. And one simple and attractive way of evaluating actions is by simply looking at their consequences. To start with a simple case, we might say that if there are exactly two actions available it would be obligatory to perform the one with the better consequences and, hence, impermissible to perform the other one. If more actions are available, we might say that it’s obligatory to perform the action with the best consequences.⁶ But if we do say that, we must say all other actions are impermissible. And that is often implausible. To make room for actions that are permissible but not obligatory, we need to loosen the connection between the evaluation of actions and the evaluation of their consequences.

⁶ This is the basic tenet of the group of ethical theories called **consequentialism**. **Utilitarianism** is the most well-known form of consequentialism. According to that theory, it’s obligatory to perform the action with the best consequences, and consequences are to be evaluated, in turn, by adding up the pleasure and pain for all sentient beings affected by the action (Mill, 1863/2004).

One way of doing this is to say we're not obligated to bring about the best consequences, but only to perform actions that lead to **good enough** states of affairs. This allows us to say that all actions with good enough consequences are permissible. What states of affairs count as good enough is, of course, going to be a hard question. One simple (probably too simple) way of thinking about this is to say that all good consequences are good enough, while all bad ones aren't. (Note that this leaves unanswered what to say about indifferent ones.) Alternatively, we might think there is a certain threshold above which good states of affairs are good enough. Or we could say it depends on the available alternatives, and an action is permissible only if its consequences aren't much worse than those of the best available alternative. We cannot decide this question here. Whatever the exact standard of 'good enough', satisfying such a standard might give us a way of thinking of actions as permissible but not obligatory.⁷

Another way of making sense of the notion that the action with the best consequences might not be obligatory is that we typically don't think that people are routinely obligated to make enormous sacrifices. If the ethically best state of affairs is very bad for me, I might not be obligated to bring it about. To volunteer 100% of my free time to help people in need, for example, might be "best overall," but quite a burden for me. It would be permissible to make the sacrifice, but doing so would be supererogatory rather than obligatory.

This way of thinking about supererogatory actions involves evaluating the consequences of an action both from an overall ethical point of view and from the point of view of the self-interest of the person acting. The idea is, roughly, that the person acting may be permitted to

⁷ This is the idea of a group of ethical theories called *satisficing consequentialism* (by contrast with standard consequentialism which is *maximizing*) (Slote and Pettit, 1984).

give some extra weight to her own self-interest in deciding on a course of action. This is just one special case of a more general phenomenon. We often think the action with the best consequences isn't obligatory (in fact, it might even be impermissible), because it infringes on the interests of someone who has some kind of special claim. The next section looks at such cases.

3.2 Rights and Duties

Suppose you're walking behind someone busily talking on their phone. Imagine you can tell this is a very wealthy person, as their conversation revolves around the purchases of yachts, sportscars, and other luxury items. Moreover, a bundle of \$100 notes is casually tucked into their back pocket. As you walk you pass a homeless person who is asking passersby for change. After quickly evaluating the relevant states of affairs, you pick a \$100 bill from the pocket of the person ahead of you, which they don't notice, and give it to the homeless person. Let's assume you're correct that the state of affairs you have brought about is better than the alternative (namely the state of affairs in which the rich person keeps the \$100, and the homeless person remains hungry). In this case your action brought about the best consequences, but it would seem strange to call it obligatory. In fact, it may seem the action wasn't even permissible. This is certainly what the law would say. Stealing from the rich to help the poor might have good consequences, but it's a violation of the rich's property rights and thus illegal.

Generally speaking a *right* is an entitlement that others behave in certain ways towards you. The notion of rights is most familiar in the context of law, but it's also an important concept in ethical discourse. When someone tells their ex-partner they've "no right to ask how my new

relationship is going”, they’re referring to a moral right, not a legal one. Many important ethical rights are enshrined in law, but this varies between jurisdictions and from one era to the next. It’s safe to say, for example, that every person who ever lived has (or had) a moral right not to be enslaved, and yet there have been many cases of legal slavery throughout history. This example also shows that there can be legal rights (the slaveowner’s property rights in the slave) that aren’t backed by moral ones.

An action that violates someone’s moral rights, then, is usually morally impermissible but things aren’t always straightforward. There are situations in which rights conflict and it’s impossible to respect everyone’s rights. For example, if people have a right to freely express their thoughts and a right not to be subject to hateful comments, it’s easy to imagine situations in which one of those rights will have to be violated. Partly because such situations are possible, it’s widely recognized that most rights aren’t **absolute**. Treating a moral right as absolute would make violating it morally impermissible under any and all circumstances.

