

## **Problems with Utilitarian and Kantian Ethics.**

The issue in question is one with regards to morality, the problem of answering such questions as how does one live the good life? What is the good? How does one determine which actions are right and which actions are wrong? It is interesting from the get go that humans seek to answer these questions, one could assume that our own intuition could answer these questions for us, or turn to the respective religions that are overflowing with rules of morality and life laws. Nevertheless, throughout history theorists and philosophers alike have attempted to answer these questions through analysis and occasionally under the influence of their particular religions as well. Today we study a range of philosophies from Plato to Peter Singer, and in most cases we find that the moment a theory seems to be adaptable and just to our own lives, a flaw surfaces and is usually followed by many more which make us question our faith in such a theory initially. Kantian ethics and utilitarianism do just that. The biggest debate in ethics today seems to be between Kant's categorical imperative and the utilitarian's greatest happiness principle. To realistically examine these theories we must recognize that there are significant problems with both ideas, which lead us back to the questions we started with. It is apparent however, that alternatives to these two conflicting schools of thought have been offered. One example is that of WD Ross who proposes some inclinations as to how both theories may be used and how certain aspects of them must be discarded at the outset. One popular criticism of utilitarianism is that it deals too much with the consequences of one's actions, and the same for Kant except that it focuses too much upon intentions. For the purposes of this essay I will explain how both theories

fail as moral guideline on how to live life, and touch upon some components of morality, which I feel are imperative in order to live the good life.

Utilitarianism is a theory that maintains that pleasure/happiness is the only intrinsic good, and that whatever act, choice etc. that any one person makes is to follow the maxim that it should create the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Of course there are more complicated explanations (and alterations) of this theory, but in sum, this is the main point. There are many critiques of utilitarianism and in the text “Eleven Objections to Utilitarianism” by Sterling Harwood; eleven criticisms that are often argued are displayed. I have chosen some of the arguments I find relevant to discrediting the theory in order to present why utilitarianism is not a theory that we should base our moral actions on.

Many find that utilitarianism is too demanding of us, that it asks too much of us when placed in real situations. An example is given of a perfectly healthy person going into a doctor's office who has five other patients in need of transplants. Under utilitarianism this person should sacrifice him or herself in order to save the other five. This situation clearly shows how unrealistic the demands of the utilitarians are. Why should someone voluntarily give up their own life in order to save the lives of 5 strangers? Utilitarianism maintains that it is about numbers, because five peoples suffering being alleviated for the cost of one is justified. For the healthy individual, this type of personal detachment from one's own life is impossible (Harwood 181). This argument is sufficient to discredit utilitarianism, but there are a number of others, which also have quite good point, as we shall see.

It has been claimed that the greatest happiness for the greatest number is unjust. It allows for decisions to be made which truly are not fair and don't serve justice to those who are deserving. We are presented with the case of the scientist who has killed his wife just before he

discovers the cure for cancer. Utilitarianism would allow the scientist to go on with his studies in order to find the cure before he is jailed, because his cure would improve the lives of many others, the integrity of the murdered wife is defenseless under this theory. Harwood presents a defense from the standpoint of the utilitarian, that “we need not develop a moral principle that covers every imaginable problem in every fantasy land.”<sup>1</sup> This argument is responded by saying that regardless of how unreal the scenarios may seem it is more than possible that they will eventually happen, and even if they don’t, we couldn’t have predicted that they wouldn’t in the first place. Another way that utilitarianism is unjust is that it allows for the ill treatment of others, for example slavery. If there are six slaves on a farm, and ten people being served by them, the slaves are outnumbered therefore they are to remain serving the ten people. If we went by the laws of utilitarianism then slavery could have never been abolished.

