Consequentialism

Good and evil are two of the most over used words in the English language, as are the words right and wrong, and yet, these concept are not even fully understood. How can one differentiate between good and evil, or decide what is right and wrong? How is it possible to know whether one's actions are just? Are these judgments based simply on preference and partiality, or rather, is there valid rationale behind these decisions? Are there foundations for either side of such controversial issues such as euthanasia, or are these opinions based merely on self-interest? These questions are generally associated with the ideas of moral philosophy, more commonly known as ethics. As something ethical is the equivalent of something good and just, the prior questions can be rephrased simply as, "how do we know, if at all, that our behaviour is ethical?" There are several approaches to answering this question, all based principally on reason, most often falling into the categories of consequentialist, duty-based, and virtue based theories, but the question remains, do these theories answer all ethical questions? As well, there seems to be an inherent tendency in all of these methods towards preference vs. logic, which would defeat the purpose of ethics itself, since ethics seem to be a basis for deciding between right and wrong, and if there is no set method, only bias, then how can one know for sure what is right and wrong?

Consequentialist's, as the name implies, deal with the consequences of an action in order to determine if it is ethical or not. As such, the effects of a deed will determine whether it is right or wrong. The two major twists of consequentialism are utilitarianism, and negative utilitarianism. The first is based on the concept of hedonism, which theorizes that the aim of life is pleasure, whereas the latter focus' more on a lack of pain, as opposed to the presence of happiness. It is possible to further separate these theories by looking at who is affected, ethical egoism being where right is determined by the consequences to the person performing the action, and ethical altruism being where right is determined by the consequences to everyone but the person performing the action. Nevertheless, utilitarianism defines right as the action that will bring about the most happiness, whereas negative utilitarianism defines right as the action that brings about the least unhappiness, since the amount of happiness can be hard to gauge. Both these theories can be very useful at times, for if you have to decide whether it is right to kill the next door neighbour on impulse, seeing that it would not give anyone happiness since it is just a whim, and realizing that it would provide great pain, makes the action clearly wrong on both accounts. However, when it comes to more complicated situations, such as child labour, the water becomes rather murky. Thus the major counter claim for both becomes how can one judge the degree of happiness/pain appropriately? Does this not turn into preference? For can one person not prefer one type of happiness to another, perhaps in terms of spiritual, and material? Or is it not possible for one person to view something as pain, and another to view it as pleasure? As well, a very convincing counter claim for negative utilitarianism, is to say that the ultimate ethical action would be to eradicate all life, as it would eliminate all future pain, even though it would provide a little to begin. This is entirely nonsensical as to do this, one would have to kill millions of

living things, and in the overwhelming majority of theories, murder is entirely immoral. In addition, as duty based theory points out, it is not entirely possible to control or predict all the consequences of your actions.

As consequentialism seems to have its faults, why not look at another theory. Duty based theory is quite the opposite of consequentialism, as it does not even deal with the consequences of an action, but rather bases right and wrong on certain duties, that all human beings must act upon. The lack of emphasis on consequences can be understood by the fact that it is not always possible to control the effects of your actions, therefore, it is the intentions that must be given the most clout. The most common form of duty based theory, is religious ethics, or in the west, Christian ethics. Morality is based on the Bible, as the Bible sets out certain duties that must be followed no matter what. This makes everything simple, since the word of God determines what is right and wrong. The advantages of this theory is that for straight forward situations, the answer as to what is right and wrong, is quite obviously laid out. However, life is not straightforward, and often, the Bible will not clearly state the solution to any given situation. As well there are other problems with this theory. First of all, if right is dictated by God's will, then what exactly is God's will? If one were to find God's will within the Bible, this would seem simple enough, but the Bible itself is open to many different interpretations, on many different occasions. Second, how does one know that there is a god at all? Or which god is the right god, since there are many different religions, with different interpretations of god. Of course, to most devout Christians, or religious followers that would follow such a method, there is a God, and their God is the only one. This however doesn't seem to be based on facts, as one cannot be epistemically certain of the existence of one God, or deny the existence of another. In this way, once again, this theory seems to be based on preference, for how does one determine which religion is better than the other? To do this, a person would have to be entirely, objective, but this is not possible due to everyone's basic and undeniable biases.

If both consequentialism and duty based theory are flawed, what about Virtue theory? Virtue theory goes against both duty based theory and consequentialism, in that it bases ethical judgements on certain rules that one must live by. As such, it can be seen to be somewhat in accordance with the duty based theory of Christian, or religious ethics, however, Virtue theory's rules are innate, or a priori in nature. As well the basis of virtue theory does not mainly have to do with these rules, but the character and human nature that will allow for the following of these rules. In effect, one must develop certain virtues, and this will allow a person to "flourish," in the words of Aristotle[1]. These virtues allow a person to live life properly, and thus act in a wholesome manner. The most obvious problem with this theory, it seems, is that it does not entirely seem to deal with ethics. Of course it can be inferred that developing oneself as a good person, will lead to good actions, however is it not possible for good people to do bad things? As well, is it not possible to be virtuous, and not "flourish"? Bad things do happen to good people after all. More importantly, if one was to develop all the virtues, as Aristotle deems necessary, how is it possible for a person to know that they have developed all the virtues? That is to say, how does one decide what a virtue is, and what isn't? For is it not possible for one person to consider something a virtue, and another person to decide against it? This then

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[1] James Fieser, "Ethics [Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy]"
http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/e/ethics.htm Accessed January 8, 2002

begs the question how does one decide what virtues to develop, for ultimately, does not one's choice of virtues depend on preference?

It seems that all these methods of determining what is ethical are inherently flawed. The best method of determining what is ethical would be to objectively go through each theory for any given situation, and attempt to find an answer that seems most correct. That being said, the theories often contradict each other, and this may not work, so once again, it comes down to preference. Of course, for simple situations, any one of these methods can be decisive, however, for the more complex, a combination of all of them may still not provide definitive answers. As previously stated, most often, even within the theories themselves, biases are frequently visited, and the problem with this is that a bias is simply an opinion, and does not state whether something is universally right or wrong, which the question of ethics demands. The purpose of ethics is to provide a standard for judgement, and if this cannot be provided, then how is it possible to be sure one's actions are ethical? For if something is ethical, should it not be universally so? As such, while it is possible to have some inkling of right and wrong, even using these methods, it is impossible to determine what is ethical, for first, how can one determine which method to use, especially when they contradict each other, and second, how does one conquer the problems with each method when it becomes necessary. Since all this gives us interpretations of what is ethical, it is possible to gain some guidance from these theories, however, ultimately, the question of ethics may come down to preference. Therefore, it is not possible, beyond reasonable doubt in most cases, to know if our behaviour is ethical or not.