Rights can be **waived**. Waiving a right is a voluntary step the holder of the right can (often) take. If you’re one of two siblings, for example, you may have the moral (and legal) right to inherit (roughly) half of your parents’ estate. But if you’re significantly wealthier than your sibling, you might decide to waive that right, and let your parents leave everything to your sibling without thereby violating your right. Another way of talking about this is to note the ethical importance of **consent**. We often do things to other people that would violate their rights, had they not consented to such treatment. Such consent can be **explicit** (or **express**), which means that the person has in fact stated that they consent; it can be **implied**, meaning the person has acted in such ways that it’s reasonable to infer their consent; or it can be **hypothetical**, meaning there’s

good reason to think the person would consent if given the chance. A relatively uncontroversial example of implied consent is that I agree to be charged when ordering food from a menu in a restaurant. Though I never explicitly say I'm willing to part with my money in exchange for food, my behaviour is reasonably interpreted as agreeing to such a transaction. Hypothetical consent is important, for example, when a person is in a coma and needs medical treatment. In such cases, we often assume they would consent to life-saving treatments if they were able to do so, and health professionals proceed accordingly. Of course, we need to be careful when relying on implied or hypothetical consent. For it's always possible that we're wrong about what other people would consent to if given the chance, and we might misinterpret their behaviour as implying consent, when it doesn't.

Rights can also be **forfeited**. To forfeit a right is to act in ways that free others from the obligation of respecting your right. For example, while you've the moral right not to be locked up against your will, it's reasonable to think you forfeit that right when you start murdering people. If you end up in prison, in this scenario, most people wouldn't think your right to freedom is being violated, but rather that you've forfeited it. Similarly, while my son has the right to play with his toys, he forfeits that right if he breaks all the toys of his younger brother. In this situation, I'm not violating his rights by taking some of his toys and giving them to his victim to play with. (At least, that's how I see it.)

We can distinguish between **negative rights** and **positive rights**. A negative right is an entitlement that others not perform certain actions against your will. For example, you've the right not to be killed, which means everybody else must refrain from killing you. A positive right, by contrast, is an entitlement that others do perform certain actions. For example, if an accused

has a right to an attorney, this means not only that nobody must keep them from hiring an attorney, but also that someone must make sure that they have one even if they can't afford to pay. The distinction between positive and negative rights isn't always easy to draw, because the same behaviour may count as performing one action or as not performing another. Suppose, for example, you have a right to be undisturbed in your apartment at night, but your neighbour is a musician who practices around the clock. Saying that you're entitled that your neighbour doesn't disturb you at night sounds like a negative right. But if we say that you're entitled that your neighbour stops practicing at a certain hour, it seems like a positive right, because you're asserting that he needs to do something.

Nevertheless, the distinction between positive and negative rights is often useful. For one thing it helps us understand disagreements about what certain rights entail. For example, most people agree that everyone has a right to life, and that this includes the entitlement not to be killed (a negative right). But exactly how extensive the positive rights associated with the right to life are is more controversial. How many resources, for example, does society have to spend to try and extend your life as you become old and/or sick? There is a tendency for positive rights to be more controversial than negative rights. That is because, first, it's easier to justify telling others to leave you alone than to tell them to do something for you. And, second, negative rights impose their requirements on everyone (your right not to be killed means that everyone must refrain from killing you), while positive rights often leave it unclear who exactly has to make sure they're respected (if you have a right to food, who has to make sure you don't go hungry?).

This brings us to the notion of **duty**. A duty is a requirement to act in a certain way. Roughly speaking, duties and rights are two sides of the same coin: if one person has a right, it

typically means someone else has a related duty. And just as with rights we can distinguish between **positive duties** and **negative duties**. If you have a right not to be killed, I've a duty not to kill you, and that's a negative duty. If you have a right to decent healthcare, then someone must have a duty to provide such healthcare, and that's a positive duty. As should be clear by now, the question of who a particular positive duty falls on is often thorny. And in many cases the most plausible answer is something like 'society', which leaves it open which members of society need to act in what ways to ensure society fulfills its positive duties.⁸

This difficulty, however, doesn't apply to positive duties that arise from certain roles and relationships. For example, my children have certain positive rights and I, as their parent, am the one with the corresponding duties. Somewhat similarly, I've positive duties as a citizen, spouse, manager, educator, and employee. The simplest case of how such duties arise is when we bind ourselves with a contract or a promise. If I (freely) promise to send you a report next week, I acquire a duty to follow through (and you have a right to find the report on your desk then). Since I only have that duty because I made that promise, this is a **conditional duty**.⁹ Conditional duties are duties that we acquire only under certain conditions. **Categorical duties**, by contrast, are duties that we have independently of any special commitments or roles we have taken on. For example, our duty to abstain from inflicting unnecessary bodily harms on each other is not conditional on whether or not we made a promise to that effect.

