What Is a Normative Ethical Theory?
Keith Burgess-Jackson
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A normative ethical theory is a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions for moral rightness.¹ It purports to tell us what it is that makes right acts right—and, by implication, what it is that makes wrong acts wrong. Let us use the theory of Act Utilitarianism (AU) as our example. An act utilitarian says that what makes an act right is that it maximizes utility. If an act maximizes utility, then it is right. If it does not maximize utility, then it is not right. Let us stipulate that “not right” means “wrong.” This allows us to say that if an act maximizes utility, then it is right; and if it does not maximize utility, then it is wrong.²

There are many ways to formulate or express a given normative ethical theory. Here are six formulations (continuing to use AU as our example):

1. For all acts x, x is right if and only if x maximizes utility.
2. $\forall x (Rx \iff Mx)$³
3. An act is right if and only if it maximizes utility.
4. All and only right acts are acts that maximize utility.
5. An act is right just in case it maximizes utility.
6. Rightness is necessary and sufficient for maximization of utility.

Each of these formulations is a conjunction of two others, which are called conjuncts:

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¹ There are other kinds of rightness besides moral rightness. We sometimes say, for example, that a particular act is legally right, in the sense of being permitted (i.e., not forbidden) by law. I omit the adjective “moral” in what follows. It is to be understood throughout the remainder of the course that the rightness or wrongness in question is moral in nature, rather than legal or some other kind.

² As this shows, a normative ethical theory is a sorting device. It sorts acts into two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories, namely, “right” and “wrong.” Different theories sort acts in different ways.

³ This is how formulation 1 is expressed in predicate logic—if we assume that the universe of discourse is acts rather than, say, objects generally. The letter “R” stands for the predicate “is right.” The letter “M” stands for the predicate “maximizes utility.” Since this is not a logic course, I will not hold you responsible for this formulation. I include it for the benefit of those students who have had a logic course.
To say that maximization of utility is sufficient for rightness is to say that the mere fact that an act maximizes utility is enough (i.e., all it takes) for the act to be right. Nothing else is necessary. To say that maximization of utility is necessary for rightness is to say that, without that property, an act is not right.

Since every normative ethical theory makes two claims (one of necessity and one of sufficiency), there are two ways for it to be false. If the claim of necessity is false, then the theory as a whole is false. If the claim of sufficiency is false, then the theory as a whole is false. Suppose I think up an act that seems (after due consideration) to be right but does not maximize utility. This counters the claim that maximization of utility is necessary for rightness. Suppose I think up an act that maximizes utility but seems (after due consideration) not to be right. This counters the claim that maximization of utility is sufficient for rightness. Either of these “counterexamples” (as they are called)† refutes AU.† In the following chart, rows 2 and 3 are counterexamples to AU, while rows 1 and 4 are confirming instances:

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<thead>
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<th>Acts</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
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† “A counterexample is an example that refutes a claim about some subject-matter. Switzerland is a counterexample to the claim that all countries with armed citizens are dangerous. Notice that it is not a counterexample to the claim that some [or even most] countries with armed citizens are dangerous. Much philosophy proceeds by finding counterexamples.” Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2d ed. rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81–2.

† See the Appendix. Since this is not a logic course, I will not hold you responsible for the proofs set out in the Appendix. I include them for the benefit of those students who have had a logic course.
You may have noticed that I used the word “seems.” I said that the act in question “seems (after due consideration) to be right” or “seems (after due consideration) not to be right.” It is always open to the proponent of a theory to disagree with these critical judgments. Suppose you are an act utilitarian. I, a critic of your theory, think up an act that seems to be right but does not maximize utility. You may disagree with me that the act in question is right. If so, then my attempt to refute your theory has failed. I may proceed to think up another act with the same features, but you are free to disagree again. What I must do, in order to get you to abandon your theory, is think up an act which you agree is right but does not maximize utility (or an act which you agree maximizes utility but is not right).

