

Brian Mittleberg

Virtue Ethics and the Application of Theory

Advisor: Professor Weis, Philosophy

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## Virtue Ethics and the Application of Theory

A dream? What is a dream? And is our life not a dream? I'll say more: let it never, let it never come true, and let there be no paradise (that I can understand!) – well, but I will preach all the same. And yet it's so simple: in one day, in one hour – it could all be set up at once! The main thing is – love others as yourself, that's the main thing, and it's everything, there's no need for anything else at all: it will immediately be discovered how to set things up. And yet this is merely an old truth, repeated and read a billion times, but still it has never take root! "The consciousness of life is higher than life, the knowledge of the laws of happiness is higher than happiness" – that is what must be fought! And I will. If only everyone wants it, everything can be set up at once. – *The Dreams of a Ridiculous Man, Dostoyevsky*

But as for a Stoic, show me one if you can! Where, or how? Nay, but you can show me thousands who recite the petty arguments of the Stoics. Yet, but do these same men recite the petty arguments of the Epicureans any less well? Do they not handle with the same precision the petty arguments of the Peripatetics also? Who, then, is a Stoic? As we call a statue "Pheidias" that has been fashioned according to the art of the Pheidias, in that sense show me a man fashioned according to the judgments which he utters. – *The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, Epictetus*

Philosophy is fond of theories large and small. These theories seek to divide and unite, explain and clarify. Yet they also have a purpose besides simple understanding. Some prescribe – they help us understand what to do in specific situations. Yet many philosophers seem to forget that their writings are supposed to have some sort of use – whether it is helping us become more ethical or simply becoming more confident of what we already know.

When a theory is used to help guide us, it is interpreted by a specific person. They take into account their specific situation or dilemma. Then they determine how various theories and ideas apply to that situation. If the theory is to serve its purpose, it must be applied skillfully and accurately. Many of the cases in which theories don't guide us well involve a lack of this skill – either the theory is interpreted poorly, or only the parts deemed agreeable or convenient are used. Other times it may be a flaw of the theory itself that leads to poor results.

A theory or idea that is not used is nothing at all. At the same time, no theory can account completely for its own use. For example, take any system of morals. That system must be interpreted

anew in each and every specific case. No theory can account for each new situation – this is the point of having a general theory or set of guidelines to follow.

Yet, how does a theory best deal with those that are interpreting it? Does one make the guidelines as simple as possible, such that misunderstanding is avoided? If one makes them too simple, they may not be able to deal with all the complexities of life. If one makes them too detailed and specific, then they won't apply to certain situations at all.

At its core, a theory that seeks to explain morals, knowledge, or anything else involving human life in the abstract is fundamentally incomplete. No theory can account for how each specific person can interpret and use it. The purpose of this paper is to explore this incompleteness in the realms of ethics, epistemology, and logic in order to come to a way that this can be remedied – if at all.

The general motivation for this paper is two lessons – taught centuries apart. The first is that of a stoic, Epictetus, who taught his followers that philosophy is meant to teach us how to live. Philosophy according to the Stoics is supposed to help us recognize what we know and what we don't, including the validity of arguments. With that knowledge, it helps us act in the world in better ways – however we choose to define “better”.

The second is that of Kurt Godel, a logician who famously proved that any general mathematical system would be fundamentally incomplete. Any logical or mathematical system is constrained either to not be able to prove some of things as true with which it is concerned, or extend its reach so far as to inevitably come to contradiction. I will show in this paper how this idea can be expanded, including how we can and cannot apply this to non-formal systems.

The two are combined in a lesson that philosophy has seemed to forget. The first teaches us that we need to be more concerned with using philosophy, not just doing philosophy. If an abstract argument has no relevance to the outside world, it is simply argument for the sake of argument. The

second teaches us that any system we come up with will be limited, as we will not be able to control how people interpret and utilize it. The first can be remedied; I am not sure about the second.

Of course, I am not the first person to recognize that no theory about human life can be complete. Aristotle recognized it too – and attempted to include concepts in his moral theory to accommodate this. This is where I will begin my analysis.

## **Aristotle**

Aristotle states early in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that “Our present discussion does not aim, as our others do, at study; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us.”<sup>1</sup> Aristotle did not forget that philosophy was to serve a purpose – the only direct use knowledge of virtue serves is to help us become more virtuous.