One interesting argument that Harwood presents is that utilitarianism requires us to enter to the experience machine mentioned in an earlier chapter of our text. It is maintained that we should spend our life in the experience machine for it could be set to maximum satisfaction. Why not? Some may ask, Harwood’s response is humorous and rings truth: “A life spent inside the experience machine seems like one of mental masturbation, an unreal and degraded life unworthy of us...”<sup>2</sup> Since utilitarianism maintains that the only true good is satisfaction or happiness, it places no intrinsic value on truth, knowledge and reality which are important aspects of life and aren’t present inside the machine (Harwood 188). In addition, it seems as though a life spent in a machine producing happiness would be quite selfish and unproductive, what about reproduction? Where would one find the time to meet someone they care for and then produce babies to continue the evolution of the human race? Something to think about.

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<sup>1</sup> Harwood, Sterling. “Eleven Objections to Utilitarianism.” In Moral Philosophy. Ed. by Louis Pojman. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998 (183)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (188)

The final argument against utilitarianism that I find relevant is that it makes decisions on an interpersonal level that are truly impossible to compare. The funny thing about humans is our capacity to distinguish what we like and what we don't like. There is no one who can determine another's capacity for pain or suffering. If my getting a tattoo feels great, and my friend's getting a tattoo makes her faint from the pain, one cannot state that the actual amount of pain is any less for me or any more for her. It is strictly in the individual and each situation can only be evaluated on a contextual basis. Pleasure and pain are solely subjective experiences; there is no accounting or disputing matters of taste. The masochist's pleasure comes from what most would consider pain, but if another's physical pain truly feels good to someone else, who is to say that they are wrong? Utilitarianism does not take this into account. It assumes the consequences of an action will automatically cause either happiness or unhappiness, the problem is it is impossible to dictate a moral theory in this manner because humans are an ever unpredictable, evolving species feeling and experiencing different things in different ways *all the time*.

Kant's moral theory or deontology has similar problems regardless of how much it differs from utilitarianism. In the case of deontology the problem lies with the matter of intentions. Kantian ethics maintain that the intentions one has are all that matter when placed with arduous moral choices. At the base of Kantian ethics is his *categorical imperative*, which is a set of rules that outline "that only the good will, a will to act out of a sense of duty, has unqualified moral worth."<sup>3</sup> The categorical imperative simply, is this: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."<sup>4</sup> And that we should never treat anyone as a means to an end.

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<sup>3</sup> Pojman, Louis. "Deontological Ethics." Moral Philosophy. Ed. by Louis Pojman. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998 (194)

<sup>4</sup> <http://philosophy.about.com/homework/philosophy/library/blqkant.htm?terms=categorical+imperative>

According to Kantian ethics there are universal moral laws, which we must follow unconditionally. There are many problems with this, and first and foremost I feel that Kant is trying to place a one-dimensional theory of ethics on a three-dimensional world full of unexpected incidents. Humans have proven time and time again to be extremely unpredictable and the nature of the earth doesn't help either. By the nature of the earth I mean the unexpected, unexplained happenings that occur and do not cease to surprise us. Kant's theory is too authoritative for us to adopt and positively function with. Admittedly, it is a noble theory, naturally with good intentions but it seems as though his Christian background had too much (dare I say) of an affect on him. It is unrealistic and inapplicable to our society and humanity, because sometimes we need to lie, sometimes we need to deceit and sometimes we need to kill.

Another problem with Kant's theory is that it not only fails to solve some of the tough problems we face, it creates more problems. Take this situation for example, C wants to kill X, C knocks on B's door and demands to know where X is. B can either lie and say he doesn't know (even though he knows very well that X is hiding in his basement) or he can tell the truth and thus allow C to murder X. Under Kant's theory B must tell the truth which is arbitrary in the obvious sense, but also, if B could lie to allow C to calm down until she is thinking rationally and able to discuss the problem with X, then the murder could be avoided altogether. If B follows Kant's laws then he creates more problems, like dealing with a murder, the guilt, the loss of X etc. I don't see and others agree, how this really solves any problem, it really is just a code of behaviour to live by and it seems like a simple cop out to respond to life's obstacles.

