

Chapter 2

Now that we've cleared away some of the preliminary debris, it's time to get to the heart of the matter.

I explained above that ethics' main task is evaluating actions. But what do we evaluate them in terms of? What is characteristic of an ethical evaluation? How do we know we have an ethical problem on our hands? How do we separate right from wrong? What makes one action better, or at least less bad, than another?

I've learned from years of teaching that people have a much easier time talking about wrong than right, so let's start this chapter by seeing how most people define wrong.

If you ask an average group of individuals to explain what they believe makes an action morally wrong, you'd probably get something like the following statements:

- 1) "Something is wrong if it goes against my deepest personal beliefs."
- 2) "Something is wrong if it hurts somebody."
- 3) "Something is wrong if it makes me feel guilty."
- 4) "Something is wrong if it interferes with other people's lives."
- 5) "Something is wrong if it breaks the laws or traditions of my society."
- 6) "Something is wrong if it causes physical or emotional harm to someone."
- 7) "Something is wrong if it violates someone's rights."

This is a common sense list most of us would agree with. And it gives us a good place to start, because these seven different definitions can be lumped into three groups. (In fact, I've found that almost any explanation someone gives you about how he or she determines what's "wrong" will fall into one of these three groups.)

One of the most common ways that people define "wrong" is in terms of the consequences or results of actions. Definitions 2 (hurting somebody) and 6 (causing physical or emotional harm) explicitly mention hurting or harming other people. Most ordinary, decent people think that there's something not quite right with an action that produces pain, distress or anguish in someone else. We may believe that in some circumstances it's o.k. to hurt people (as in war or in protecting ourselves against attack). But most of us see that as the exception rather than the rule. We mainly disapprove of actions that make others feel pain.

Another common way that people explain "wrong" is what we see in definitions 4 (interfering with other people's lives) and 7 (violating someone's rights). Sometimes you'll hear this put in terms of "forcing people to live under certain restrictions against their will," "controlling" or "manipulating" them or treating others with "disrespect." But it all amounts to the same thing. What these definitions have in common is that they say that "wrong" actions don't treat people the way human beings should be treated. These definitions assume that people have "rights" or deserve to be in control of their own lives and that there's something amiss about actions that don't recognize that. What people are objecting to here, then, isn't the consequences of an action as much as something about the action itself. They're saying, "This isn't the kind of action that should take place among fellow humans, no matter what comes from it."

That leaves us with definitions 1 (conflicting with personal beliefs), 3 (feeling guilty), and 5 (violating a society's laws or norms). Now in the last chapter I explained how feelings and laws aren't really within the province of philosophical ethics. But the fact is that people frequently refer to both of these things in explaining why something is wrong. And there's good reason why they do. For in these three definitions we find "wrong" being defined as anything that violates an ultimate standard. The first two definitions refer to an internal, personal guideline--what people sometimes refer to as "conscience" or "personal values." Definition 1 identifies the beliefs themselves; 3 refers to the disappointment most of us feel with ourselves when we go against our own deeply held convictions. The other definition appeals to external norms. But what they share is direct reference to some standard.

An average person, then, would probably give you any or all of these three ideas in explaining what makes something morally wrong: harmful consequences, inappropriate actions and behavior that falls short of some important standard.

Actually, in these three ideas we have the basic concepts that we're going to explore in this guide. Because when we do philosophical ethics all that we do is to apply a special standard to actions and/or the consequences that result from the actions.

The idea of a standard, however, is obviously the most important of the three because that's what we'll have to measure the actions and consequences by. This standard lets us decide which consequences are harmful, and which actions are inappropriate. So if we want to get anywhere in understanding ethics, we have to develop a clear idea of such a basic standard.

Although the third group of definitions from above implicitly rely on the idea of a standard, they don't really give us much help in discovering a useful "moral yardstick." "Personal beliefs" are as variable as individuals themselves. "Guilt" plagues some people about virtually everything they do; others seem immune to anything remotely resembling remorse. And "laws" and "norms" vary enormously between societies and they even change within societies.