At the same time, he warns us of the limits of his method: “But let us take it as agreed in advance that every account of the actions we must do has to be stated in outline, not exactly. As we also said at the beginning, the type of accounts we demand should accord with the subject matter; and questions about actions and expediency, like questions about health, have no fixed answers.”<sup>2</sup> While Aristotle’s inquiry could serve to help one become virtuous, it could not serve as a comprehensive guide – at a certain point we must rely on ourselves.

The two points combined bring us to a rather bleak conclusion: whatever use philosophy has, it will be limited. We cannot draw on theory and philosophy for all problems; eventually we must learn and grow more virtuous in our own unique way or not at all. Of course, Aristotle’s ethics wants to make a complete account of a person – including, nearly contradictorily, the part of a person which theory cannot offer an account.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pg 19

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pg 19

Aristotle attempts to explain for this aspect of a person – when abstract theory and general guidelines fail them, they must make decisions themselves. The person who is adept at this is said to have phronesis, or prudence. Aristotle defines prudence the type of knowledge concerned with that which is open to deliberation<sup>3</sup>. A prudent person deliberates well about both means and ends, and deliberation can concern both particulars and universals. In a sense, it is what moves between general principles and concrete situations.

Phronesis fills the gap left behind by the incompleteness of theory. However, it is not the only kind of knowledge that is concerned with particulars, but it is the only one concerned with a certain type of particular. When one needs to make a personal or ethical decision, phronesis is the type of knowledge being used. Despite being concerned with particulars, it is not concerned with decisions involving crafts such as art or cooking. Rather Phronesis is the deliberation that the wise or saintly person puts into use.

Phronesis is the mediator between different kinds of knowledge, and at the same time is a kind of knowledge itself. Let us also make clear what it is not. It is not general, theoretical knowledge. It the knowledge of how to use such a thing – to determine in a concrete situation what aspects of a theory or generalization apply and which do not. Knowing this allows one to make better decisions.

In essence, without phronesis the only point of theoretical knowledge would be the philosophical kind – knowledge for its own sake, satiating our drive to know more. With phronesis, we can apply abstract ideas to our daily lives. It does this by allowing us to deliberate on the correct ends to live a good life, and while the ultimate goal is set, there are many ways to define a good life. These abstract ends become concrete through moral reasoning about particulars, another type of reasoning

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, pg 91

that involves phronesis. We use phronesis as we move in the moral realm from universals or general concepts to particulars.

Of course, it might be said that abstract ideas are abstract for a reason –they don’t need to have a purpose like the one phronesis gives them. Perhaps the hole in Aristotle’s theory without phronesis is not so big. Let us move closer toward what phronesis is concerned with – ethics.

## **Ethics**

In moral theory, we often move quite quickly –even seamlessly – between moral theory in the abstract and specific situations with their own unique complexities. We learn a system or test, such as that of utilitarianism and Kantianism. Then we pick situations, tailored to the theories. One will show where a theory works, another where it doesn’t.

The point of such exercises is to show us the strengths and weaknesses of various accounts of ethics. They will in various ways leads us to outcomes that are not satisfactory, for one reason or another. They point towards areas of revision. Usually in these cases, a theory points towards a solution to a problem that is intuitively unappealing. Despite a hypothetical situation having a clear solution, or an apparently moral decision, the complexities or dilemma of the situation are created in such a way that it becomes difficult to justify our intuition with a moral theory.

These exercises are usually *not* intended to teach us how to apply such ethical theories in our daily lives. They stretch the believable, and are contrived to the point where one is compelled to ask “Would this really happen?” if not already sure that it never would. I will give a few examples of how such exercises widen the gap between the theory and who it is meant for – us.

The first involves Kantian ethics. This type of ethical system at its core is based on completely respecting the autonomy of rational individuals. So much so that in a situation where killing an innocent

person would save 100 lives, Kantian ethics has trouble justifying the killing of the innocent person. The result does not change if killing the innocent person would save a thousand, or a million lives. Kantian ethics has no room for quantification.<sup>4</sup> While we may not like the idea of killing an innocent person to save a city, it is intuitively unappealing to call such an action immoral. Kantian ethics cannot deal with such situations very well, and so we try and see what we can change.

