Different Considerations for Evaluating Actions

by John Lumsden
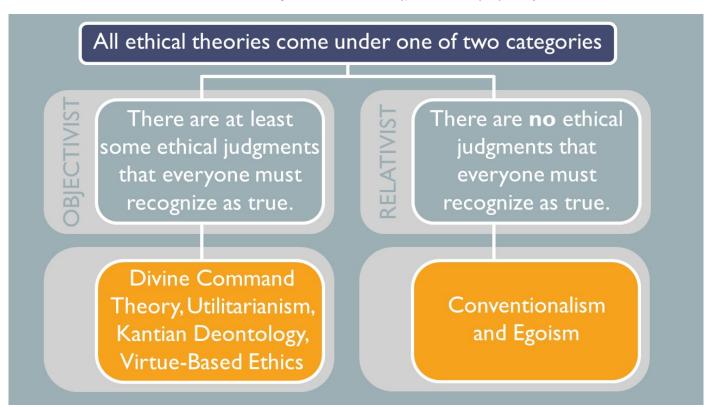
WHAT'S COVERED
In this tutorial we will be reviewing different ethical theories, before looking at the way we can characterize these theories in terms of their different objects of moral judgment. Our discussion will break down like this: **1. Overview of Ethical Theories** **2. Basis for Ethical Valuation** **3. Identifying Different Considerations**

1. Overview of Ethical Theories

There are six ethical theories that we will discuss. First of all, let's organize them in terms of what type of ethical theory they are, objectivist or relativist.

Conventionalism and egoism are relativist because they hold that right and wrong aren't the same for all people. Conventionalism says right and wrong are relative to society, convention, or culture; whereas egoism says they are relative to the individual's own interests.

Divine command theory is objectivist because the moral standards freely commanded by God should apply to all people. Utilitarianism also thinks there are objective moral standards to be obeyed by everyone, but it's based in the utility principle. That is, in the principle that the more utility or benefit to humans an action brings, the better it is.

Kantian deontology evaluates the intent of an agent, not the outcome of actions. On this account everyone should make their intentions fit with a universal law, which Kant called the categorical imperative. Finally, virtue-based ethics evaluates actions in terms of how they manifest or inform the agent's character. According to this theory, all people must try to cultivate the right character traits (virtues) and avoid the wrong ones (vices).

2. Basis for Ethical Valuation

All ethical theories can be grouped under three larger positions, which are primarily distinguished by what they see as the most relevant thing to evaluate. This is detailed in the definitions of these positions below.

- **Consequentialism**: The position that consequences are the basis for ethical valuation
- **Deontology**: The position that something intrinsic to the action itself is the basis for ethical valuation
- **Character Ethics**: The position that the character trait being manifested in the action is the basis for ethical valuation

Let's see where various ethical theories lie in relation to these three groups.

Consequentialism	Utilitarianism belongs in this group because moral value is based on the outcome or consequences of the action.
Deontology	Kantian deontology belongs in this group because moral value is based on the action itself, no matter what the outcome.
Character Ethics	Virtue-based ethics belongs in this group because moral value is based on the character that motivates an action.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Consequentialism

The position that consequences are the basis for ethical valuation.

Deontology

The position that something intrinsic to the action itself is the basis for ethical valuation.

Character Ethics

The position that the character trait being manifested in the action is the basis for ethical valuation.

3. Identifying Different Considerations

Depending on which of these positions you take up, your moral judgments will vary. For instance, imagine a friend wants company when going to the cinema. They know you don't like watching films with subtitles, so they lie in order to get you there. In the end you're glad you went because you really enjoyed it.

Here's how your friend would be evaluated:

1. Consequentialism: Since the outcome was good overall, what your friend did would be evaluated as good.
2. Deontology: Assuming that lying is a bad action, your friend would be evaluated as bad.
3. Character ethics: Your friend's action could be said to manifest selfishness since their action showed them to be concerned with their own needs before those of others.

Now let's consider some common ethical judgments and see which group they come under.

Common Ethical Judgements	
1	Giving to charity is good because its outcome is good (consequentialism).
2	Making polite conversation is good because it manifests the virtue of friendliness (character ethics).
3	Torture is intrinsically wrong because all humans have the right not to be tortured (deontology).
4	Always showing off your achievements is bad because it manifests the vice of boastfulness (character ethics).

📋 SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with an **overview of ethical theories**, seeing which ones were objectivist and which relativist. Then, three ways to group ethical theories were presented, specifying the **basis for ethical valuation** in each. Finally, we had a go at **identifying different considerations** by looking at various examples of common ethical judgments and seeing how they fit one of the groups of ethical positions.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Character Ethics

The position that the character trait being manifested in the action is the basis for ethical valuation.

Consequentialism

The position that consequences are the basis for ethical valuation.

Deontology

The position that something intrinsic to the action itself is the basis for ethical valuation.