

PERSONAL ETHICS

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Limiting consideration of ethics to personal ethics (as distinct from social ethics), the concept of person is obviously central in ethical theory. Unfortunately for simplicity, the concept of person is complex, too complex for complete exposition here. Treatment will be limited to three concept ingredients in the concept of a person.

Since I propose an enlightened self-interest theory of ethics as the soundest, most obvious, and the most easily and fully demonstrable theory, I will examine concepts concerning the nature of self, of interests, and of enlightenment.

Self

Clues to the nature of a self can be observed in how it conceives itself.

1. All selves are alike in having self-conceptions. Selves differ by having differing self-conceptions. All selves are alike in having some essential kinds of self-conceptions, e.g., whatever concepts are necessary for the existence of a person. These include concepts of having a body, of perceiving through sensations, of breathing, eating and excreting, of having desires, satisfactions and frustrations, of having feelings, pains, emotions, fears, ideas and ideals, and of being awake or asleep, acting or resting, vigorous or ill. But selves differ, and the same self differs at different times, regarding how such essential, as well as non-essential, conceptions are conceived.

2. A self conceives itself in terms of things with which it identifies itself and of things to which it opposes itself. In addition to identifying itself with a body, its desires and actions, etc., outlined above, a self may identify itself with parts of its body, e.g., organs such as head, heart and hands, with cells, molecules, atoms and electrons. A self may identify itself with its parents, siblings, children, ancestors and descendants, race, all mankind, all sentient beings, the universe as a whole, with group memberships such as family, neighborhood, school, state, nation and world groups, with social roles such as wife, daughter, mother, citizen, taxpayer, renter, owner, driver, cook, editor, teacher, soldier, etc. A self may also oppose itself to each of the above things. Some persons have been taught to conceive their selves as eternal souls temporarily imprisoned in an undesired body and to seek escape, e.g., through yoga. Some oppose themselves to groups, institutions, and even all other persons. Nevertheless, these feelings of identity and opposition are essential to the nature of self.

3. Selves differ regarding how stable their self-conceptions, in terms of identification and oppositions, remain and how flexible their self-conceptions are when a person confronts new situations and new adaptive problems. Some develop very rigidly, some very flexibly, and some with rigidity in some conceptions and flexibility relative to other conceptions.

4. Persons are essentially social, and part of each person's conception of himself results from how others conceive him and how he responds to the conceptions of others of which he becomes aware. In this way, each person's self is partly a product of his social circumstances. Since others make observations about how a person behaves which a person is not able to make about himself, he can learn some things about himself from others. Persons grow in achieving new capacities, and some new capacities for acting, producing, creating, destroying, etc., result from sharing in group conceptions and actions. Some highly socialized selves develop capacities for performing complex and varying social roles (e.g., actors, multilingual translators). Some enjoy gregariousness. Some retreat to isolation, even idealizing loneliness. But social sources are essential to, and clues to, the concept of a person.

5. Persons may develop misconceptions of their selves. Perhaps all do. Misconceptions occur whenever a person believes that he has either more of something (characteristic, capacity, status) than he actually has or less of something than he has. Belief that he has more may result from hasty generalization, wishful thinking, flattery or simple ignorance. Belief that he has less may result from hasty generalization with frustration, fear, contempt or ignorance. Some misconceptions of self result from misconceptions by others which influence one's conception of himself. Misconceptions do play important roles in personal self-conceptions.

6. Self-conceptions are organic unities. Each conception is a whole with more or less integrated parts, or is multiplicities of parts more or less integrated into a whole. Some persons, especially those responding readily to the opinions and approvals and disapprovals of others, tend to conceive themselves differently on each occasion to suit the approved roles called for by others. Some persons, especially those developing concern for personal integrity, tend to retain more stable self-conceptions which resist superficial variability called for by passing occasions. Some persons have both stable wholes of self-conception and variable parts needed for differing occasions. As organic unities, some self-conceptions are more stable gestalts and some are more loose and fluid. But some kind of interdependence of wholes and parts of self-conceptions needs recognition in ethical theory.