If we turn to the first two sets of definitions, however, we find quite a bit to work with. After all, people who define "wrong" in terms of harm or pain are referring to something pretty tangible, and the actions that the second group of people rule out are relatively specific--violating someone's rights, manipulating them, and so on. And if we generalize what both groups think, we can say that when they were asked what makes something morally wrong, they said, "Whatever produces human unhappiness." And the reason they gave us two different explanations is that there are basically two ways that people's lives can be made worse--subjecting them to certain physical conditions (pain) and merely treating them in certain ways (denying them their rights). The other side of the coin, then, is that if something is morally right, it must make people happy or their lives better.

This common sense attitude connecting right and wrong with happiness and unhappiness is virtually identical with the conclusions of the great philosophers who have thought and written about ethics. For despite the heated debate and controversy that accompany ethical dilemmas, the ultimate aim of philosophical ethics turns out to be quite simple: to evaluate how much actions will increase or decrease human happiness, human good or human well-being. To the extent that an action retards, prevents or minimizes human good, we say that it's morally unjustifiable, morally wrong (or at least morally worse than another action). On the other hand, if an action advances, is conducive to or maximizes happiness, we say it's morally right, morally justifiable (or at least morally better than something else).

The most basic standard used in a philosophical approach to ethics, then, is nothing more sophisticated, mysterious or complicated than human good. Philosophical ethics doesn't judge right and wrong in terms of sacred texts, divine will, subjective beliefs, personal feelings, the word of some authority, laws or the traditions in a particular culture. Instead it uses a standard that aims to be objective, neutral, rational, public and secular--whether good or harm is experienced by the people involved and whether individuals are being treated the way they're entitled to.

There's much to be said for using this kind of a standard for trying to resolve disagreements about ethical issues. It is free of the problems that plague totally personal, emotional standards that can be neither explained nor defended. If we disagree about whether homosexuality is right or wrong, it's pointless for us to trade statements about how we each feel. But it would certainly be productive for us to discuss whether homosexuality produces more human good or harm. In the same way, we can use this standard in discussions with people with completely opposite religious beliefs or with no religious beliefs at all. If a Fundamentalist and an atheist disagree about the morality of divorce, they'll obviously get nowhere talking about "God's law." But they can engage in productive dialogue if they focus on whether or not divorce produces more happiness than unhappiness in the lives of the people involved and whether or not it's ever right for spouses to break their marriage vows and promises to each other.

Appraising in a rational and secular manner whether or not actions or policies foster human happiness has been the goal of ethics since its beginnings two thousand years ago in the dusty streets of Athens. There's been no debate about what ethics aims at. If human happiness or human well-being is at stake, we've got a moral or ethical issue. That's all it takes. That part's been easy.

The hard part's been in defining human happiness or human well-being and getting people to agree on it. Nonetheless, I said this was only "hard," not "impossible." So in this chapter we're going to try to develop a common sense idea of human happiness that most people will agree to. Then on the basis of that we can fashion what we might call a kind of rough "ethical yardstick"--a standard we can use to see how actions measure up.

Happiness is one of my least favorite terms in ethics. The main problem is that it's so misleading to the modern ear. When you talk about "happiness," people seem to think you mean something emotional. As when I say, "I'm so happy to see you!" or "I'm so happy I got that job!" In these cases we're talking about gladness or joy--two reputable emotions, but not what we have in mind in ethics.

I much prefer terms like human good, human well-being, human satisfaction or human fulfillment. Even though it's so much longer, a state of full human development seems better to me than happiness. Any of these terms conveys better what we're talking about because "fulfillment," "satisfaction" and "well-being" at least suggest quieter and richer states than "happiness." They also bring to mind more things that can go into making us feel that way. So what we're talking about isn't some passing emotional state when you feel really "up" or "high." It's a more general sense of completeness or contentment with life. Our basic needs are met; we feel relatively safe and secure; our life is free of serious turmoil and anguish. We may not be experiencing any great emotional highs and our life may not be filled with great pleasure, but we have a general sense that life is fundamentally o.k. and free of pain.

Yet the key to this notion is the word human. When philosophers refer to "human happiness or well-being" we mean a general state of satisfaction or fulfillment with life that is uniquely human. We assume that human beings are special creatures, different from any other on earth and that they can enjoy in a unique way the pleasures of being human.