We said that duties and rights are roughly speaking two sides of the same coin. The qualification ("roughly speaking") is important. It's sometimes unclear who has the duty that

⁸ This difficulty of apportioning and justifying positive duties leads some theorists to believe people have few, if any, positive rights.

⁹ Followers of the influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant call conditional duties **hypothetical duties** (Kant, 1785/2012).

corresponds to a right – especially in the case of positive rights – which leaves open the possibility that nobody does and that rights can thus exist without corresponding duties. The converse is also possible. We may have some duties even though nobody has a corresponding right. For example, we might think extremely wealthy people have a moral duty to donate some of their money to help the less fortunate. Suppose there is such a duty. It seems that no individual has a corresponding right. There are any number of ways in which a wealthy person could discharge this duty, each with different beneficiaries. And it would be strange to say a wealthy person who decided to fulfill their duty by, for example, donating to hunger relief in Sub-Saharan Africa thereby violated the rights of others who they could have helped instead. This leads us to one last distinction between duties. A **perfect duty** is one that prescribes a specific course of action, and leaves no (or little) leeway in how to fulfill it. An **imperfect duty**, by contrast, is an obligation to act in certain ways, without an exact determination of how and when this is to be accomplished (Kant, 1785/2012). Sharing wealth is an imperfect duty, because it can be done at different times, with different beneficiaries, and so forth. Rescuing a child from drowning when you're the only person in a position to do so, by contrast, is a perfect duty. You need to save this particular child right then and there.

3.3 Actions and Motives

As noted above, the same action can be performed from noble or wicked motives. Partly this is because each action is going to have various consequences, and the person performing the action might be trying to bring about any one or a combination of them. This has important implications, for example, in the moral evaluation of military actions. In fighting a war, there is commonly

thought to be a big ethical difference between targeting civilians and harming them as collateral damage. Suppose an air force bombs a village killing 50 civilians in order to demoralize the population. This is generally considered morally (and legally) impermissible. But, if the same air force bombs a munitions factory which causes a big explosion killing 50 civilians in a nearby village, this is often seen as permissible (or at least less bad), even if the general ordering the bombing knew in advance that the civilians would be killed. The attack on the factory wouldn't be considered permissible, however, if the killing of the civilians was the goal of the attack, rather than merely an unfortunate side-effect. Thus, at least sometimes, motives seem to matter in evaluating actions. When we *intend* to harm others, the action is less likely to be permissible than if we *merely foresee* the harm.¹⁰

A related issue we've neglected so far, is that we're often not sure what the consequences of our actions will be. Thus, we might perform actions with terrible consequences, or violate somebody's rights, without any intention to do so. In other words, noble motives might lead to regrettable actions. It's a difficult question whether this should affect our evaluation of those actions. Suppose somebody hits and injures a young child while speeding past an elementary school. This is an impermissible action with a bad outcome. But what if the person didn't know they were speeding, or that there was an elementary school there? (Maybe they're from abroad, and the signs indicating the speed limit and presence of the school were illegible due to vandalism.) In this case, it seems there were no wicked motives at play. This leaves us with two somewhat plausible options regarding the evaluation of the action. We might say that the action

¹⁰ Philosophers commonly refer to this distinction between intended and merely foreseen harms as the *doctrine of double effect*.

remains impermissible (after all, an innocent child was injured), or that it was permissible (after all, the driver couldn't have known they were doing something dangerous). Because both of these options seem reasonable, some philosophers think that they're both correct, because there are two different types of evaluation: **subjective** and **objective**. An action is objectively impermissible (permissible, obligatory, supererogatory), when it in fact has the properties that make an action so (for example, it does in fact kill civilians). An action is subjectively impermissible (permissible, mandatory, supererogatory), when the person performing it reasonably believes it to have these properties.

