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Theory and Practice

The idea that some things are fine in theory, but do not work in practice, was already an “old saying” when Kant wrote about it in 1793. Kant, who was annoyed that a man named Garve had criticized his ethical theory on this ground, responded by pointing out that there is always a gap between theory and practice. Theory provides general rules but it cannot tell us how to apply them--for that, practical judgment is needed. “[T]he general rule,” said Kant, “must be supplemented by an act of judgement whereby the practitioner distinguishes instances where the rule applies from those where it does not.” This means that those who lack judgment might be helpless, even though they know a lot of theory. “There are doctors and lawyers,” Kant explains, “who did well during their schooling but who do not know how to act when asked to give advice.”

The point is especially important for the kind of absolutist ethic that Kant defends. Kant held that moral rules have no exceptions; on his way of thinking, we may never lie, we may never break a promise, and so on. This is a clear example of an ethic that seems not to work in practice, for sensible people recognize that in extreme circumstances even very serious rules may have to be broken.

But the “gap” that Kant identifies has often been exploited to soften the impact of such harsh precepts. Traditional Christian ethics, for example, says (like Kant) that suicide is always wrong; but because judgment is required to determine which acts count as suicide, casuists have been able to excuse various sorts of self-destruction (and, not coincidentally, avoid consigning the deceased to hellfire) by classifying them as something else. Thus the hero who sacrifices herself to save others is not a suicide, nor is the man who kills himself while blind with grief, as he lacks the required rational intention. It might be thought that such gaps could be closed by adding further principles to the theory--for example, principles that specify more closely what counts as suicide

and what does not. Similarly, one might make the rules against lying and promise-breaking more complicated by adding clauses to specify circumstances under which those actions would be permitted. But, as Kant observed, one could never add enough complications. Gaps will always remain.

Kant noticed one way that theory and practice come apart, but there are others. Many ethical ideals are endorsed even though they are unattainable. The Jains of India, for example, believe that one should never harm any living creature. Jain priests carry brooms to sweep the ground before them as they walk, to avoid crushing bugs beneath their feet. But for practical reasons ordinary Jains cannot do this, and they inevitably kill. Christians believe that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, although no one can actually manage such a stunning feat of benevolence.

What good is an ideal, one might ask, if it cannot be put into practice? Such ideals might be understood as goals toward which we should strive, even if we can never fully realize them. The fact that we cannot live up to the ideals might be taken as revealing morally unfortunate limitations in our circumstances or in ourselves. They also express moral reasons: the fact that a course of conduct would bring us closer to the ideal is a reason in its favor.

For general ethical theories such as utilitarianism, the gap between theory and practice poses an especially acute problem. Utilitarianism, perhaps the most influential ethical theory of the past 200 years, says that we should do whatever will have the best consequences for everyone affected by our actions, where everyone's welfare counts as equally important. This may sound nice in theory, but critics have pointed out that no one is willing to adopt such an ethic in practice. For one thing, none of us regards everyone's welfare as equally important. On the contrary, we naturally pay special attention to our own needs and to the needs of our friends and family. For another thing, the utilitarian ethic is too demanding--it would require that we use almost all of our resources to help others. We could not, for example, spend money on new clothes, concert tickets, automobiles and the like while third-world children do not have enough to eat.

Some utilitarian philosophers are unmoved by such complaints. They counter that if we are unwilling to live according to the utilitarian standard, that shows there is

something wrong with us, not with the standard. Others, such as R. M. Hare, take a more flexible approach. In theory, Hare says, the right thing to do is whatever maximizes utility. However, it would be ruinous if people went about calculating utility all the time. Therefore, it is not wise to ask people to guide their conduct by referring directly to the principle of utility. For practical purposes, people need simple, easy-to-apply rules of thumb. The question for utilitarian calculation, therefore, is: what simple rules would it be best to promulgate? Considering the circumstances of ordinary life and the facts of human nature, the best set of rules that has any chance of acceptance would be fairly close to the rules of moral common sense. Such rules would not only permit but would encourage people to be especially concerned for their family and friends; and they would demand charitable contributions only a little in excess of what normally generous people are willing to give. By this method of reasoning, the demands of utilitarian theory are brought closer to the practices of ordinary life.

If utilitarian seems to demand too much, other theories seem to demand too little. The leading alternative to Kant's view and utilitarianism is social contract theory, which sees moral demands as based upon agreements of mutual benefit. Each of us has much to gain from associating with other people, but if our interactions are to be profitable, certain rules must be followed--rules that require us to be truthful, to keep our bargains, not to harm one another, and so on. Morality arises when each of us agrees to follow these rules, on the condition that others do so as well.

Contract theory, however, implies that we have fewer duties than conscientious people generally acknowledge, and this is another way that theory and practice can come apart. How, on such a theory, could we have obligations to mere animals or to mentally impaired humans? After all, they are not able to participate in agreements of mutual benefit. To handle this problem, contract theorists have sometimes suggested that our duties to such individuals are only "indirect" duties--that is, duties owed not to them but to the (unimpaired) people who care about them. I should not mistreat your dog or your handicapped child because it is part of my agreement with you. (Presumably, though, orphans and strays are fair game?) Moreover, on some versions of contract theory, our charitable obligations turn out to be so small they are virtually nonexistent. Thus Jan Narveson holds that, because I would have nothing to gain from a social rule that

required me to contribute to the maintenance of children halfway around the world, I have no obligation to help them.

Considering these difficulties, it is not surprising that, despite Kant's defense, many people continue to believe that ethical theories are useless in practice. Contemporary philosophers who work in "applied ethics," particularly in bioethics, often say this. Part of the problem is that every general ethical theory seems flawed, for reasons such as we have mentioned. But even setting that aside, the precepts of ethical theory seem too neat and abstract to be of any use in dealing with real cases, which are messy and particular.

Is this a fair complaint? Suppose it were said that physics is irrelevant to automobile mechanics, because a mechanic cannot "apply" the principles of physics to determine what is wrong with a car? Or that biology is irrelevant to medicine because a physician cannot "apply" the principles of biology to diagnose a patient's illness? Such remarks would seem very odd. Certainly, the highest-level laws of physics are not of much use to the auto mechanic; nevertheless, cars obey physical laws, and a working knowledge of scientific principles is often useful. The same may be said of the physician's knowledge of biology: while a good doctor needs to know a lot more than biology, in many instances a working knowledge of biology might be critical.

The relation of ethical theory to practice might be like the relation between biology and medicine. Just as fundamental research in biology may sometimes concern matters distant from the physician's problems, fundamental issues in ethical theory might sometimes seem far from issues of practical choice. Moreover, as in medicine, practical judgment in ethics may require more than theoretical knowledge, and theory may be more useful in some instances than in others. But this does not mean that ethical theory is useless in practical decision-making, any more than biology is useless in medicine. In both areas, Kant's remark might be apt: "No-one can pretend to be practically versed in a branch of knowledge and yet treat theory with scorn, without exposing the fact that he is an ignoramus in his subject."

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