Take freedom, for example. If I turned my friend's Golden Retriever loose saying, "I hereby release you from bondage! Be free! Enjoy your liberty!", I wouldn't make her life any better. In fact, I might make it worse because now she'd have a harder time finding food and protection. If I liberated a human being, however, I'd improve his life by quantum leaps. People need and enjoy the ability to run their own lives in a way that dogs, cats, squirrels or gerbils don't. We enjoy it in a way denied to any other species. We may be able to domesticate cats, but the instinct for liberty is so strong in humans that we'll never successfully domesticate one another. So human happiness, human well-being or human good refers to a state of affairs brought about by our distinctly human needs being met.

This way of looking at things presupposes that because we're all human, there's a basic set of things that we all need in order to be satisfied in life just because we're human. Happiness, satisfaction, well-being or fulfillment is the state of general contentment we'd be in if we had all of those basic things that we really need because we're human.

So what is it that we all need in order to have that sense of contentment? The most obvious needs are things like food, shelter, protection and physical health. But there are many more. One of the best descriptions of all of them, however, is a document adopted by the United Nations called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (For the complete document see Figure 1.)

This document refers to "rights" but it may as well say "needs." The theory it's based on maintains that we have a "right" to something if we "need" it in a special, fundamental way. The document's thirty articles aim to tick off the most basic and important things that all of us as humans need in order to experience a satisfying, contented human life. Or, to put it another way, the more of these things we're deprived of, the less our chances of being fully satisfied with our lives.

There's nothing especially novel or fancy about this list of "rights" or "needs." The document is very detailed and broken down into a preamble and thirty articles, but in essence it lists only very basic things: life itself, freedom, equality, personal security, protection by a just legal system, political rights, a private life, the ability to choose marriage and family, freedom of thought and action, access to the benefits of a society (government, culture, education, protection against illness), work and rest.

The most basic point to understand about this document is that it claims to describe the needs of "all peoples and all nations." It assumes that the conditions it describes are as objectively necessary for human happiness as the conditions needed for human health.

For example, let's look at Article 3, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person." Imagine what it would be like if your "life, liberty, and security of person" were constantly at risk. You'd always fear being killed, enslaved or attacked. You couldn't trust anyone because you wouldn't know who was a friend and who a foe. Your life would be filled with worry and dread, and you'd probably be plotting against the people you thought were most dangerous to you. Such a way of life is hardly appealing.

Now because humans are so adaptable, in one way or another most of us could adjust to such a way of life. But could you imagine any normal person actually feeling good about life under these conditions? Could you imagine any normal individual even feeling calm and untroubled--never mind feeling good? Human beings--no matter what the traditions or norms of their culture--just don't experience deep fear about losing their lives or liberty as satisfying. If you injected such fear into the average day of an ordinary person, in one stroke you'd dramatically diminish the amount he enjoyed life.

Or consider the first part of Article 26, "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit." This provision asserts that everyone has a right to education because human beings need education in order to live a decent life. How satisfying do you think you or anyone else would find life if you were barred from learning how to read and write or prohibited from developing any but the simplest skills? You would feel unfulfilled, frustrated and bored. Your life would be devastatingly empty, void of any significant challenges. Or it would be a torment in which your lack of knowledge and skills would condemn you to fail at virtually anything you tried to do. It certainly wouldn't be very pleasant.

And again, no matter what part of the world people live in, no matter what the traditions of their culture, no ordinary human being is going to experience anything but frustration and dissatisfaction at being deprived of the opportunity to develop his or her abilities.

It's also important to notice that despite how many specific conditions are listed throughout the thirty articles, we can lump them into two categories. First, many of the articles refer to specific material or physical conditions. The Declaration says humans need things like: life, liberty, security of person, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, a certain standard of living, work, education, and rest. It also identifies material conditions that men and women need protection against: slavery, torture, interference with their private lives, and the like. Obviously, the first set makes our lives more pleasant, the second more painful.

