

Free essay on ethical theories of kant and mill

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The theories of both Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill have played an important role in framing conceptions of modern philosophical theories. Although most modern philosophers have critiqued these theories, they are still important since they form the very basis of philosophical understanding and thought. This essay will summarize, reflect on and respond to the theories of Utilitarianism by John Stuart Mill as well as the Deontological theory by Immanuel Kant.

Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill's utilitarian thought is heavily characterized by classical liberalism and positivism and is a 'consequentialist' theory. The utilitarian theory is a principle which believes that a right or wrong action depends upon the likely consequences or effects of that action on the overall happiness of society. (Gerard 430) Thus, in simple terms, given a number of solutions for a certain problem, the theory would choose the solution that gives the maximum benefit or happiness to the majority of the beneficiaries. This solution would also be appropriate or inappropriate using the same yardstick of the overall happiness of the majority in a given society.

The definition stated, therefore, leads one to the understanding that any

action would be appropriate when it tends to promote happiness and inappropriate when it tends to produce an effect that reverses happiness. In the case mentioned, one can understand Mill's definition of Happiness as the intended pleasure and absence of pain, while one could interpret Unhappiness as suffering and pain due to the deprivation of pleasure. If one goes a step further, one understands that Mill's theory of happiness and the allied definitions have an end goal of pleasure and complete freedom from suffering. Thus, the utilitarian theory would advocate the use of any and all resources and efforts towards the achievement of this particular ideal. Having established the superiority of Happiness, Mill also advocated the concept of Hierarchy of Pleasures. The concept states that given two distinct pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference—irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it—that is the more desirable pleasure. (438) Therefore, one can understand that even within two pleasures the utilitarian theory tends to weigh each of these pleasures on two factors, namely the experiences of those who may have experienced these pleasures and the quality of pleasures. In doing so, the preference of the theory would naturally lean in favor of those pleasures that require the utilization of the higher human faculties, for instance, one would rather prefer to be a dissatisfied human being than a satisfied animal. However, most people, at times, behave in a manner contrary to this hierarchy. In doing so, they end up choosing the lower pleasures in the hierarchy that are of the bodily and sensory nature rather than those that might provide mental pleasure. This choice deprives a person of his character, aspirations as well as intellectual

prowess leading to such a person's imminent downfall in life. To highlight this Mill says " It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." (439) I would certainly agree that some kinds of pleasure are higher in quality than others. The ambience, the feeling and the aftermath of a Mozart symphony is highly uplifting, positive and pleasant to one's mental well being. On the other hand, a wrestling match on television may not have much effect of any kind on one's mental well being with some people arguing that the effect may even be slightly negative. Both of these are subjective pleasures depending on one's individual viewpoint, but in the hierarchy of pleasures the Mozart concert would rank several grades above the wrestling match from my viewpoint. Thus, in my opinion, I would agree with the relative hierarchy of pleasures based on quality.

One can understand that both pain and pleasure are not homogeneous indicating that the two are interdependent and that pain is heterogeneous with pleasure. This thought in the utilitarian theory indicates that both pain and pleasure are related and when one chooses a lower pleasure, there is always a possibility of such a pleasure leading to pain. The theory, therefore, advocates that one must make a choice that reflects a benefit or happiness for one's higher faculties rather than for one's base desires since such a choice would ensure that the experience of pleasure would not be followed by the unwanted experience of pain. However, when one tries to apply this concept to aggregate pleasures it becomes nearly impossible to determine which of the individual pleasures (of the sum aggregate pleasures) might have contributed to the cause of pain and suffering in one's life. For instance, if one constantly chose a lower pleasure along with other higher

pleasures from the hierarchy it would not be possible for a person to determine which of the pleasure caused suffering. This would lead to a mistaken notion that one of the higher pleasures might have caused the pain when, in fact, it might have been a lower pleasure that might have been responsible for the suffering.

Another important aspect of the utilitarian theory is that for any given individual who adheres to the utility principle a right conduct would constitute the happiness of all concerned and not the agent's happiness.

(446) In doing so, the individual must develop a point of view similar to an impartial spectator. For this possibility to happen, our social structure should be changed in order to place an individual's happiness and that of the society in relative harmony. This should be followed by appropriate changes in the educational system that would then help individuals to adjust themselves to the utilitarian ideals.

One can now proceed to examine the implications of Utilitarianism by looking at some of the positive as well as negative critiques of the utility theory.

Some of the positive critiques of the utilitarian principle are the general happiness and the good of all people concerned as its basis and the means of achieving the same through the nobility of people's character in a society.

This general happiness and the good of all people is also the logical end of this theory. The second important aspect of this theory is the inherent solutions that the theory provides to the positive evils of life, such as physical and mental suffering, including poverty, diseases, worthlessness and other ills. Lastly, one of the important points is that this theory does recognize the human ability of self-sacrifice for the greater good of others

unlike other schools of thought. However, the utilitarian theory believes that devotion to the happiness of society (or mankind) and self-renunciation related to this cause is laudable.