Interests

Each person is naturally interested in what is good, or best, for himself. Each is naturally interested in avoiding what is bad for himself. No concept of person and no ethical theory is adequate until it incorporates an adequate account of the nature of values, good and bad, intrinsic and instrumental, actual and potential, subjective and objective, apparent and real, and pure and mixed. Good and bad, for present purposes, are whatever appear as good or bad to each person confronted with choices. Although from a more enlightened viewpoint, a person may have many values of which he is unaware, only what he knows, or believes, conceives or misconceives, is able to motivate his choices and ethical actions.

Not only does each person naturally desire to maximize his goods and minimize his evils, but also rightness, I propose, consists in intending to choose and act in such a way as to produce the best results for one's self in the long run. So defined, acting rightly is what each person most wants to do. Why, then, does one ever act wrongly? My answer to this question appears in the next section on enlightenment.

Oughtness, I propose, consists in the power which an apparently greater good has over an apparently lesser good in compelling our choices. When oughtness is so conceived, each person naturally wants to choose and act as he ought. When, then, does any person ever believe that he has not acted as he ought? Again, see the next section.

The present section is devoted to outlining some kinds of interests persons may have, how interests are acquired and lost, and conflicts of interests.

1. Each person naturally has interests in every part of his self, in whatever he conceives as identified with his self, whether or not essential to his life. Some interests are momentary and some life-long. Some are easy to realize, some are hard, and some may be unrealizable. Some are simple, others complex. Some pertain to only one part of life, others to many parts and their harmonious cooperation. Some are consumptive, terminating values completely; some are productive, leading to more future values. Some are purely private; some are fully social.

2. Each person naturally acquires more interests as new objects, activities, opportunities and capacities occur. Is there some limit to the number that one can or should acquire? Can one acquire too many interests? Are interests acquired accidentally or intentionally, haphazardly or by design, experimentally or by drawing on experiences of others? Some interests are instinctive, some are acquired from earliest associations, and some emerge after mature experience. Each person also loses interests. Those that are momentary pass with the moment. Some acquired in childhood disappear during youth. Some cease when opportunity ceases or when ability ceases. Some lose out in competition with others that are more interesting. Some cease when resulting apparent evils outweigh apparent goods. Many cease because of conflicts of interest.

3. Conflict of interests occurs whenever one has two wants, both of which cannot be satisfied. A New Yorker cannot be vacationing in Bermuda and Hawaii at the same time. Most persons naturally acquire more interests than can be realized, so conflicts of interest develop naturally. Such conflicts are themselves the cause of choices, of oughtness, and thus of ethics. The kinds of interests each person acquires and the conflicts that appear among them determine the kinds of ethical problems he faces.

Enlightenment

The more a person knows about himself and interests the more possible will it be for him to maximize goods and minimize evils. How does one know what is best for himself and how can he learn about them?

Some interests are instinctive. Some, especially those based in

physiological needs, such as hunger, assert themselves automatically. Some develop in mother-child and primary-group associations. Some result from personal experiences. Many are taught by others, for example, oral instruction, schoolroom or books. With the rapid growth of the sciences, technologies, publications, libraries, colleges, universities, and research institutes, more and more knowledge becomes available. Today the problem of too much knowledge becomes an ethical problem for more and more persons; how to sift from the deluge parts that are most relevant and most beneficially enlightening.

Although discovering or deciding what is best for one's self is always a personal responsibility, help from others, especially in an age of multiplex sciences and technologies, is to be expected. Which others? There are many others who can help, especially all other scientists and technicians having specialized competence. Each competent specialist is an ethical authority regarding what is best in his own field. So each self-interested person has interests in learning as much about his self as he can from both general scientists (physical scientists, informed about the physical, chemical, geological, geographical, astronomical, etc.; conditions for the existence of each person; biological scientists, informed about the genetic, botanical, zoological, physiological, etc.; conditions about the existence of each person; psychological scientists; social scientists; and philosophical scientists, informed about the metaphysical, epistemological, logical, axiological, aesthetic, ethical, religious, etc.; conditions of human existence) and from specialized scientists and technicians (dietitians, dentists, physicians, agriculturalists, architects, psychiatrists, bankers, automotive engineers, etc.).