But the articles also talk about acceptable and unacceptable procedures or ways of treating people. We're told we have rights to: equality before the law, fairness, a presumption of innocence, impartial tribunals, marriages based only on consent, and equal pay for equal work. And we're entitled to be protected against: discrimination, arbitrary arrest, being accused of an offense that wasn't a crime when we did it, arbitrarily being deprived of our property, and so on. These articles don't care about the consequences of such actions; it wouldn't make any difference that good results could come from some of these things. (After all, some people believe you end up with less crime in a society if you presume that someone charged with a crime is guilty and put the burden on him to establish his innocence.) What's at stake here are principles--equality, justice, fairness, respect for individual liberty--which are supposed to guide our actions independent of the likely outcome. The Declaration assumes that no amount of good could offset the harm produced by breaking these principles because some actions are just intrinsically wrong. That is, this way of thinking sees actions that are unfair, arbitrary, discriminatory, biased, or unjust as simply in and of themselves unacceptable and inconsistent with human happiness or well-being.

When you look over this document you may find that you don't totally agree with it. Perhaps you think people could be perfectly happy without some of these things. Or maybe there are some needs you'd like added. But the idea to focus on isn't so much the Declaration's details as the assumption it's built on--that we can describe both the material conditions and rules or principles of human behavior that would have to be met in order for any normal man or woman to live a satisfying life.

You'll remember, however, that the point of this discussion about human needs or rights is to try to develop and illustrate a basic standard of morality. So when we say in philosophical ethics that the things that encourage human good are morally better than the things that retard it, we can think of something like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (or any statement of the necessary conditions for human happiness) as a kind of "ethical yardstick." Actions or policies that "measure up," that is, that let

people enjoy the conditions listed or treat them with appropriate respect, are "right" or "morally superior" because they increase human happiness or are consistent with human well-being. Actions that "fall short," that is, that keep people from having these basic needs met or simply treat them inappropriately, are "wrong" or "morally inferior" because they make people's lives less satisfying.

Starting in the next chapter we'll see that philosophers debate about just how you measure human happiness, and we'll look at a couple of variations on the "ethical yardstick." But even in the midst of some pretty serious disagreement about this, nobody abandons either the basic idea that you can specify the conditions that people need in order to be satisfied or the fundamental notion that these are the things you look at in determining the moral character of actions.

I know from experience that some of you aren't buying this. "Different people need different things to be happy," I can hear you saying. "Individuals go after what they decide will make them happy or they just follow the dictates of their culture," you add. "Just look around. People and cultures are different. You can't say everybody needs the same things to be happy."

There's an element of truth here, but not enough to overthrow this whole theory. Obviously, different men and women value different things. Some seek money, success or power; others prefer fame to wealth. Some dedicate themselves to a cause; others place their families at the center of their lives. Similarly, western Europe and the United States enjoy fairly open attitudes towards sex while kissing in public is scandalous in China. Some societies recognize the equality between the sexes, while others are rigidly chauvinistic. But all that this shows is that different individuals and cultures are trying different ways to reach the same end--human good or happiness.

Some variety in what people seek is to be expected. After all, one of the most basic things that humans need is freedom--the ability to choose how we're going to live as individuals. However, variety alone doesn't prove that every option that people are trying is just as good as every other one. It's possible that the diversity means that lots of people are really off track. In other words, just because people want something and believe it will make them happy doesn't mean that it will.

Let's approach this matter this way. Think of your body and then the bodies of people around you. Despite the individual differences, all human bodies are roughly similar. They're biological engines. In order to run, they need to take in various substances: protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals and the like. Every body should also get exercise. When everything is working right, your body is operating the way it's supposed to--a condition we call health. Health is the proper condition of a human body. Bodies that fall short of this standard are at best "out of shape" or "weak"; at worst they're diseased or ill.

Medical science can describe health and disease in remarkable detail independently of our opinion on the matter. To take a simple example, we know the range of a normal heart beat (60 to 100 beats per minute) and that a blood pressure reading of 120 over 70 is optimum. If I consistently run a reading of 180 over 110, however, I'll be diagnosed as hypertensive and treated for the disease. I may feel fine and think I'm healthy, but I'd be mistaken. My body has the final word on the matter. No matter what I believe or want to tell myself, a sedentary life and high cholesterol intake will gradually produce obstructions in my circulatory system. My body is diseased and I'm on my way to a heart attack unless I mend my ways. Still, the choice is mine.

