Briefing paper: Patterns of moral thought

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Appendix 16
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Patterns of moral thought

There are many ways in which we can think about ethics and about the ethical requirements on our own actions and decisions. Moral philosophy is dominated by three thought patterns, each of which has been distilled into a type of moral theory. Moral philosophers disagree about which of these is the correct moral theory. Interestingly enough, each of these thought patterns is much used in everyday discussions on moral matters, where we tend to mix them freely.

Utilitarianism

The first metaphor is that of weighing, as represented by the balance. Whenever there are several actions that one can choose between, it would seem sensible to specify the advantages and disadvantages associated with each of the alternatives, and then choose the alternative that has the largest net advantage (sum of advantages minus sum of disadvantages). In moral philosophy, this way of thinking is associated with utilitarianism. According to utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-
1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), morality requires that we choose the actions that maximize utility. Classically, utility was defined as the total amount of happiness produced by an action, minus the total amount of unhappiness that it produces. In modern moral philosophy other definitions of utility have been used, such as the total amount of preference satisfaction. However, the thought pattern is the same. Utilitarians want us to choose between actions by weighing their positive and negative effects against each other.

It is important to note that according to utilitarianism, it is the existence of utility that matters, not its distribution. If a certain amount of new happiness is created, then according to classical utilitarianism it makes no moral difference who receives it.

**Duty ethics**
The second metaphor is that of a *limit*, represented in the figure by a fence. When we teach children ethical behaviour, we tell them that there are certain limits to what they may do. “You may tell you sister that you are angry with her, but you may not beat her.” Moral philosophers have developed this mode of thinking into *deontological ethics*, also called duty ethics. The most famous deontologist was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who emphasized the strictness of moral limits. According to Kant, it is morally wrong to lie, and this applies even in cases when telling the truth can cause great harm. Other philosophers, most notably WD Ross (1877-1971), have developed less absolute variants of deontology, in which it is possible for a duty to be outweighed by other moral considerations. A closely related group of moral theories are *rights-based ethics*, in which the limits to our actions are constituted by the rights of other people.

**Virtue ethics**
The third metaphor is that of *orientation*, as represented here by the compass. Being ethical means more than being able to follow precepts of weighing or staying within given limits. An ethical person should have an inner sense of moral orientation. This means to be a virtuous person. *Virtue ethics*, the oldest well-developed form of ethical theory, focuses on the personality traits that one needs to develop in order to have a
sound moral orientation. Aristotle’s (384-322 BC) formulation of virtue ethics is still the most influential one. Virtue ethics had a decline in the twentieth century, but it has recently been revitalized, both in general moral philosophy and in some applied areas, notably nursing ethics. Virtue ethics has often been criticized for not telling us how to act. On the other hand, the other moral theories have much less than virtue ethics to say about what type of moral orientation one should have in one’s life.