A Review on *What Is This Thing Called Ethics?* by Christopher Bennett

Prof. Fr. Gyuha Choi
(The Catholic University of Korea)

One of the necessary but difficult tasks for those who are planning to teach an introductory course about ethics at the college level is finding a proper textbook. It should neither be too specific nor be too general. For, if the former, due to limited teaching hours, the course may not be able to cover all the major or important moral theories, which must be the goal of any introductory class. On the other hand, if the latter, the course may fail to meet the needs of the students who are ready to delve more deeply into detailed arguments and discussions that deal with such issues as: what it means for an action to be morally right or wrong; how an action or a character is morally justified; and what criteria can be used to judge the rightness of an action.

In this regard, Christopher Bennett’s *What Is This Thing Called Ethics?* appears to be a good example of how an introductory textbook should be

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** Christopher Bennett, *What Is This Thing Called Ethics?*, New York: Routledge, 2015.
organized. Basically, this book consists of three main parts: first, an introduction to the theoretical approaches concerning moral issues; second, discussions on three major moral theories, i.e., utilitarianism, Kant’s deontology, and Aristotle’s virtue ethics; third, explanations on some other varied approaches to morality, such as Marxian and Nietzschean critiques on morality and contractualism.

In what follows, I do not aim to seriously critique Bennett’s own arguments since, in his book, rather than developing his own arguments and theories, he tries to provide his readers with a substantial and persuasive presentation of various moral theories. Thus, in this review, especially focusing on Part II where Bennett explains three moral theories that are arguably considered as major moral theories, I aim to present the topics of each part chapter by chapter; then, when necessary, I will raise some critical issues although they may seem to be quite trivial.

1. Part I: Life and Death

The first part, which consists of three chapters, aims at stimulating the readers’ interest in a more theoretical and systematic approaches to the moral dilemmas and problems which we meet in our daily lives. Here, Bennett invites his readers to critically reconsider moral thoughts and principles which are generally taken for granted, such as death is morally evil, life is valuable, and we ought to help others: Are these commonsensical moral principles valid? If so, why?

In more detail, Chapter 1 deals with two main questions: i) Is death bad? If so, why?; ii) If death is considered bad because it deprives a person of her life which is valuable, in what sense is one’s life valuable?
In Chapter 2, the core question goes like this: Which lives count? In this chapter, Bennett raises a question of why human life is considered valuable in a special way compared to the lives of animals. Lastly, in Chapter 3, the readers are invited to reconsider their commonsensical moral principle that one ought to help others. Is helping others always praiseworthy or even required as one’s duty? To what extent ought one help others?

Rather than trying to develop his own arguments to answer these questions, Bennett aims to show his readers that, whatever their own answers to these questions may be, they need to employ sophisticated and critical thinking to arrive at their answers. Ethics, in other words, is not merely a matter of simple intuition or common sense.

2. Part II: Three Starting Points in Moral Theory

In the second part (Chapters 4 to 6), Bennett critically and systematically presents three main moral theories, i.e., utilitarianism, Kant’s deontology, and Aristotle’s virtue ethics.

In Chapter 4, Bennett presents utilitarianism as a consequentialist theory that commits to maximizing happiness — according to Bennett, this focus on happiness is what differentiates utilitarianism among the various consequentialist theories. In utilitarianism, what counts as inherently valuable is not an action but a state of affairs which is the result of an action. Thus, an action is morally right or wrong only derivatively in accordance with the value of the state of affairs which it brings about.

As for the advantages of utilitarianism, Bennett presents three points: i) Since this theory is based on the psychological nature of sentient beings (namely, to evade suffering while pursuing pleasure), it is appealing and
understood with ease; ii) Utilitarianism appeals to equality and impartiality without discriminating against anyone based on race, sex, etc.; iii) For any moral problem, utilitarianism finds a clear and simple answer by calculating an action’s cost and effect while comparing it with its alternatives.

On the other hand, Bennett points out some of utilitarianism’s disadvantages too. For example, he notes the issue of punishment. Since what morally matters according to utilitarianism is the happiness of all as a consequent state of affairs of an action, it may be justified that an innocent person is unjustly punished for the sake of the whole society. Another issue which he raises concerns the keeping of promises. Utilitarianists may prefer not to keep their promises when so doing results in a more profitable consequence; however, if all members of a society act in this ‘utilitarian’ way, then the society as a whole may be worse off than a society where its members keep their promises.