A related issue concerns **justifications** and **excuses**. Justifications are aspects of a situation that make an otherwise impermissible action permissible. For example, while it's ordinarily impermissible to punch others, doing so can be permissible in self-defence. Thus, the presence of a justification changes the ethical status of an action. What would've been wrong isn't wrong, if there is a justification. In contrast, an excuse doesn't affect the moral status of the action itself, but merely absolves the person performing it from responsibility. This is where ignorance may come in. Suppose I punch you because someone tricked me into believing you were about to stab me, when you were not doing anything of the sort. In this case, I may be absolved from responsibility for my action (I have an excuse), but the action remains impermissible.

This brings us to **praise** and **blame**. It seems natural to say that we should blame people who perform impermissible actions, and praise people who perform obligatory or supererogatory ones. But things aren't so simple. For one, it might seem unfair to blame people who perform impermissible actions without knowing they were doing so. The distinction between subjective and objective evaluation introduced above can help with that by suggesting

that praise and blame are appropriate responses to the subjective, rather than the objective, moral status of actions. More importantly, however, praising or blaming someone is itself an action, and there might be all kinds of considerations that bear on whether we should perform it. For example, praising somebody for doing something supererogatory might have bad consequences (if it makes them feel they've earned a permission to do something immoral.) And this might be enough to render praising them an impermissible action.

4. Styles of Moral Reasoning

Because, there are various ways in which consequences, rights, duties, and motives can affect their moral status, the evaluation of actions is often difficult. Moreover, there will be disagreements about which considerations are the most important ones, both generally speaking, and in particular cases. Can we ethically perform an action that violates somebody's rights, if the other consequences are good enough? Is an action with bad consequences permissible if it resulted from a noble motive? Must I keep a promise even though doing so would actually hurt the promisee? People answer these questions differently, and it's not the purpose of this article to adjudicate these disputes. What we'll do, in this last section, is to characterize a number of different ways of going about answering such questions.

4.1 Principles

One way in which we can approach the question how to act in a certain context is with *principles*. A moral principle is a rule telling us a certain type of action always has the same ethical status. (There are also principles regarding the ethical status of motives and states of affairs, but we'll

focus on actions). Examples of principles are “lying is wrong”, “eating meat is impermissible”, “consensual sex is permissible”. If you believe the three principles just enumerated are correct, you can use them to evaluate, for example, a plan to tell your parents that you are going to spend the evening studying, and then instead sneak over to your romantic partner’s dorm, grabbing some hotdogs on the way. Two elements of this plan violate your ethical principles, and you should make some changes.

If you subscribe to a number of principles, you’re likely to sometimes encounter a **moral dilemma**. That term describes a situation in which you cannot avoid doing something impermissible. Suppose, for example, that lying is always wrong, and that hurting your parents’ feelings is always wrong. When your parents then ask whether you’d like to go camping with them, which you don’t, and you know that anything but an enthusiastic ‘yes’ will hurt their feelings, you’re in a moral dilemma: no matter what you do, you’ll violate one of your principles.

One way of avoiding moral dilemmas is to say that principles have exceptions. This is quite plausible. “Killing another person is impermissible” seems like a good candidate for a correct moral principle. But we can easily think of exceptions. Some of them will be quite uncontroversial (killing in self-defence), others not so much (killing a terminally-ill person who has asked to be killed). In the example about lying to your parents, you might say that lying is wrong except when it’s done to avoid hurting someone’s feelings. But things get complicated quickly, because you can probably think of cases where speaking the truth seems more important, ethically, than protecting someone’s feelings. And so, to capture the entirety of our moral convictions with principles would require, for most of us, an extensive set of principles, each subject to several

very refined exceptions. Most of us don't operate that way. Instead, we abide by a relatively small set of simple principles, but we're willing to override them in unusual circumstances.¹¹

As we've seen, the three principles we started with don't define specific circumstances under which they're supposed to be applied, and that's part of the reason why there are exceptions to them. Building these exceptions into our principles would lead to a larger set of principles with fewer exceptions but also less general in their application. Note, however, that principles can be at an even higher level of generality and such highly general principles can be quite useful in many contexts. A popular approach to healthcare ethics, for example, tells healthcare providers to abide by four principles: the principle of respect for autonomy (proceed only with the patient's consent), the principle of non-maleficence (do no harm), the principle of beneficence (provide the most beneficial treatment), and the principle of justice (distribute scarce resources fairly) (Beauchamp and Childress, 2013). These principles don't concern a specific type of action (such as killing a person, eating meat, consensual sex), rather they provide a broad guideline as to what kind of considerations we should consider when making decisions.

