

Does Utilitarianism or Kant's Moral Theory Present a Totally Satisfactory Theory of Ethics?

Utilitarianism is a teleological theory of ethics. It maintains that it is the total consequence of an action which determines its rightness or wrongness. It means that the morality of an action is to be safely determined through an assessment of its consequences. With utilitarianism it is not just personal happiness or self interest that counts, but the happiness and interest of everyone concerned. The basic principle of utilitarianism is 'an action is right if it produces the greatest good for the greatest number.' In utilitarianism actions have no intrinsic value. In utilitarianism all people, ethically speaking are equal but the morally right action is the one which produces the greatest overall positive consequences for the greatest number. This means in utilitarianism the majority are more important than the minority.

Two of the most influential utilitarianists are Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stewart Mill (1806-1873). Jeremy Bentham, a man of great intellectual ability stated that we should act in a way which would maximise pleasure and minimise pain. This position is known as hedonistic utilitarianism. Its aim is to lower overall pain and increase overall pleasure.

What is produced from the consequence of an action is called utility. Pleasure, happiness and preference of satisfaction can be included in this term. It is used to calculate the moral worth of an action. Bentham introduced the hedonic calculus to measure this. It was the idea that human pleasures and pains are measurable and that accordingly actions can be judged right or wrong on the basis of a kind of 'moral arithmetic.'

John Stewart Mill's moral philosophy was a modified version of utilitarianism. He based his theory on happiness rather than pleasure like Bentham. It had a definite advantage over Bentham as it was based on a better standard rather than mere pleasure.

In utilitarianism there are no certain ethics and morals which are agreed by everyone. Obviously there are some examples such as rape and murder when the majority know they are wrong. Therefore, utilitarianism could be plausible because most things, which are agreed to be good, are agreed universally. Actions which are reckoned to be the worst are the ones which cause the most suffering like rape. Therefore utilitarianism does seem to provide a satisfactory theory of ethics. It provides a valuable corrective against the sort of excessively rule based ethics which come naturally to some society. The principle of utilitarianism, 'the greatest good of the greatest number' can be an effective way of defeating prejudice and selfishness.

However making a moral decision means calculating an action's effect. But how can we measure all the possible consequences of an action, and how do we know that an action will produce the greatest net happiness. At what point do you make the calculation and determine that the original action was right or wrong

If you were to follow utilitarianism you would have to have special responsibilities rather than what you feel is right. For example, two men are drowning one is your father and the other is a famous scientist on the verge of curing cancer. A utilitarian would urge you to save the scientist, even though we have a special duty to our parents.

Lying would sometimes be acceptable to a utilitarian as long as it didn't directly effect the person you lied about.

As utilitarianism is a forward looking theory, obligations and promises wouldn't matter as they were made in the past. A utilitarian would look back on the promise and weigh up the possible future outcomes, so their word cannot be relied on.

In utilitarianism it would be okay for a judge to sentence someone to death, even if they know they were innocent, if he believed that a greater good would come of it like pleasing an angry mob and restoring law and order. This maybe regarded as unjust in the way that good is distributed.

The hedonic calculus maybe a way of working out utility but it would be in reality difficult to measure people's pleasure and pain as everyone is different and may experience things at different levels. Utilitarianism suggests that you make guesses to the likely effects of the actions that you consider.

Deontology is an ethical system which is very different to utilitarianism. Deontology is the study of moral necessity, duty or obligation. It is where the morality of an act depends on the nature of the act itself.

A deontological view holds that moral worth is an intrinsic feature of human actions determined by formal rules of conduct. Deontologists, like Kant states that moral obligation rests solely on duty, without requiring any reference to the practical consequences. Kant says that, if a moral law is to be unconditionally and universally binding it must contain something that is good in itself and the highest good.