Also, Bennett criticizes some other disadvantages of utilitarianism, such that it is morally too demanding that it deprives individuals of their personal lives, or that it denies the value of one’s personal relationship with close friends or family members because of its exclusive commitment to impartiality. In addition, utilitarianism may be quite inefficient when the cost and effect of every action needs to be calculated and compared to that of its alternatives.

One of the utilitarianism’s strengths as a moral theory is that this theory is so flexible that it seems to cope persuasively with many of its criticisms by adopting some alterations and/or constraints while keeping its utilitarian principle of maximizing happiness. However, Bennett does not seem to pay much attention to showing how classic utilitarianism evolves in various ways to handle the challenges it faces. For example, Bennett
might have introduced *satisficing consequentialism* or *scalar consequentialism* to explain why consequentialists or utilitarianists do not always need to be burdened too much in their pursuit of *maximal* happiness.

Also, one may claim that some of the critical issues that utilitarianism has to deal with are not properly introduced in this book. For example, the distinction between *subjective consequentialism* and *objective consequentialism* is arguably quite a big problem concerning whether the criterion of the rightness of an action is the *real* outcome of an action or its *expected* outcome. Then again, one may ask whether the happiness that utilitarianism pursues is the *total* happiness of a society or its *average* happiness. It might have been better if these issues had been introduced at least very briefly, for the discussion on these issues might help the readers get a better and clearer understanding of utilitarianism as a form of consequentialism.

One issue that Bennett does discuss is the comparison between *direct consequentialism* and *indirect consequentialism*, or between *act utilitarianism* and *rule utilitarianism*. According to the former, an action is right if and only if it brings about the maximal happiness of all; on the other hand, according to the latter, an action is right if and only if it follows a rule whose observance would increase the happiness of all. By following rule utilitarianism, one can solve the problem of inefficiency such that one needs to calculate the cost and effect of *every* action before she puts it into practice.

In relation to this issue, following J. J. C. Smart, Bennett seems to distinguish between utilitarianism as a criterion of right and wrong and utilitarianism as a guide to action: Since what is morally relevant is the former, and the latter, i.e., telling what to do to increase happiness, is rather an empirical issue, act utilitarianism does not need to answer the
issue of inefficiency. However, in this case, against Bennett, one may argue that since being a guide to action is still an essential feature of any moral theory as a practical theory, one cannot arbitrarily ignore or simply give it up.

In Chapter 5, Bennett discusses Kant’s deontology. According to Bennett, at the core of Kant’s moral theory lies human dignity: Every human being should be respected as an end itself, not a mere means for another end. This respect for human dignity is built on Kant’s belief that every human person is autonomous: She decides and acts by herself on the basis of her own reason, not on the basis of others’ inference and decision.

Since respecting every human person’s autonomy is the central moral issue for Kant’s theory, Kant takes it for granted that one’s intrusion into the life of another should be prohibited except by way of rational arguments and reasonable persuasions. For example, even when a murderer knocks on the door of my house looking for my friend who is hiding inside, I am not morally allowed to lie to the murderer (say, “She is not here.”) to save my friend; for it is my duty to respect even the murderer as an autonomous rational agent. In this case, if I lie to the murderer, I am improperly influencing him in such a way that he is deceived and thus deprived of an opportunity to make his own decision autonomously on the basis of true information. Here, I am not morally responsible for any undesirable result of my telling the truth. However, as Bennett points out, this appears to be quite problematic to many people. Thus, non-absolutist Kantians argue that the absoluteness of a rule, such as “Do not lie”, should be restricted in such a way that it is permissible to break the rule when the consequence is too bad.

Bennett continues to explain that, for an action to be morally right, it
should be done in observance of universal laws that are impartially applicable to all rational agents. Thus, these laws must be categorical imperatives, not hypothetical ones, which appeal to the rationality itself.

Although Bennett’s presentation lets his readers get clear and easy access to Kant’s complicated theory of morality, he does not properly discuss some of Kant’s most important terms, such as the good will which, as something good in itself regardless of its result or instrumental value, makes an absolute condition that renders one’s action good.

Also, when a human person is claimed to be an end that needs to be respected in itself, it is because of the fact that she is autonomous. However, it may seem that Bennett too casually deals with this concept of autonomy. One thing that he does not sufficiently explain in his book is that a human person is autonomous in a sense that, as a rational being, she is the one who establishes universal laws that are built on rationality; thus, she is not only under the rules but also creates rules by herself. However, since a human person consists not only of rationality but also of other conditions such as egoistical motives or feelings, universal laws based on rationality do not always perfectly match one’s subjective principles and inclinations; and this explains why there should be an ‘ought’ in spite of the fact that every person is an agent with reason.

