

Chapter Five: Ends and Means

1. *Two ways to honour a value*

Suppose you value honesty. There are two different ways you might honour honesty in your behaviour. One way is to be honest. The other is to promote honesty.

Often enough, of course, expressing a value in your behaviour serves also to promote that value. Your being honest in a tough spot can inspire others to be honest. As well, the most efficient way to promote a value can be to express it in your action. You want to promote honesty and being honest in a tough spot happens to be an effective way of inspiring others to be honest.

But the two—expressing and promoting—can come apart. Your being honest in a tough spot can turn others away from honesty, as they fear they will be punished just as you were. As well, parents often encourage truthfulness in their children by telling them falsehoods such as that liars always get caught or that God knows whether they are telling the truth. Lying for honesty's sake is not impossible. In fact, it happens all the time.

We honour a value by expressing it when our behaviour embodies that value and we intend our behaviour to embody it. When we do the decent thing out of our commitment to decency our behaviour expresses our commitment to decency. When we act in favour of the general welfare meaning thereby to increase the general welfare, our behaviour expresses our commitment to the wellbeing of others.

We honour a value by promoting it when we do something we think will increase the number of times that value is expressed in people's behaviour or when we otherwise think what we do will bring the world more into line with that value. When we do something intending to get others to be decent or to make the world a more decent place, then we are honouring decency by promoting it.

Suppose you and your group are concerned about global warming and want to do what you can to slow it. You have a great idea for a video that you think will promote your cause and get governments to act. Your group lacks the resources to make this video in a carbon-neutral way. In fact, making and distributing your video will result in the release of an industry's worth of greenhouse gas emissions. To make and distribute your video your group will have to violate the practices and standards the video itself urges people and governments to follow and to support in all they do. Making the video, then, does not honour your concern to mitigate global warming by expressing that concern. Making it, though, might be an excellent way to promote taking action against global warming.

Sally, though, a member of your group, opposes making the video, for she would rather the group did nothing that didn't itself express its concern to slow global warming. Martin, another group member, advocates making the video, for he would rather the group pursued its mission in the most effective ways possible.

Are you with Sally or are you with Martin? Is one of them wrong? Sally, for instance, might be wrong to think the situation isn't desperate yet. Martin might be wrong to think that the group

can't afford to take small steps any more and still succeed in its goal. But must one of them be making a mistake in preferring to express a value over promoting it or in preferring to promote a value over expressing it? It's natural to say that Sally and Martin disagree, but maybe instead they just simply differ. Sally prefers that the group express its concern while Martin prefers that the group promote its concern, and that's that.

People who generally prefer expressing to promoting a value when they cannot do both are sometimes said by philosophers to take a deontological approach to value. People who generally prefer promoting to expressing a value when they cannot do both are, in this same terminology, consequentialists. Those of a deontological bent would rather be honest or fair or kind in their actions even if being honest, fair or kind won't result in more honesty, fairness or kindness in the world. Those of a consequentialist bent would rather be dishonest, unfair or unkind if being dishonest, unfair or unkind will make the world more a more honest, fair or kind place.

A person of a consequentialist bent who values the overall wellbeing of people (or animals) is, again in the terminology often used by people who discuss these issues, a utilitarian. A utilitarian is one who strongly prefers those actions that have the most utility in making the world a happier place, or a place in which more people (and other animals) are content or satisfied, or less pained or dissatisfied.

2. Utilitarianism

If your preference is for attaining ends over enjoying means, then you are a consequentialist. To prefer ends over means is to be inclined to take the most efficient or effective path to your goals whatever the features or properties of those means are. If your goal is, say, freedom for the multitudes or prosperity for your family or an increase in medical knowledge or in humanistic study, then you will choose the means by which to attempt to bring the world into line with your goal according only to whether it will secure that goal more efficiently or effectively than other means.

You will not, that is, care whether the means involves dishonesty, unfairness, fairness, or murder. Apart from their effectiveness, you will be indifferent to the character of the means on offer.

Of course, no one has just one end they wish to promote. We all have many ends. You will want, then, to find means to any particular goal you have that are consistent with your pursuing another of your goals. That is, you won't want to pursue one end at the expense of another. If you value both peace and justice, you won't want to pursue peace in a way that stifles justice. You will take into consideration your desire to promote justice when you select your means to peace. That a particular means to peace would make the world less just will count for you as a reason not to employ that means, even as you recognize it to be an effective means.