The importance of competent scientists having specialized ethical authority is too often overlooked by some ethicists. But also the importance of axiology and ethics as sciences having their own basic problems to solve is also too often overlooked by other scientists. Ethics as a general science inquires into the nature of right and wrong, oughtness, obligation, duty, justice, conscience, intentions and choice. Specialized ethical sciences, such as medical ethics, legal ethics, environmental ethics, educational ethics, etc., depend for understanding their problems upon relevant conclusions from both ethics as a general science and the relevant specialized sciences. Past and present practices of seeking ethical advice from priests and ministers has retarded the development of ethics as an applied science, as has the prevalence among professional counselors of cultists, such as behaviorists, psychoanalysts, romanticists and existentialists. But professional ethical "engineers", specialists in applied ethics, both general and special (and for both personal and social ethics), are urgently needed today.

What are some of the problems that belong more properly to personal ethics than to any other field (even though, because ethical problems and principles permeate every other field of life? They are often dealt with in other fields also). My list is not complete.

1. How does one obtain more enlightenment? As mentioned above, one who advocates a theory of enlightened self-interest sees increasing understanding of how to maximize goods and minimize evils as a primary problem.

2. How does one choose rightly when complete information is lacking? How does one make the best guess when forced to decide? Although answers depend much on peculiarities of particular choices, general questions about degree of consent, tentativity of assent, willingness to accept risk, and estimation of responsibility for unforeseen consequences exemplify the problems involved.

3. How does one obtain more of what is good? Earn it. Expect to obtain more by doing more of what is needed to obtain it. If enlightenment about "how to" includes "how to most efficiently", then one will try to act as efficiently, i.e., produce the most good with the least evil, as he can.

4. How does one develop habits of obtaining more of what is good? Regarding maximizing recurring goods, habits, i.e., tendencies to repeat efficient methods of attaining them, will be developed when possible. A person's many habits constitute his character. Formerly, "good habits" were called "virtues", or "strengths", i.e., abilities to achieve or maintain, i.e., to maximize goods. When habits become too rigid and inflexible, so that they are used to solve similar problems in which differences have increased in significance, in ways that produce more evil than good results, such virtuous habits have turned into vices. Then a person's problem becomes one of how to discard or restrain habits that are deficient rather than efficient.

5. How does one manage conflicts of interests? Conflicts resulting from too many interests may be reduced by reducing numbers of interests. But since interests are interesting (embody values), one may prefer more interests and more conflicts. Growing megalopolitan and global interdependencies generate more and more interests, and prospects promise more conflicts in persons. Conflicts between trivial interests may be experienced as insignificant, but those between important interests may have crucial significance. Persons enlightened about their natures will tend to choose to satisfy those interests that are more complex, more long-range, and more wholesome (for life as a whole), and harmonious. Enlightened management involves planning, especially life planning, i.e., planning to get the most out of life.

6. How does one get the most out of life? In addition to instinctive interests, persons often acquire lasting interests by reacting to particular crises encountered in the course of living. But enlightened persons tend to replace haphazard acquisition by planned acquisition of interests, usually together with skills needed to pursue them. Many problems result from interest in planning. My list is incomplete:

a. Avoid waste; assess fitness of opportunities and capacities. A person's abilities include not only his capacities and opportunities but also their fitness to each other. To acquire a violin (opportunity) which one never learns to play, and to learn to play a violin (capacity) which one never has opportunity to use, are both wasteful. Enlightened planning includes avoiding effort to acquire capacities for which one has no opportunities and opportunities for which one has no capacities.

b. Anticipating changing with aging. Although some childhood, youthful and middle-aged interests beneficially last throughout life, some enjoyable (even essential) interests can be acquired appropriately only later in life.

c. Specializing versus wholesomeness. Enjoyment of excellence resulting from specializing is a major value. When preoccupation with a specialty prevents enjoyment of other values, it becomes an evil, unless somehow a person does not have abilities to develop other interests. Enlightenment about one's range of possibilities and probabilities may enable one to obtain some balance of the major kinds of values people find desirable in life, or at least some minimum of each when fuller achievements are not possible. A person able to comprehend his life as a whole, i.e., as a value whole, seems more likely to enjoy pursuit of each kind of interest more when he is aware that it also contributes harmoniously to such a whole.