Kant states 'it is possible to conceive anything "good without qualification" except a good will.' This means to be a good man you must have good will. The goodness of an action is not dependent on the effects, if it were it could be considered of unconditional value. Kant believes that it is the motive behind and having the right intention that makes the good will good. Kant says that the motive behind a good will is to act for the sake of duty, this means that an act is carried out because it is the right thing to do.

The categorical imperative is "act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will it should become a universal law." In other words act only according to that rule, maxim or principle by which you can simultaneously will that it ought to become a universal law.

The categorical imperative is used to recognise your duty. It is based on the ability to think objectively and reason.

Kant himself offers examples of distinguishing duty from self interest.

'...It certainly accords with duty that a grocer should not overcharge his inexperienced customer; and where there is much competition a sensible shopkeeper refrains from doing and keeps to a fixed and general price for everybody so that a child can buy from him just as well as anyone else. Thus

people are served honestly; but this is not nearly enough to justify us in believing that the shopkeeper has acted in this way from duty or from principles of fair dealing; his interest required him to do so. We cannot assume him to have in addition an immediate inclination towards his customers, leading him, as it were out of love, to give no man preference over another in the matter of price. Thus the action was done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination, but solely from purposes of self-interest.'

A strength of Kant's philosophy is that it takes account of justice and does not, like utilitarianism, use some people for the benefit of others. The universal nature of the categorical imperative and the intrinsic value of each rational being ensures .

Kant also distinguishes duty from inclination and stops us assuming what gives us pleasure is morally right. According to Kant, inconsistency is the essence of immorality. Any rule that when universalised becomes contradictory must be dismissed as immoral. So for example 'always accept help, never give it' lacks moral worth. It would of course be quite possible for you to obey it, but it would be quite impossible for everybody to obey it. It could not be universalised because if everybody refused to help, there would be no one to receive it.

However some rules can be applied with no moral worth, for example: whenever anyone buys a new book they must put their name on the inside. This can be universalised but it has no moral worth.

While all people may be rational, not everyone has the same temperaments and we do have different levels of tolerance in different situations. Kant believes that telling lies or breaking promises are always wrong, because neither can be universalised. But are there must be some situations where telling a lie is justified.

What happens if you need to tell a lie to keep a promise. For example, if you promise a friend that you will hide him or her from a murderer and later that murderer asks you where your friend is. What is the answer, if you tell the truth you break a promise and if you keep the promise you tell a lie. Kants theory offers no answer to his dilemma which is a major weakness of his argument. If you were actually in his dilemma you would have to make an exception to the rule of truth telling.

Kants theory either leads to a place where no moral decision can be made, or to a situation in which you may be doing your duty but it may be wrong.

Another theory of ethics is Aristotle's theory of virtues.

Aristotle believed that happiness is the ultimate good in human life. Just like Utilitarianists he thought that what was right and good are the actions, which result in happiness. He insisted that the happy life is the life of virtuous action. Aristotle said that a virtue must be an aspect of the soul. A virtue is said to be a kind of mean. His list of virtues are:

Courage, Temperance, Liberality, Magnificence, pride, good temper, friendliness, truthfulness, wittiness, shame and justice.

For Aristotle the aim of happiness would always be for the well being of the entire community. Aristotle assumed that the ultimate advantage of the

individual would be identical to the well being of the community in which he or she lived.

Many of the aspects of in Aristotle's virtues are social for example temperance- which includes the enjoyment of pleasure as well as moderation, a man who abstained from sex, food and drinking would not be considered virtuous by the Greek's as they maybe by someone today. The Greeks also believed that people who couldn't tell a joke or take one weren't virtuous. Being able to throw good parties and having a good time were all encouraged by the Greeks. Aristotle's ethics reflects how the Ancient Greeks lived. The most essential virtue that was not on the list is honour. In Ancient Greece honour was a fusion between the individual citizen and the community.

If I were to choose a list of virtues I would include:

A good sense of humour, courage, intelligence, trustworthy, not taking yourself seriously.