Another example highlights the problem of utilitarianism, which emphasizes the aggregate gains of groups over that of individuals. The common example, given by Bernard Willaims, goes something like this: Twenty people in a town you're visiting are going to be executed by no fault or relation to you. As an honored guest in this town, you are offered the chance to kill one. Due to the occasion, if you do kill one the others will be let free. If you don't, all 20 will be killed as per custom for this town. Utilitarian considerations would point towards killing the one prisoner, so that 19 may live.<sup>5</sup> Yet this gives no thought to your own autonomy – do you not get a say in the question of whether or not blood will be on our hands? Even if justified, one would still be a murderer. This is just one example of utilitarian ethics favoring the group over the autonomy of the individual.

The astute reader will notice the two situations above are mirror images of one another. Kantian ethics cannot justify the killing on an innocent person for any amount of people. Utilitarianism on the other hand can be used to justify it for the sake of saving only a handful. It could be responded that we could simply use each theory in the situation where it seems to work well. In this case, we would not be consistent, but merely picking the moral theory that best justifies our intuitions in a given situation.

The point of a theory is that it helps guide us in those situations that are unclear – not just when it conforms to our intuition. It could be responded that we can come up with a meta-theory –

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<sup>4</sup> Reiman, Jeffreery. Ethics for Calamities, pg 94.

<sup>5</sup> Willaims, Bernard. Against Utilitarianism. Pg 221-222.

something to tell us when we should be Kantians or utilitarians. Yet one could also decide when to use such a meta-theory, namely only when it conforms to one's intuitions.

One final ethical situation will suffice to show what kinds of situations are often dealt with when we try and apply ethical theories – and the problem with such approaches. The article “A Defense of Abortion” by Judith Jarvis Thompson is considered one of the most widely read articles in philosophy ever written. The main argument of this article exists through a thought experiment in which one wakes in a hospital with a famous violinist attached to you. You are informed that you are the only organ match for this violinist, so you need to stay in the hospital for a period of time in order for him to use your organs to recover, after which you will be free to leave.<sup>6</sup> The parallels to abortion are apparent. They can become more or less similar as the details change: Is your agreement to let the violinist use your organs voluntary? How long, exactly, is your commitment? Thompson uses our intuition about when it would be right to disconnect oneself and let the violinist die in order to examine our thoughts about abortion.

While Thompson's analysis may be interesting and useful, it does not help us in one very important way. The variety of situations she comes up with are not plausible in the slightest – and get even more abstract as she continues, bordering on science fiction. They do help us see similar problems in a new perspective. Yet they are so divorced from realistic situations that they are only of limited use. This is because even if one came to a firm conclusion about what the moral action would be in the case of the violinist, one cannot be sure that that same reasoning applies to the issue of abortion as well. While her cases help clarify, they cannot serve as a replacement for analyzing the actual issues.

The three cases I have cited above are very common archetypes of the situations usually encountered in an introductory ethics class. I emphasize that they are common because I do not want

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Jarvis Thompson. A Defense of Abortion. Pg

be open to the criticism that I picked three particularly contrived examples of ethical case studies. While I could hardly quantify such a statement accurately, I think it would be safe to say that most ethical situations used to analyze ethical theories are equally contrived and divorced from situations that we encounter in daily life.

This need to examine ethical theories through unusual situations must have a source. In a way, it is twofold. The situations used are at once complex and yet very general. They are complex in that they must be very specific in order to highlight the aspect of a given ethical theory they have been designed for. Often this results in them seeming strange or unlikely to actually happen. On the other hand, the details are often only provided up to the point where it is deemed that more detail is not relevant to the moral considerations (although the line itself between what is important and what isn't may be fuzzy).

This is quite unlike the situations we encounter in real life. In reality, the situations we are often put in are quite normal, if daunting. We are not often asked to kill someone for the sake of others, whether it for the sake of one or a million it is uncommon. We pity those that have faced such dilemmas as bearing a great burden. The further the situations we associate ethical theories are divorced from reality, the easier it becomes to forget that these ethical theories are and even sometime should be applied in our daily life. They are a powerful source of guidance if used correctly.

I am not saying that one should be reciting the categorical imperative every day when one debates rather mundane things. However, in difficult situations it could offer a dose of clarity and rigor when we are most likely to be distressed. Yet we do not learn to skillfully apply moral theories if we do not ever apply them to realistic situations. The thought experiments above merely help us to understand the theory under consideration.