The central theme in Kant's ethical philosophy is that one's intentions out rule the consequences that result from any actions. Again, this is a noble approach but there is a lot more to it then intentions as we have seen from many of the cases presented. The trolley situation for

example, where the brakes stop functioning and the only way out is to either kill five workers on the track or one to the side. The Kantian answer would be not to steer away from the five workers because it would be unfair to use the one to the side as a means to save the others' lives. This is a tough case no matter how you look at it. The utilitarian view seems like a better answer, sacrifice one for the greater number, but regardless of how you look at it, this case is no win. The main problem with Kantian ethics is that it deals with intentions, and while they are important in distinguishing one's actions, they are not the only factor in question when placed with life's dilemmas.

There are of course a number of alternative views of morality that criticize utilitarianism and deontology there are also those which don't. WD Ross upholds that utilitarianisms focus on consequences don't line up with what is right, and that Kant's universal principles are not absolute objectives. He further maintains that moral principles are *prima facie* duties which are duties whose "intrinsic value is not dependant on circumstances [but] their application is."<sup>5</sup> Prima facie translates: 'at first site' in Latin, we presume them to be of obligation when first approached, but may be superseded if the circumstances prescribe. Ross goes on to stress that there are instances when certain duties may be overridden and gives the example of breaking an appointment in order to help someone in grave need. (Ross 231) Knowing that a duty has extreme value or worth is very different from acting against that duty when the time calls. Ross's intuitionist stance on morality is valuable in comparison to utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. In a world where absolutely everything is contextual, we cannot come to conclusions on things based on hard rules. There are always miniscule details, which must play a part in the decisions we come to.

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<sup>5</sup>Pojman, Louis. Moral Philosophy. Ed. by Louis Pojman. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998 (229)

The morality that Ross circumscribes is one that is noble and even possible. William Frankena also brings about an interesting point, among others, but one stands out. That it seems right that we promote the most good that we can while trying to prevent as much evil as possible. He argues that utilitarianism seems to forget the part about preventing evil and allows the greatest good to rule, which leaves space for harm to be done, not serving justice. (Frankena 240) He believes that there is a *prima facie* duty to do good and prevent harm, but this 'ideal' is compromised for utilitarianism. I believe that Kant forgets this ideal as well with his universal principle theory. Harm is not being prevented by not lying to someone who needs to be lied to, by keeping your promise to lunch while you watch someone choke on the street. Both of these theories fail to recognize the main point theme in morality, when one's actions cause harm, the goal is not being served.

Ross and Frankena both have good points using our intuitions while, keeping in mind that doing good and at the same time preventing evil is probably a good way to live. There are individuals who evidently, do not know what is right and wrong for various reasons, these characters usually end up imprisoned but wouldn't consider applying an ethical theory in the first place so we needn't worry about them and their intuitions. It could be argued, as it has that one's good could very well be quite different from another's, this is where we utilize our intuitions in the meanwhile, there may be some circumstances where utilitarianism is applicable – the trolley example, or others where Kantian ethics are of better use. With these two tools, promoting good/preventing harm and using one's intuitions, a more flexible system of ethics is created allowing for more leeway in some of the tough situations presented.

The problem of morality is clearly one that requires much thought, questioning and general brainwork. There are so many writings on the topic, it's possible to lose one's self in all

of it. Of all the things I have made it clear how utilitarianism fails as an ethical theory, it is too demanding of us, it is unjust, it allows for us to enter the virtual reality world of the experience machine and lastly that the question of personal preference cannot be addressed when approaching ethics in this manner. It has also been made clear why Kant's deontology isn't workable, hard laws and rules about how to conduct one's life don't solve problems, the world is too unpredictable, which also brings us to the next point that Kant's theory doesn't do well when presented with hard choices, the trolley for example. Utilitarianism's reliance on consequence and Kant's on intention is where both theories find their major downfall, because as they display for each other both must be taken into consideration.

Ross's intuitionism brings a little clearing to the murky waters of morality and Frankena as well, raises many valuable points in "A Reconciliation of Ethical Theories" which leads us to believe then that morality is plainly a contextual matter and also a personal one. We need to approach each situation with caution and empathy and use our best-felt judgment when faced with tough choices, while keeping in mind that there are things that are wrong and right which are usually innate to each and every one of us.



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