The same thing applies to smoking. No matter what any individual smoker believes, smoking cigarettes does not help the body's health. Even if years of smoking don't bring on lung cancer, there's a good chance they'll lead to

respiratory or circulatory ailments. This is simply the result of the interaction between human tissue and cigarette smoke. The opinion of the smoker is totally irrelevant to the outcome.

However, if you're a smoker, you probably feel that the short-term pleasures of smoking outweigh the long-term risks. And that's why you choose to continue smoking. We all have the power to act against our own long-term interests. And most of us do so about one thing or another (whether it be alcohol, drugs, or just a really poor diet) believing we have good reason to act as we do. Nonetheless, whatever we believe isn't going to change the fact that what we're doing--in a clear cut and objective way--is ultimately not going to help our bodies. We may feel better for now, but we won't be better in the end.

Or take this example.J*K Imagine that a hitherto unknown village is discovered high in the Andes, that the people agree to be examined by physicians from the United Nations, and that we're all part of the group. We stay with these people for a month observing their way of life and doing scores of sophisticated medical tests on them. Let's say we discover that these people are living under the worst possible conditions. Their land produces very poor crops; their water supply is filled with disease producing micro-organisms; they have a terrible diet; they suffer from chronic malnutrition and anemia; their condition has weakened their bones and muscles; their brains may also be affected; and most of them die by age 50. In short, they are all unhealthy.

J*KI owe this example to Professor Robert Paul Wolff.

Imagine that we then report our findings to their council of elders hoping to encourage them to move to a better location. How do you think they'd react to the news that they're all sick? At first they probably won't believe us. They may accept that some of their people are sick or weak, but not all of them. Also, they're the council of elders. By definition they've lived long lives (although by our count not a one is over 45). Furthermore and most importantly, they tell us about a village that's higher in the mountains and faced with even worse conditions. In relation to the people of this other village, they consider themselves strong, robust and long-lived.

Now it's possible that we might ultimately be able to convince them of our findings, but that really doesn't matter for the point of our discussion. What's important is that these people have developed a conception of health from their own experiences and most likely will strongly resist the idea that their entire society is ill. Nonetheless, despite what they believe, in fact they are unhealthy in terms of what we know is a standard definition of human health in the late twentieth century.

Although we can't draw a precise parallel between physical health and human happiness, the parallel is close enough to entertain seriously. That is, in the same way that every body needs pretty much the same things to be healthy (that's just the way the human body is made), every human being seems to need roughly the same things in order to have a basic sense of contentment or satisfaction with life. That's just the way the human being in general is designed. It enjoys certain things; it's pained by other conditions. Whether or not someone believes that people need freedom of opinion is as immaterial as whether or not she believes that her diet is far too rich in salt. Too much salt will eventually make her less healthy. Anyone being denied freedom of opinion is being deprived of something that would make their lives more satisfying. What we need to be happy is determined by the fabric out of which we're all made.

The hard nosed skeptics among you are no doubt still hanging tough. Reaching for what you consider to be one of your best arguments, you're probably thinking something like, "What about the fact that cultures differ so much and that humans can adapt so readily to different conditions. What about slavery? Lots of slave-owners treated their slaves well. Surely many of them

must have been happy. Or look at the people today who can't make a decision and are happiest when someone else tells them what to do. Liberty or being in control of their own lives only makes them unhappy."

Well, it's true that humans are marvelously adaptable and that some slave owners were decent to their slaves. Nonetheless, the fact that people can get used to servitude doesn't mean that the satisfactions of their life are as great as that of a life of freedom. There may be benefits which partially compensate for the loss of freedom--not having to worry about providing for yourself, having a kind of guaranteed employment--but they can never be as great as the loss of liberty. And the fact that people can adapt to all sorts of circumstances doesn't change the fact that some circumstances are simply not consistent with the idea of full human development.

We can offer a variation on this argument for the example of someone who seems happiest when someone else is making his decisions for him. He may feel content inside, but he's not experiencing the deeper satisfactions that would be his if he ran his own life. The dependent person is living like a child; some part of him is immature, undeveloped. His happiness is like a child's, not an adult's. It's the type of satisfaction characteristic of a less fully developed human being. And the satisfactions of a less mature person are not as great as those of someone who's fully matured. Given your choice, would you rather be a happy, but dependent child or a slightly disgruntled, but competent adult?