Here is a more mundane example. Suppose you assert, boldly, that all and only Texans are college graduates. You have made two claims: that all Texans are college graduates and that only Texans are college graduates. I can give a counterexample to the first claim by identifying a Texan who is not a college graduate. I can give a counterexample to the second claim by identifying a college graduate who is not a Texan. Suppose my first counterexample is someone (such as former president George W. Bush) who was not born in Texas but moved there as a young adult and has lived there for many years. You may resist my counterexample on the ground that the person in question is not (really) a Texan. If you do this, then, to convince you that your claim is false, I will have to come up with a different (better) counterexample. I will have to name someone who you agree is a Texan but not a college graduate. This process, known as refutation by counterexample, is widely used in philosophy. It will figure prominently in this course. For each normative ethical theory that we discuss (such as AU), we will try to come up with at least one counterexample.

As an exercise, think up a counterexample to each of the following claims:

1. All dogs are beagles.
2. All students are Democrats.
3. All students are college students.
4. All professors are males.
5. All males are professors.

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6 Compare the claims “All Ø are Ψ,” “Most Ø are Ψ,” and “Some Ø are Ψ.” The first claim is bolder than the second and the second bolder than the third. In general, the bolder the claim, the easier it is (in principle) to falsify it. If I claim that all Ø are Ψ, all one has to do to refute it is to come up with, or point to, one Ø that is not a Ψ. This would not refute either the second claim or the third claim. Normative ethical theories make bold claims. They say (1) that all right acts have a certain property and (2) that all acts that have that property are right. Each of these claims can be refuted with a single counterexample.
Explain why there is no counterexample to the following claims:

6. All beagles are dogs.
7. All college students are students.
8. All young dogs are puppies.
9. All moral philosophers are philosophers.
10. All professors are professors.

The propositional form “Only Ø are Ψ” is logically equivalent to the propositional form “All Ψ are Ø.” Thus,

- “Only animals are dogs” is logically equivalent to “All dogs are animals.” (Both are true.)
- “Only Texans who are at least 21 years of age are Texans who are permitted by law to consume alcohol” is logically equivalent to “All Texans who are permitted by law to consume alcohol are Texans who are at least 21 years of age.” (Both are true.)
- “Only professors are males” is logically equivalent to “All males are professors.” (Both are false.)
- “Only married people are happy people” is logically equivalent to “All happy people are married people.” (Both are false.)

As an exercise, think up a counterexample to each of the following claims:

11. Only beagles are dogs.
12. Only professors are males.
13. Only mammals are animals.
14. Only even numbers are numbers.
15. Only prime numbers are even numbers.

APPENDIX

Let the universe of discourse be acts. Let Act Utilitarianism (AU) be the thesis (theory) that all and only right acts are acts that maximize utility— symbolized as ‘(x)(Rx = Mx)’. Suppose there is an act—call it ‘a’—that is right but does not maximize utility. It follows that AU is false. Here is the proof:

1. Ra • ~Ma / ~(x) (Rx = Mx)
2. (Ra • ~Ma) ∨ (Ma • ~Ra) 1, Add
3. (∃x) [(Rx • ~Mx) ∨ (Mx • ~Rx)] 2, EG
Let the universe of discourse be acts. Let Act Utilitarianism (AU) be the thesis (theory) that all and only right acts are acts that maximize utility—symbolized as ‘(x)(Rx = Mx)’. Suppose there is an act—call it ‘a’—that maximizes utility but is not right. It follows that AU is false. Here is the proof:

1. Ma • ~Ra
2. (Ma • ~Ra) ∨ (Ra • ~Ma)
3. (∃x)[(Mx • ~Rx) ∨ (Rx • ~Mx)]
4. (∃x)[(~Mx • ~Rx) ∨ (Rx • ~Mx)]
5. (∃x)[(~Mx • ~Rx) ∨ (Rx • ~Mx)]
6. (∃x)[(Mx ⊃ Rx) ∨ (Rx • ~Mx)]
7. (∃x)[(~Mx ⊃ Rx) ∨ (~Rx • ~Mx)]
8. (∃x)[(~Mx ⊃ Rx) ∨ (~Rx ∨ Mx)]
9. (∃x)[(~Mx ⊃ Rx) ∨ (~Rx • Mx)]
10. (∃x)[(Mx ⊃ Rx) • (Rx ⊃ Mx)]
11. (∃x)[(Rx ⊃ Mx) • (Mx ⊃ Rx)]
12. (∃x)(Rx = Mx)