Let us consider two people. One is an expert in Kantian philosophy. He knows Kant's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics backwards and forwards – a commendable feat. He has even written many papers on various aspects of the philosophy. Yet it has never occurred to him that his life may not be in accord with Kant's philosophy, and indeed he has never used it in his daily life. The other knows Kantian philosophy, but only vaguely- he understands just enough about the core tenets of Kant's ethics as well as the basic justifications for them. He uses this knowledge when encountered with difficult situations. While he does not know the details of Kant's ethics, he knows enough, and comes to the correct conclusions in each situation he is in. This knowledge helps him make moral decisions and to act with confidence that his actions are indeed moral.

While we may admire the person who has studied Kant so closely, we are not likely to say that by virtue of this knowledge he is more moral. Rather, the person who actually uses Kant's philosophy is the much more ideal candidate. This seems to show, if only cursorily, that at least in daily life the application of a moral theory is more important than simply knowing it well.

Yet even the application of a theory has limits – even the perfect master of a moral theory is not always the best person he or she can be. As Aristotle recognized, at a certain point we must have the skill and wisdom to guide ourselves. This is the subject I will explore in the next section.

### **Moral Saints**

In the article "Moral Saints" by Susan Wolf, the issue of applying moral theories to ourselves is approached. She, like many others, is concerned with where the various common moral theories break down. In particular, she is concerned with "a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be."<sup>7</sup> Put differently – she is concerned with "moral saints" whose life would "be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of

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<sup>7</sup> Wolf, Moral Saints, pg 79

society as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> Wolf does not think such a person is an ideal worth striving for, and she gives several reasons for this.

The primary reason is that a moral saint would cultivate moral virtues to the point where they “are apt to crowd out the non-moral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character.”<sup>9</sup> The moral saint would not be an artist, a great cook or lover of literature – one devoted to improving the world would never find a lack of work to do. A moral saint or extreme altruist would not be a well rounded person.

In her analysis, Wolf does not believe it matters if a moral saint was to unfailingly follow the general tenets of utilitarianism or Kantianism. The result would overall be the same. Regardless of the theory followed, Wolf argues that there is an upper bound to morality – at a certain point becoming more moral to the detriment of other goals is not the best decision.<sup>10</sup> Yet drawing a line at a certain point for any theory seems arbitrary, as Wolf admits. Despite this, Wolf argues that at a certain point we must consider sources of value besides the moral and that a moral ideal is not necessarily the best personal one.

Wolf concludes her paper by stating a dilemma. If a moral ideal is not the best for everyone, what do we substitute for it? There are multiple ways that a person can be great – and they can’t all be captured by a theory. However, she argues towards the end of her paper that this is not a matter of competing moral ideals being flawed vis-à-vis each other. Instead, we simply need to consider ideals

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<sup>8</sup> Wolf, *Moral Saints*, pg 80

<sup>9</sup> Wolf, *Moral Saints*, pg 81

<sup>10</sup> Wolf, *Moral Saints*, pg 92

outside the moral realm. She concludes by saying “the flaws of the perfect master of a moral theory need not reflect flaw in the intramoral content of the theory itself.”<sup>11</sup>

This, at first, glance, overall seems to mesh well with Aristotle. No single theory can account for all of life; no moral theory will even be a perfect guide. Yet at the same time, Wolf seems to believe that if a moral theory points us in a negative direction – such as being so moral as to be nearly a slave to others desires – this is not a flaw in the theory. Rather, it is a flaw in us not properly considering non-moral virtues and sources of value.

There is no point to a moral theory that does not point us towards some ideal. If that ideal is poor, then the theory is poor. I am not saying that we cannot have multiple ideals, we should. However, they should each be worthy of being as much. If a theory does not guide us well, it should be replaced. In other words, I disagree with Wolf. If a theory leads us to an undesirable end, then the theory itself is flawed.

There are several reasons for this. First, let us return to phronesis. Phronesis allows us to move between concrete situations and abstract ideals. If the abstract ideals we are working with lead us to compromise ourselves at every turn, then is that a good ideal? Perhaps it could be rebutted that phronesis is needed precisely so that this does not happen. But phronesis is not about choosing the correct ideals, it is about choosing the correct means and ends to reach them. Someone who deliberates accurately about every situation while holding the ideal of say, the perfect Kantian, would not always make the best decisions.