In addition, it may have been better if Bennett had shown how Kant’s ethics is connected to his metaphysics which distinguishes the sensible world and the intelligible world. A human person, as a rational being, belongs to both worlds: As the one that belongs to the sensible world, she is under the natural laws, which refer to such things as inclinations and egoism; on the other hand, as the one that belongs to the intelligible world, she is under the laws that are purely based on rationality. This explains why one’s subjective rules cannot perfectly match the universal laws al-
though she is a genuine rational being.

These more detailed discussions may help the readers understand the structure and the premises of Kant’s ethics more clearly.

In Chapter 6, Bennett presents Aristotle’s virtue theory as an alternative to both utilitarianism and Kant’s deontology. Both moral theories cannot persuasively handle the so-called problem of “near and dear” because of their exclusive commitment to impartiality. In utilitarianism, since the value of each person’s happiness is always the same, one is obliged to sacrifice the happiness of her own family members or close friends whenever it is required to increase the happiness of all; on the other hand, observing Kant’s categorical imperatives may often collide with cherishing and prioritizing those who are in special relationships with the agent.

Bennett also points out that, especially in the case of deontology, since it consists in categorical imperatives that focus on discerning which action is not morally allowed, it does not provide people with clear answers to such questions as how to live and what kind of life is more valuable.

In addition, Bennett finds that both utilitarianism and deontology pay little attention to human passion or emotion because they see it as the source of irrationality. However, ignoring it may result in what is quite contrary to our commonsensical morality.

Bennett presents Aristotle’s virtue ethics as an antidote to these problems. Virtue ethics discusses the issue of what the meaningful way of life is, while not excluding human passion from our moral thinking. Also, it considers various aspects of one’s real life when dealing with moral issues.

Bennett sees the agent’s own happiness as the starting point of virtue ethics. Contrary to other moral theories that are interested in establishing the rules that are impartial or a fair value-system, virtue ethics pursues the
agent’s own happiness. As Bennett points out, one can be happy when she functions well as a human person, i.e., when she flourishes by living a rational life well.

According to Bennett, a virtue is a human quality such as benevolence, fortitude, justice, and so on, which is necessary for any person to live a rational life, which is good. Also, a virtue is a disposition that elicits one’s reliable reaction to particular features of situations. Thus, in virtue ethics, a morally right action is an action that comes from a virtue — not in the sense that a certain action is in itself virtuous but in a sense that a virtuous person’s action is morally right.

In relation to the issue of integrating human passion into moral thinking, Aristotle, according to Bennett, claims that reason can teach and control human passions and emotions. Reason makes our emotional reactions proper and reasonable and thus helps us form a right disposition to act properly in certain situations. In this way, we acquire a virtue that lies at the middle point between two related vices; for example, fortitude is at the middle point between cowardice and recklessness.

After presenting Aristotle’s virtue ethics, Bennett raises some challenges to the theory. First, since this theory compares various ways of real life and prioritizes some of them, it may easily fall into elitism. Also, virtues can sometimes turn out to be vices in some specific situations; for example, the fortitude of a thief may be considered as a vice. However, in response to this objection, Bennett claims that whether a certain quality makes a virtue depends on the context of the unity of virtues: All virtues need to be harmonized among themselves, and this ability of harmonizing all virtues itself comes from a virtue, which is practical wisdom that can be acquired by way of real life experience.

However, what Bennett seems to take as one of the most powerful
challenges to virtue ethics is the theory’s apparent inclination toward egocentrism, given its commitment to the agent’s own happiness. For example, when one has the quality of kindness, this quality makes a virtue because it contributes to the agent’s own flourishing and happiness; but, should it not be such that a purely kind person ought not to expect any reward for her kind action toward others?

To solve this problem, Bennett suggests that a virtue be not of an instrumental value but of a constitutive value. That is to say, it is not that one achieves happiness using her virtues as instruments but that she flourishes because she possesses various virtues harmoniously as the constituents of her happy life. If so, one does not execute the virtue of kindness simply with the intention of increasing her happiness; rather, she shows pure kindness towards others and this in itself is how she flourishes and lives happily.