7. How to get the most out of others. Getting the most out of life normally involves getting the most out of others (and out of groups and institutions). Persons vary in social abilities, ranging from having a single contact-person to world-wide reputation exploitation. To increase enlightenment about the number and kinds of social interests a person may have and how to maximize values obtainable through these interests is a primary obligation of each wisely self-interested person. Yet, persons often neglect to benefit from some well-known and easily demonstrable principles.

The most obvious and important of these is the principle of reciprocity. It is an omnipresent condition of association, both throughout life and in all areas of interests, including esteem, companionship, love, production of goods, security and adventure. Persons tend to treat each other as they are treated by others. The principle operates variably because persons and circumstances differ in many respects; but studies of kinds of variations yield additional principles that self-interested persons can utilize beneficially. The fact that selfishness prevents maximizing self-interested values has been demonstrated again and again, not merely in historical literature but also in the life of each person. It operates negatively as well as positively. Despise me, and I will despise you, at least for despising me. Admire me, and I will admire you, at least for admiring me. Reasons for exceptions are discoverable; and reasons for unexpected benefits can be demonstrated. Although discovery of how the principle works indirectly, through group memberships and group interactions, in megalopolitan and global society, may be too difficult for many persons, development of ethics as a science interdependent with all other science can provide more of a kind of enlightenment needed increasingly as life becomes more intricately complex.

Why act wrongly? If acts are right because intended to produce the best results for one's self in the long run, why does a person ever feel that he has acted wrongly, or that he has not done as he ought? There are two general kinds of reasons:

1. He lacks enlightenment. He does not have all needed facts. He does not foresee all of the consequences. He does not fully understand all of his interests at stake when forced to choose.

2. He lacks clear awareness. Even when one has learned about his interests, he may at times become incapable of thinking clearly about them. This lack of clarity operates both negatively and positively.

a. Negatively, illness, fatigue, drugs, distractions, emotions

such as love, fear, hatred, anger or depression, for example, may diminish a person's ability to be conscious of his longer range best interests. If he is sufficiently disabled, he may become incapable of even caring about them.

b. Positively, and often more subtly, persons tend to want more than they can have. Enlightenment about this problem by Gotama, The Buddha, made his name perhaps the most famous in history: "Desire for what will not be attained ends in frustration. To avoid frustration, avoid desiring what will not be attained". Unfortunately, every person desires more, at least just a little more, than he will attain. Hence, the "First Noble Truth": "everyone suffers". Other explanations (Greek: "hubris"; Hebraic, "sin"; Taoistic, "lacking Tah") abound. But a tendency in human nature to overdesire and overdo causes persons to suffer. This almost constant tendency to wrongdoing can to some extent, be controlled. But, with subtle dialectic this same tendency then induces suffering in each controller whenever he attempts to control it too much.

Although these two reasons for wrongdoing, lack of enlightenment and lack of clear awareness, often interdepend and reinforce each other, most persons are able to "learn from experience" in ways that reduce their tendencies toward wrongdoing. Growth in knowledge of the sciences should enable more persons to become more enlightened. And increasing establishment of ethics as a science should enable more persons to achieve a more sensitive as well as more thorough understanding of how to maximize values.

I have proposed an enlightened self-interest theory. I also advocate a wise self-interested theory. No person is wise until he is happy. One may be enlightened, or understand, without being able to use his understanding effectively in his choosing and acting. Only when one willingly chooses and acts according to his enlightened self-interests, including his interest in wanting neither more nor less than he is going to get, does he act both wisely and rightly.