Second, what would be the point of a theory that points towards undesirable ends? Again, a theory that is not used is not anything. If using the theory leads to poor results, then we just shouldn't use that theory or hold that specific ideal. A moral theory is meant to be a guide, if a limited one. Wolf

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<sup>11</sup> Wolf, *Moral Saints*, pg 94

seems to deny that a theory that is a poor guide is poor – but rather that moral theories cannot take into account some ideals.

In many ways, Wolf is correct. A single or even several moral theories cannot definitively guide us through life. Eventually we must take over, make decisions for ourselves. It might be responded that this may be true of ethics, but it is not true of theories concerning other realms. Human life is messy and complex – and the fact that our moral theories cannot take this into account is simply something we must accept.

Ethics, however, is not the only realm of knowledge that concerns human affairs. They all do, to a greater or less extent. All types of knowledge are types used by humans, not by thinking beings or other metaphysical entity in the abstract. Physics and logic exist because we apply them to our lives, just as every other type of knowledge or theory. As such, they are interpreted and misinterpreted, used correctly and poorly. Even more important, they are all as misleading if used as a complete guide in their domain as any system of ethics would be in the realm of human affairs.

This brings me to my second topic – Epistemology. Epistemology is important because it is intimately connected with ethics. It could be said that phronesis is not what is needed in order for our ethical theories to guide us well, but simply adequate information. As we often act with limited information, it would be ideal if we have some epistemological theory that helped us act with more confidence. However, we will see that finding a complete theory to guide us towards knowledge is just as difficult as finding one in ethics.

### **Gettier Problems**

Epistemology is concerned with the question “What is knowledge, or knowing?” It is a logical next step in our analysis of theory – we always operate under constrained knowledge. This constraint

manifests itself in several ways. The first has been discussed above – we can never find a theory that fully guides us to live a moral life. Perhaps this could be mitigated if we had fuller knowledge of the situations themselves that ethics is concerned with. Sadly, some respite from our dilemma will not be found in other areas of knowledge, as the Gettier problems will show us.

The Gettier problems are a classic response to the idea that knowledge is nothing but justified true belief.<sup>12</sup> In each of the counterexamples Gettier proposes, this theory of knowledge, as well as sound logical reasoning, are applied to specific situations. The result is often poor – hence the problem with this definition of knowledge.

The first problem involves Smith and Jones, who have applied for a certain job. Smith has evidence for two propositions: That Jones will get the job, and that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. As a result, Smith comes up with the proposition: The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. This is a seemingly justified inference to make.

In this situation, we imagine that it is not Jones who will get the job, but Smith himself; similarly, Smith himself has ten coins in his pocket. Smith does not know about either of these facts. If this were the case, we could say that Smith's proposition that "The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket" is true. At the same time, the propositions that led Smith to get this true conclusion are false.

Now, this example was created to show that simply having a justified true belief is not sufficient to have genuine knowledge. This is because Smith "knows" something in virtue of all the wrong reasons – even if they are indeed justified. However, this is not the reason I bring up this example.

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<sup>12</sup> Gettier, *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*, pg 49

Again, we have come across a problem with applying sound theory. In this case, the subject is logic and epistemology. In this counterexample to the classical theory of knowledge, we come across sound reasoning that leads us to poor conclusions. However, is the reasoning really that sound?

In the example, Smith does indeed apply the classical theory of knowledge correctly, but does he do so in a way that any normal person would? There is no principle of knowledge that formally says we must use common sense when evaluating propositions. Yet in this example the stunning lack of it must be considered.

There is no relation between the number of coins in Smith's pocket and his likelihood in getting the job. We could imagine some of course, for example: Their interviewer explicitly says that they will be evaluated on such criteria. Yet this would bring the example even further into the realm of our imagination, for this would be quite an unusual situation.

It might be objected that there is nothing wrong with an unusual situation in philosophy. Counterexamples are by their nature extremely specific; they are done that way so as to better highlight the problems or dilemmas of a specific idea or theory. But they should be reasonably within the bounds of everyday life.