4.2 Values

An alternative way of thinking about the dilemma when a small lie seems the only way to protect someone's feelings is in terms of conflicting **values**. Values operate similarly to the very general principles discussed towards the end of the last section. In contrast to more specific principles,

¹¹ Philosophers refer to the fact that principles can be overridden by saying that such principles describe *prima facie moral reasons* or *pro tanto moral reasons*. So, you may have a prima facie (or pro tanto) moral reason not to lie even if the specific circumstances are such that lying is permissible *all things considered* (Ross, 1930/2002). Of course, philosophers being philosophers, there is also disagreement whether 'pro tanto' and 'prima facie' really mean the same thing.

which tell us exactly what kind of evaluation to make of a certain action, a value is simply a belief that acting in certain ways tends to make actions right or wrong. For example, many of us value honesty. This doesn't necessarily mean we think it's always wrong to lie. Rather it means that we take acting and speaking honestly to be something we should strive to do. Telling a small lie might sometimes be compatible with valuing honesty in general, and so it might seem that this is a laxer moral standard than a principle forbidding lying. But a principle forbidding lying might not say anything about withholding information, which might be incompatible with valuing honesty.

Note that values are often quite indeterminate. Many people value family. But, compared to honesty, it's less obvious what kinds of behaviour are implied by this. Does valuing family mean putting the interest of one's relatives ahead of friends and strangers? Does it mean to be more willing to forgive slights and transgressions when they come from family? Does it mean calling one's parents regularly? To be open and trusting with siblings? Doing things for your family that you'd otherwise consider unethical? Different people who proclaim to value family will answer these questions differently. Thus, naming values is the beginning, rather than the end, of figuring out what one's moral standards are. Nevertheless, values can be helpful in thinking about what the right course of action is.

Just like principles, values can conflict. When they do, we might try to find solutions to minimize the conflict. Someone valuing both friendship and honesty, for example, might avoid discussing topics they strongly disagree about with their friends. In other cases, we weigh the conflicting values and decide which one is more important in a given situation (maybe we need to let this friend go...). And often we'll find a middle ground, accepting a minor violation of one or more of our values in order to avoid larger violations elsewhere (as when we express an

opinion less forcefully than we would really like to – a small cost in terms of honesty that might protect a friendship).

4.3 Ethical Theories

All this business about values and principles that can conflict, need to be weighed, and admit of exceptions can seem rather messy. Unfortunately, this messiness is just a feature of our ordinary ethical reasoning: thinking through an ethical problem can be a complex affair. But we might wonder whether we can't do better by developing a theory of ethics that helps us decide all (or at least most) ethical questions. Philosophers in the field of *normative ethics* are working on exactly that. A complete theory of normative ethics would consist of a (hopefully small) number of principles that tell us exactly what the ethical status of every possible action is in every conceivable situation. It would, in effect, gather together a very large number of moral judgments and unify them under a small set of general rules. If you are interested in what building a theory like that looks like, you should take a course in normative ethics. If you do that, you will find that the concepts and vocabulary discussed in this primer will help you to understand what normative ethicists are up to. Conversely, learning about ethical theories will also likely deepen your understanding of these concepts. Why, then, doesn't this primer introduce specific ethical theories (except in passing)? Let's begin by noting that experts in normative ethics are not close to an agreement as to what the correct theory of normative ethics looks like. Thus, we are not in a position to simply take the currently accepted theory and apply it to cases. Rather, we would have to carefully think about and debate the plausibility of each theory. This is a worthwhile thing to do, but it is not the same as thinking about and debating concrete ethical questions. The goal

of this primer is to enable the informed application of moral concepts. Knowing about ethical theories, while potentially helpful, is not a requirement for that.

5. Conclusion

A grand, universally accepted, theory of ethics that answers all of our questions in a simple way seems not to be forthcoming anytime soon. In the meantime, we all work with more or less well-defined value systems that amount to something like partial theories of normative ethics. For those who subscribe to a particular religious or philosophical belief system, this is somewhat formalized in the tenets of such systems. Those who aren't committed to such a system get their values and principles from more eclectic sources. For all of us, however, thinking through the ethical implications of our choices is often difficult. Being clear on what moral terms mean and how they relate can assist us in reasoning more clearly.

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