Furthermore, in concern with this issue, Bennett briefly introduces Alasdair MacIntyre’s theory of virtue: There are some practices that have internal good; when one commits herself to these practices, although she may get some advantages such as fame and money while pursuing them, her intention is not to acquire these advantages but to pursue the intrinsic good of the practices; and a virtue is a quality that enables the agent to be committed to these practices. If this is the case, although one may have benefitted by her own virtuous actions, she can still be free from the suspicion of egocentrism.

One of Aristotle’s central points that Bennett seems to be missing in this chapter is that happiness, which makes the fundamental criterion of whether an action is morally right or wrong, is not merely a static state but an action; thus, according to Aristotle, happiness refers to one’s soul’s activity in accord with virtue. It should be noted that possessing virtue in
itself is not what makes one happy; rather, virtues in action — or, one’s active life in accordance with virtue — constitutes one’s happiness.

There is another issue I would like to point out. Aristotle’s virtue ethics is interwoven with his understanding of the human soul. After dividing the human soul roughly into two parts, i.e., one with reason and the other without it, Aristotle claims that the virtues that correspond to the rational part of the soul are the intellectual virtues, such as practical wisdom, understanding, and so on. However, in the human soul, there is another part that does not belong to the rational part in its primary sense but is related to it: It is a volitional or emotional part that does not have reason in itself but is persuaded by reason or resists against it. Aristotle claims that the characteristic virtues, such as fortitude and moderation, are the ones that correspond to this part of the soul. However, Bennett does not seem to provide his readers with an understanding of this connection between Aristotle’s theory of human soul and his virtue ethics, which might have helped his readers to understand Aristotle’s moral theory more accurately and in detail.

3. Part III: Further Directions for Moral Thinking

In Chapter 7, Bennett deals with questions in concern with the relationship between morality and God. For those who believe the validity of any one of the aforementioned three moral theories, whether or not God exists has no implication on morality, which is contrary to the theists’ claims that, without God, what remains will only be the material world that lacks meaning or value in itself, and thus that morality, as a mere creation of human beings, will lose its true authority and meaning.
However, I must briefly mention that it is not easy to follow this theist argument, as presented by Bennett. Even if there is no God, it does not necessarily follow that a rational soul does not exist. Then it is still a strong possibility that, for example, a spiritual realm or aspect which supervenes on a purely material world exists while bestowing genuine meaning and value on the world even if there is no God. If this were the case, Bennett’s claim that, without God, what remains will only be a material world that lacks meaning and value does not seem valid.

In addition, after presenting some theists’ claim that, without divine revelation, one may not acquire any knowledge on morality at all, Bennett persuasively claims that to judge whether certain divine revelation is genuine, it may be the case that there needs to be some moral knowledge that is independent of one’s belief in God.

In Chapter 8, Bennett presents three kinds of contractualism. First, there is Hobbesian contractualism that sees morality as a human invention based on egoism: Since individuals could not survive in the lawless natural state, they invented moral rules to protect their own interests and increase their mutual benefits. Second, there is Rawlsian contractualism that is based on the value of fairness: Although it also assumes morality as something for the individuals’ mutual benefits, according to the theory, moral duties come out of the value of fairness and justice, not from the individuals’ egoistic self-interests. Third, there is Kantian contractualism that is based on the autonomy of human persons as ends in themselves: Morality is not for mutual benefits but for mutual justification, i.e., for finding a way of communal life that we can justify to one another.

Finally, in Chapter 9, Bennett introduces Marxian and Nietzschean critiques to morality. According to Bennett, Marx sees morality as something that speaks for the interests of the dominant class of a society. That
is, morality is the invention of the dominant class to justify their privileges, and thus it needs to be resisted as something faulty and deceiving. Unlike Marx, Nietzsche considers morality as a means for the weak to deceive and rule over the strong; thus, to get over the nihilism of modern society, morality — especially Christian morality — needs to be overturned, and people ought to learn how to recover their instinctive self-confidence and not try to justify themselves and their own actions in the name of morality.

So far in this book review, I have presented the main topics of each chapter in Bennett’s *What Is This Thing Called Ethics?* and provided some critiques in relation to what Bennett seems to be missing in discussing each moral theory, rather than with respect to the validity of Bennett’s own arguments, in a rather casual way. All in all, regardless of whether my critiques are to the point, I strongly believe that Bennett’s work has successfully achieved its aim of providing the readers with a broad but clear and precise understanding of various moral theories in a very persuasive way.