If your bent is consequentialist and a consequence (or end) that matters to you is the overall wellbeing of people, then you are a utilitarian. You will want that your society, or that societies everywhere, are organized so that the most happiness possible is experienced by the most people. The laws and rules and institutions you will prize are the ones that you think promote happiness best, given the natures and values of the people to whom they apply and the resources and prospects of those people.

For a utilitarian, a law or rule or a personal characteristic like honesty is to be promulgated because of its utility in bringing happiness to people. Laws that decrease the overall happiness are to be rejected and replaced while laws that lead to happiness are to be retained and followed.

3. *Deontology*

If you have a strong preference that your actions express certain values independently of the goals you mean to reach through them, then you lean toward deontology. Your goal this morning, let us say, is to get to school and to get there on time. But it matters to you that you get there elegantly and in style, and that's because elegance and style matter to you (and not as means to other ends). You constrain how you get to school by your desire to be elegant and stylish. If being elegant and stylish delays your trip or causes you or others discomfort, you are willing to pay that price. You won't run, for that would be vulgar. You might even be willing to give up your goal of getting to school if you cannot maintain a certain minimal level of elegance or style in your attempt to attain it.

Let's say your goal is the advancement of medical science. But you have a commitment to treat people with respect. Your goal might be one you have chosen on utilitarian grounds. That is, you seek the advancement of medical science because you believe that involving yourself in the advancement of medical science is the most efficient and effective way available to you to contribute to the overall happiness of people (and other animals). But because you are committed to treating people respectfully, some ways of advancing medical science are not ways you will follow, even if they are the most effective. Effective means toward medical knowledge that involve deception, for instance, manifest disrespect; because you constrain your search for medical knowledge to respectful means, you will not employ a disrespectful means, such as deception, no matter how effective those means might be.

Now, just as a consequentialist might find that he cannot pursue one of his goals without compromising his ability to serve another of his goals, a deontologist might find that two constraints on behaviour he values cannot both be honoured in the situation in which he finds himself. Sally wants neither to lie nor to violate a confidence but she finds that in the mess she's in, she must lie in order to maintain a confidence. If she maintains the confidence, she has lied, and if she doesn't lie, she breaks the confidence.

4. *Consequences or intrinsic properties?*

A pure utilitarian would be someone who always takes the effects of their actions into account when deciding what to do and always goes with what they think will best promote happiness or satisfaction overall. A pure deontologist would be someone who would never pursue an end the means to which would involve their lying or their dressing inelegantly (or whatever value they wish to honour by expressing in their actions).

I hazard that no one, or hardly anyone, is a pure utilitarian or a pure deontologist. Almost all of us are content or keen to constrain our pursuit of our ends by our appreciation of the intrinsic properties of our actions. So almost all of us have deontological leanings. Likewise, just about none of us will let justice be done though the heavens fall, as a pure deontologist would. Few if

any of us, that is, will insist on honesty or style (or whatever) if the consequences of doing so are bad enough. Even the most dedicatedly honest person we know would lie if lying will save a life.

Should we be more utilitarian than we are, though? Perhaps our deontological leanings are mere prejudices or habits that get in the way of this being a better—that is, happier—world. Should we be less utilitarian than we are? A fully utilitarian person could not be much of a friend, for friendship would be something a fully utilitarian person would enter into only if it promoted the general happiness.

Should we be more deontological than we are? Should we be less deontological than we are?

These questions make sense. They can be asked and answered, though perhaps only following much research on ourselves and lots of hard thought. They would have to be asked and answered from various perspectives, it would seem, and then the answers from the perspectives weighed against each other.

Individual people might ask these questions of themselves (and of individual other people). Could one ask them of people generally, though, and arrive at a sound answer? If people were more uniform in temperament and taste than they are, perhaps. Some say, though, that there is a correct answer to this general question. They hold that utilitarianism is the true theory of what actually matters or that a deontological theory is true. If we should conform ourselves to the true theory here, then all of us should either have utilitarian preferences or prefer to have overriding deontological commitments.

On the other hand, it might be false that the idea that a theory of what matters, of what is good or right, could be true.