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It's possible that some of you are still unpersuaded and believe that we can't make any kind of general statement about what all people need to be happy. But hardly anyone really believes this, and I'll prove it to you.

Let's go back to the example of the village in the Andes. Let's say that the villagers refuse to move. What would you think about forcing them to--picking them up bodily and transporting them against their will to another location?

There's hardly anyone who would approve of this. As long as the villagers are aware of the situation, most of us would think it would be wrong to force our will on them. Why? Because most people, especially the hard nosed skeptics, believe that we should respect their right to decide how they want to live their own lives. That is, most people believe that--if nothing else--all human beings need the ability to decide their own fates in order to be satisfied with their lives. Almost everyone who says you can't generalize about this matter ultimately believes that people's individuality has to be protected. When it comes down to it, this is usually one of the most important reasons that they deny that everybody needs basically the same thing.

In the course of talking about how human good is a standard of right and wrong, we've also given ourselves a way of knowing when an issue is an ethical one. And it's pretty simple. Whenever human good is on the line, we've got an ethical issue. Whenever a situation involves what any of the conditions for human happiness or well-being, there's an ethical dimension to that situation. And human good is involved whenever it touches on the basic needs (or rights) I've been talking about in this chapter.

This means, then, that there are roughly two ways we can find ourselves with an ethical issue on our hands. Either it involves fulfilling our material needs (some actual good or harm) or it relates to how we're being treated. Stealing the rent money from a senior citizen has more than just a legal dimension. The fact that this money's needed to provide this individual with shelter makes it an ethical issue. Tricking a friend into doing something he doesn't want to do is an ethical issue because we generally take personal freedom and control over our actions to be a basic need. If a case

involves actual material good or harm or a question of the appropriateness of how people are being treated, it has an ethical dimension.

Understanding what an "ethical yardstick" looks like, then, gives us a way of recognizing ethical problems and evaluating how ethically appropriate particular actions or policies are.

So in this chapter, we've looked at some of the basic ideas that undergird a philosophical approach to ethics:

--one of the most basic concepts involved in distinguishing right from wrong is a standard used to evaluate the consequences of actions or the actions themselves;

--this basic standard is usually taken to be human happiness, satisfaction or well-being;

--thus, the most fundamental understanding of morally wrong is preventing or restricting human happiness, while morally right is advancing or maximizing human happiness;

--this approach assumes that we can specify the conditions needed for "a generally satisfying human life" in the same way we can detail the criteria for "physical health"; that is, that the ultimate criteria for human happiness are objective and universal;

--in identifying the criteria for human happiness we arrive at the same time with a list of the most basic human needs and rights (we have a right to something because we need it to live a basically satisfying human life); such a list, then, is one of the most basic ethical standards we can use;

--we have an ethical issue, then, when any of these needs (material conditions for human happiness or the need to be treated in a certain way) is on the line.

1. What's your reaction to the idea that right and wrong can be defined entirely in terms of human good and human needs without any reference to laws, emotions or religion?
2. What do you think of the general idea that all humans need roughly the same things to live happily?
3. What's your reaction to the United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights"? Do you think it's an accurate description of the needs of "all members of the human family"? Does it contain anything that you think humans can easily live without? Does it miss anything?
4. Article 23 (2) says, "Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work." Does that mean that before the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which put the notion of "equal pay for equal work" into U. S. law, American companies who paid men and women different salaries for the same job were doing something unethical, although it was legal?
5. Explain why each of the following is an ethical issue. In precisely what way does each involve human good?

a. You find a wallet on the street. It contains \$1000 in cash and you can tell that this is the wallet of a wealthy man. You return the wallet, but keep the cash thinking that losing the money won't hurt this man a bit (and you're probably right).

b. You agree to buy alcohol for a fellow student who's underage in your state. You know that this person will get drunk and may drive while drunk.

c. You're living away at college, but you have a boyfriend/girlfriend back home. You've agreed not to date other people, but you start seeing someone on campus. You don't say anything about breaking your word because you figure that what your sweetheart at home doesn't know won't hurt him/her.