The reason for this limitation is that philosophy, especially in ethics but in other realms as well, is meant to be used, to be applied. If a theory is sound in all but the most unlikely and inconceivable of cases, then it is sound overall. While counterexamples can be used to highlight the way we view a problem intuitively, if they are too strange and contrived they cannot be used as the basis of an argument. Of course, it is difficult to draw a line between when a situation is reasonable or too contrived. Despite this, I think it is safe to say that in most cases we can tell the difference. This point will be brought up again later, although for now we will return to Smith.

Now, if we assume Smith's is in a reasonable world where his evaluation for a job is based on relevant information, there is really no connection between his proposition regarding who will get the job and who has ten coins in his pocket. The two are irrelevant to each other. Combining them in a logically sound way doesn't change whether they are true or not, but it implies they are connected in some relevant way. In our everyday reasoning, most of us would not combine unrelated propositions are Jones does.

If we move onto Gettier's second counterexample to the classical theory of knowledge, we will see this problem even more clearly. In the second example, Smith had strong evidence for the proposition "Jones owns a Ford." Now we suppose Smith has another friend, Brown, of whose whereabouts he is ignorant. Smith, apparently very bored, constructs a whole series of propositions of the form: "Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Paris," "Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Denver," and so on for various other places.

If we assume that Jones owns a Ford, each of these propositions is technically true by virtue of that. Now, Gettier asks us to imagine that Jones doesn't actually own a Ford, he only rents one. In addition, by sheer luck Smith picked the right place – Brown actually is in Denver. If this was the case, Smith would believe a true proposition, but for the entirely wrong reasons. This, again, puts a hole in the idea that justified true belief is knowledge.

Yet again, Gettier's hypothetical reasoners do not reason as we would expect any rational person to. No one who is sitting in their room thinks "Either I am sitting in my room, or we have successfully colonized Mars," "Either I am sitting in my room, or ghosts are real," and so on. There separate propositions are not related. They have no relevant reason to be joined by a conjunction, even if the use of "or" in this case is logically sound and indeed does create logically true propositions. This is not the type of reasoning we would expect someone to take seriously.

Many of the counterexamples and thought experiments in philosophy are quite contrived, as we have mentioned above. What they certainly cannot lack is actors with poor reasoning, unless integral to the argument. The point of a theory or idea such as “Justified true belief is knowledge” is to be used as a criterion for what we know. Yet it isn’t possible to stop there. Just as with moral theories, we expect such a theory to be applied in a common sense, unbiased, and skillful way. If we don’t expect this, it should come as no surprise that the result is poor.

The Gettier problems highlight the same issues as Wolf’s argument. In both cases, a theory used rigidly and exclusively leads to poor conclusions. In both cases, it is shown that without a healthy dose of common sense (or at least an acknowledgement of the limited use of a single theory), an otherwise good theoretical account will fail to lead to good results in concrete situations. A limitation exists – after which our own individual skill in dealing with situations takes over, in other words, *phronesis*.

Before returning to the overall argument of the paper, there is one other example that must be covered. Epistemology, while more removed from human interaction than ethics, is still closely tied to daily life. It may be objected that something like mathematics or logic, the most abstract reasoning possible, will not fall into the same limitations that ethics or epistemology do. That is why we must turn to logic next – to show that as a type of human knowledge, the same fundamental constraints apply.

## **Godel**

Mathematics, and logic in particular, are known to be the most “pure” types of human knowledge possible. This purity can mean a variety of things. It can be about how logic is devoid of reference to experience, or that its rules apply equally well to all other realms of knowledge, or that its rules are universally true for anyone. It is meant to provide the backbone upon which all other knowledge is based. If an argument fails to be true when put in terms of propositional logic, the argument is usually considered invalid at a most fundamental level.

This is the popular view of logic; but it isn't necessarily sound. It would be nice if even the most basic of our knowledge was not open to interpretation or bias in practice. When an argument is said to be logically true, we want that to mean something specific - we want that argument to indeed be logically true no matter what. To show that this cannot be established easily, I will need to make several distinctions.

The first is that of working inside or outside a logical system. By that, I mean: When considering or using a logical system, are we working within the rules of that system, or are we analyzing the rules of the system themselves? These two ways to interact with logical systems are worlds apart, and what one can show us the other can't.

