Normative Ethical Theories (Part-I)

- The principal purpose that normative ethical theories serve is to articulate and advocate an ethical code, i.e., to provide justifiable and reliable principles to determine what is moral (and immoral) behavior.
- Normative theory involves arriving at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. In a sense, it is a search for an ideal litmus test of proper behaviour.
- The **Golden Rule** is an example of a normative theory that **establishes a single principle** against which we judge all actions. Other normative theories focus on a **set of foundational principles**, or a set of good character traits.
- Normative theories seek to provide action-guides; procedures for answering the practical question (What ought I to do?").
    - The key assumption in normative theory is that there is only one ultimate criterion of moral conduct, whether it is a single rule or a set of principles.
- Normative ethical theories are classified into three main groups **teleological, deontological and virtue ethics theories**.
    - These types of theories differ in how they determine the moral worth of an action – whether an action is morally right or wrong, permissible or impermissible.

Teleological Ethics

- Teleology finds its etymology in the Greek word 'telos' which means "end" and logos, "science".
- The teleological approach is also called **"consequentialism"**. It determines the moral worth of any action by the **consequences or outcomes of that action**.
    - An action is good if its consequences are good; an action is wrong if its consequences are bad.
    - Hence, for judging an action morally, we have to consider its actual or likely results. Ethical egoism and utilitarianism are teleological.

- Teleological moral theories locate moral goodness in the consequences of our behavior and not the behavior itself.
    - According to teleological (or consequentialist) moral theory, all rational human actions are teleological in the sense that we reason about the means of achieving certain ends. Moral behavior, therefore, is **goal-directed**.
- **Example:** From a teleological standpoint, stealing could not be judged inherently right or wrong independent of the context and the foreseeable consequences. Suppose one is contemplating stealing a loaf of bread from the neighborhood grocery store. Many moral theorists would argue that morality requires an analysis of my motives (or intent) that brought about that behavior.
    - However, from a teleological perspective, motives really have nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of the act. What really matters lies in the potential pains and pleasures associated with the short-term and long-term consequences.
    - If thief's children were starving, and if stealing a loaf of bread would immediately prevent them from starving, then the act might be called moral.
- The classic example of teleological ethics is utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism as Teleological Ethics

- Utilitarianism requires a moral agent to foresee the consequences of his action. In any given situation, he has to consider the available alternative courses of action and select that course which will result in the **maximum utility** or the **minimum uselessness**.
- The modern form of the **consequentialist theory of utilitarianism** derives from 19th century British philosophers such as **Jeremy Bentham** and **John Stuart Mill**.
- Rather than maximise individual welfare, utilitarianism focuses on **collective welfare** and it identifies goodness with the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people: the **'greatest happiness principle'**.
- So maximising benefits for the greatest number of people involves net assessments of benefit: utility is the net result of 'benefits' and 'disbenefits' - or costs.
- Utility has entered modern economics as a key **quantitative concept**.
    - The concept of trade-offs is specifically embraced and **social and environmental cost-benefit analyses** are explicit utilitarian tools for assessing the goodness of an action.
    - A simple balance sheet of costs and benefits can be drawn up to assess the overall utility of a decision.

Deontology

- The term deontology finds its etymology in the Greek word "Deon", meaning 'duty,' or 'obligation,' or 'that which is necessary, hence moral necessity'.

- The deontological approach **rejects that the moral worth of any action depends on its consequences**.
    - Deontological approach to ethics holds that moral agents have to rigorously fulfil their moral duties or obligations unmindful of the consequences.
        - Moral agents have to honour human rights and meet moral obligations even at the cost of an optimal outcome.
        - Deontology argues that the moral worth of an action does not depend on its consequences, but that a different criterion should be used.
- A deontological moral theory might hold that character assassination is wrong and inhuman, even if it produces good consequences.
- **Example:** In early nineteenth-century America, many members of the anti-slavery movement argued that slavery was wrong, even though slaveholders and southern American society in general, economically benefited from it.
    - The slaveholders were also able to condition the slaves to the point where they actually enjoyed living under slavery. From a **teleological perspective, slavery might appear to be an ideal economic institution**. Everybody is satisfied and happy!
    - A **deontologist**, however, would argue that even if the American government conducted a detailed cost/benefit analysis of slavery and decided that it created more pleasure in society than pain (good for majority), it would still be wrong.
        - Hence, slavery is wrong, not because of its negative consequences, but because it violates an absolute moral rule.
- According to this theory, some actions are morally obligatory irrespective of their consequences.
- Historically, the most influential deontological theory of morality was developed by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Categorical Imperative of Kant

- Immanuel Kant did not agree with what he had heard of Utilitarianism and thought that morality rarely had anything to do with happiness.
    - Kant holds that the moral life does not have any place for feeling, emotion or sentience.
- A **moral life is a rational life**. He started by asking what it is that distinguishes a moral action from a non-moral action one.
    - He concluded that a moral action is one which is done from a **sense of duty**, rather than following inclinations or doing what we want.
- Kant grants purity to only one feeling and that is faith in the moral law. But this is not actually emotion. He looks upon every emotion as immoral.
- Kant's deontology enlightens the concept of **categorical imperative**.
    - It is a moral law that is **unconditional or absolute for all agents**, the validity or claim of which does not depend on any ulterior motive or end.

- For Kant, the only thing that is unqualifiedly good in this world is a good-will, the will to follow the moral law regardless of profit or law to ourselves.
- For him, there is only one such categorical imperative, which he formulated in various ways. **"Act only according to that maxim (rule) by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"**.
    - It implies that what is right for one person becomes right for all and what is wrong for one is wrong for all. If you cannot universalise your action in order to make it right for all, then it is wrong for you too.