Working within a logical system is much more common and natural to us. When we break an argument into syllogisms or propositional logic, we are working within these respective systems. We are taking them as given; we have decided that they have worth and are a relevant way to evaluate the argument at hand. The information that the system will give us will be relevant and useful. Indeed, it may be the deciding factor between accepting an argument as valid.

What this method does not do is call into question the validity or usefulness of the rules of the system itself. When we do this, we are evaluating if the rules that a system has are the best ones for it to serve its purpose; it may be possible that a different set could give us better or more accurate information.

For example, if one is considering an argument that involves quantities, simple propositional logic may not be the best system to use. We may opt for syllogisms if the argument is sufficiently small, or we may decide to use first order predicate (quantificational) logic. However, making a choice between different systems is not the only thing we do outside of them. We can also ask the question "What makes these rules better than a different set of rules for the goals in mind for the system?"

When taught logic, we are often not offered the viewpoint that the system at hand is only one of an infinite amount of other possible systems. Only a few core things are needed: We pick a set of axioms, a few theorems, and rules to produce new theorems. If we have that, we have a logical system. It may not be useful or anything more than a mess of symbols. It can still be a coherent system that has rules for what is true within it without actually having any meaningful interpretation.

This brings us to our second important consideration in logic, an unsurprising one in this paper – interpretation. This is the mechanism that allows us to distinguish between the infinite amount of meaningless yet coherent logical systems and the ones that are actually useful – and among the variations of useful ones what is best for a given situation. This interpretation takes the form of connecting a purely formal system with something else, the thing that we want our formal system to evaluate.

This connection between a formal system and the subject at hand is called an isomorphism. An isomorphism in mathematics is usually interpreted to be a relationship between the structures of two different objects, in that they can both express the same information. In terms of logic, an isomorphism is the connection between the purely formal system and whatever we want that system to evaluate.<sup>13</sup> We know that propositional logic deals with arguments; so when we evaluate an argument we can break it up into smaller parts – propositions and connectives – into order to express it in terms of the formal system. If such a connection didn't exist – if this wasn't possible, or the rules of propositional logic told us nothing about the validity of an argument – such an exercise would be pointless.

In some cases, we find an isomorphism between a formal system and some non-formal phenomena or series of experiences. This relationship allows us to formalize some information so that

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<sup>13</sup> Hofstadter, Godel Escher Bach, pg 49

we can evaluate similar kinds in the future. Many logical systems that we can think up have no such relationship – they are completely arbitrary.

When we come to use a formal system, we are picking that system for specific reasons. Whatever the use of the formal system we are looking for is, we have many to choose from. Some may not be suited for our current situation, if any at all.

This act of choosing a formal system over others, the act of choosing which rules to include and which to not include only has the smallest of constraints. Even such universal laws as the Principle of Non-Contradiction can be violated and still result in coherent systems. The only constraint is what purpose we want it for.

It would be nice if logic was something not open to the interpretation of individuals, if something really existed that could be used by all people in the same way. While a single formal system does offer this, it does not offer a meaningful way for everyone to choose that specific system in the same situations. This is outside the realm of the system itself. Even among very similar systems, it is possible that slight variations in rules will come to different results – hence the importance of which one we pick.

It could be responded that perhaps syllogisms, propositional logic and their ilk are appropriately limited in scope, thus we must pick different ones for different situations. If we could come up with a more general, far reaching system of logic, we would not have the dilemma of what system to pick. In this way the interpretation involved when one picks or constructs a formal system would be eliminated and formal systems would not suffer the same limitations as moral or epistemological ones.

Unfortunately, this is impossible. It was proved impossible by Kurt Godel, a mathematician of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by his famous Incompleteness theorems. These theorems prove that axiomatic

systems (such as those of logic or mathematics) have inherent limitations. In particular, it put a stop to the search for a system of axioms or other basis upon which all of mathematics could rest.

In logic, there are two important ways to evaluate a logical system. The first is to check for completeness, the second for consistency.<sup>14</sup> When we ask if a system is complete, what we are really asking is if everything true that the system is concerned with can be proved true within the system. As for consistency, this is whether or not the system will prove true anything that is actually false.<sup>15</sup> Gödel's proofs show that there is an inherent balancing between the two – a system cannot be both perfectly complete and consistent.

Any complex axiomatic system will have to balance between two extremes. If the system tries to prove too much, it will inevitably come to contradiction. On the other hand, if the system does not extend its reach very far, there will be things that it is concerned with that it cannot prove as true. Note that the subject a logical system is concerned with need to be extremely complex for these constraints to arise – Gödel's proof involves only arithmetic. On the other hand, propositional logic is both complete and consistent. Yet let us not forget that propositional logic is devoid of all content, and involves only five different connectives between propositions (that can even be expressed by combinations of a single connective). It is not a very powerful system, if an often used one.

The constraints of interpretation and choice cannot be solved by creating a sufficiently powerful system, as no such system exists. Whenever we are picking a system to use for our purposes, there will

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<sup>14</sup> While these are indeed ways to evaluate logical systems, they are of no help in choosing one for actual use. This is because many logical systems are complete and consistent, yet trivial. Other times, having a system that is complete or consistent is not important for the task at hand.

<sup>15</sup> Hofstadter, Gödel Escher Bach, pg 101

be considerations that must be balanced. In this way, logic suffers the same problems as epistemology and ethics – some kind of skill is needed for it to be used appropriately.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Whenever we apply an abstract theory to our lives, we face fundamental constraints. These constraints manifest themselves in a variety of topics – not only ethics, epistemology, and logic. Logic is known as the most “pure” type of knowledge, yet suffers the same constraints as when we try and apply abstract theories to our daily lives. Epistemology relies on logic, and in turn ethics relies on epistemology. No matter how deeply to we go in our knowledge, even our fundamentals rely on questions that cannot ever be definitively answered.

The first constraint is that we cannot know if that theory is the ideal theory for a given situation. Others may be picked that point to different solutions. It is difficult to come up with a way to pick one, for if we come up with a way to pick a theory in the abstract; we have no way to know if our decision procedure is the most accurate or correct. In other words, we only move the problem to a different realm instead of solving it.

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<sup>16</sup> Let me make one thing clear. There is a parallel between the considerations we must be aware of when picking a moral or epistemological system and the limitations that Godel proved exist for all logical systems. Yet they are very different. I only bring up Godel’s proof to show that a sufficiently powerful logical system is not a solution to the dilemma of choosing and interpreting a theory. Godel’s proof concerns only axiomatic systems that satisfy certain relatively strict criteria. It is very compelling, even wishful, to want to apply Godel’s proof to other realms of knowledge such as ethics. This is simply impossible. The parallels are striking, yet making any strong connection between the two is unjustifiable.

The second is that given a theory, even if we know it is the correct one to use, it will not guide us completely. Theories can only guide us in so far as the abstractions they deal with accurately depict or are related to the situation we are dealing with. Every situation is unique, with its own specific nuances and characters. While an ethical theory can help guide us in some ways, even then we must be able to use the theory in a skillful and accurate manner.

This brings us back to phronesis. Phronesis is the skill or knowledge that helps us solve both of these problems. Aristotle recognized that phronesis was important; despite being so general it filled an important and large gap in his ethics. Yet it did not just fill a gap in his theory – it is an important concept for all of philosophy. It fills a gap that we could never offer an exhaustive account of – namely, how people interact with the abstract theories that they study and use.

It fills this gap by specifying that a certain type of skill is needed whenever we try and use an already formulated theory. This skill helps us decide what kind of theory is suited to the situation at hand, and in turn helps us apply it accurately. When we reach the limits of this method, that is, when no theory can further help us in our decision making process, it is what guides us.

Aristotle argued that while certain types of knowledge can be taught, phronesis cannot. It comes with age – we do not find children with this type of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> This is appropriate, as we learn to see connections between other disparate situations and ideas only through practice and experience. It is hard to draw inferences about a given situation if it is the first time we have experienced anything resembling it.

Virtue ethics, as a theoretical account of ethics, suffers the same constraints that all other systems of ethics suffer from. However, it is different in that it is agent focused, and thus can consider the characteristics of the actor rather than just the action itself. Every theory does not exist only in

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<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pg 93

action – someone formulates it, weights the alternatives, and finally others who understand it try and use it in their lives. Virtue ethics, with its important concept of phronesis, offers an important account of this process, regardless of the theories or areas of knowledge involved. As such, virtue ethics offers us an important, if unsatisfying, way to complete the inherent incompleteness of our ethical and epistemological theories. The alternative is to not offer an account at all.

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