There have been several negative critiques of the Utilitarian school of thought. 1) The main objection to theory comes from the opposition to the concept that Happiness is the End. Philosophers believe that exalted states of happiness and pleasure are temporary and last only for a few moments or days. Our present educational and social system, further, precludes us from the kind of happiness that the theory illustrates, since it does not cultivate an individual's mind to work for the greater good of society. 2) The second point of objection comes from the fact that most humans would be selfish in nature and when in a position of power would make choices benefitting themselves. One observes this on a daily basis in politics and also sees that these factors lead to a reverse effect of the Happiness principle. 3) As mentioned, while the Utilitarian view does respect an individual's ability of self-sacrifice for the greater good of others, it refuses to admit that sacrifice, by itself, is good. Thus, there may be several instances where sacrifices done with honorable intentions may be disregarded by this school of thought. 4) While the theory advocates working for the greater good of the society it risks leaving out the minority part of the population in its quest for happiness. 5) Most people believe that the ideals of utilitarian thought are extremely difficult to achieve since a majority of the actions that society considers positive in today's time are those that benefit individuals or a few people and not the vast majority. 6) Another important critique of utilitarianism also states that the theory renders people cold, unforgiving and

devoid of moral feelings towards individuals. This, in turn, leads to a void in the ethical standards of dealings between individuals. 7) Experts believe that utilitarian thought is both Godless and Expedient. This further renders it inapplicable to a large number of societies since the majority of the population may be God fearing.

The positive and negative critiques discussed clearly lead one to infer that while some aspects of Utilitarianism are positive and applicable, a larger part of the theory is inapplicable to our modern society and its social systems. Further, the negative points of the Utilitarian principle make it a difficult theory to apply and implement.

Deontology

Deontology is a non-consequentialist moral theory that was largely represented and developed by Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, the only thing in this world that is intrinsically good is 'good-will.' Good will is intrinsically good because it is highly valued by itself and not as something through which one can achieve a higher good. One can consider something that has an intrinsic value to be valuable by itself without any external provision, for instance Gold is an example of a metal that is intrinsically valuable. Therefore, analogically, one can say that Good Will much like gold is intrinsically valuable since it has a certain perceived value in the mind of a user and does not require any external provision to make it valuable.

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world (or even out of it) which can be called good without qualification, except a good will. While one may be gifted with attributes such as intelligence, judgment, courage et. al., or with material possessions, Kant believes that it is only good will that makes a

person eligible for true happiness. (340) Therefore, one understands the emphasis that Kant places on the concept of goodwill.

An important constituent of good will is the concept of duty. When one performs a certain act, as per Kant, without placing one's own selfish interests at the forefront with a sole view to be beneficent towards others and to take delight in the happiness of others, one can be said to be performing one's duty in a proper and ethical manner. There is, however, a very fine line of distinction in this case since it is extremely difficult to distinguish between a person who performs a duty ethically for his own benefit or for those of others. The theory also states that a duty done ethically keeping in mind one's own interest is also not included in the list of ethical discharge of one's duty. Therefore, Kant states that a person's moral value is highest when he is beneficent, not from duty but from inclination. By saying this Kant feels that the highest morality lies in working with a sense of inclination for the particular task rather than solely having a sense of duty. The conception of an objective principle (as long as it is obligatory for a will) is called a command, and the formula of the command is called an imperative. All imperatives fall into one of two different types - Categorical Imperative and Hypothetical Imperative. (Gerard 351) Hypothetical Imperative represents the practical necessity of a possible action as means to something else that is willed or which one might possibly will (in future). The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as necessary of itself without reference to another end as objectively necessary. Since all practical human laws represent a possible action as good and necessary, all imperatives are formulae that resolve an action. If

one performs an action that is good only as a means to something else, then one can classify such an imperative as hypothetical. On the other hand, if one conceives an action as being good in itself and consequently as being necessarily the principle of a will which of itself conforms to reason, then it is categorical. (351) The hypothetical imperative is a problematic and an assertorial practical principle, while the categorical imperative is an apodeictic principle.

Kant further introduced two formulations of the categorical imperative. The first formulation states, " Always treat persons as ends in themselves and not as a means to your own ends." (Gerard 363) The second formulation states, " Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature." (Gerard 357) The first formulation tells us to treat people as ends in themselves. This means that the people whom one transacts should be treated as fellow beings having a certain intrinsic value. In other words, this statement means that these persons have a value that is not dependant on their usefulness. However, the formulation does not imply that one should not use a person for one's purposes, but instead tells us one should refrain from using a person solely as a means to achieve one's goals. The second formulation tells us to act only on universal " maxims." A maxim, in this case, is to be understood as a generalized incentive to act in a specific way under a given number of conditions. One can universalize a maxim if one wills that all persons act in accordance with that specific maxim. One could consider an instance to highlight the formulations. Consider that one borrows money from a friend for utilizing it for purchasing consumer goods. The money borrowed is used by oneself for one's own benefit and

falls in the category of self love. Such an instance, would also contradict itself and thus violate the universal law of nature. In such cases, both the promise and the end would eventually become unsustainable and impossible if everyone were to follow this pattern of borrowing (being universal). Since such a contradiction would also ensure that the end would also be impossible, borrowing money from a friend for any purpose would be a violation of Kantian ethics. Therefore, even in situations where one's grandmother would be seriously ill, the ethical standards would prohibit borrowing money from one's friend.

Based on these propositions, one can examine the concept of perfect and imperfect duties. When one conceives performing a duty that does not lie in accordance with a universal maxim such a duty is said to be an imperfect duty since a performance of such a duty would violate established inflexible moral laws through contradiction. Further, the performance of an imperfect duty would also violate the first proposition since such a duty would always use others a means to one's own ends rather than considering other people as ends themselves. Therefore, it follows that a duty performed in accordance with universal maxims and with due consideration of the proposition that people are not a means to one's own ends can be considered a perfect duty. One can examine the instance of a certain person borrowing money knowing well the inability to repay the same. (358) This instance, clearly fails the maxim and ends up contradicting the applicable universal law since if one tries to apply this law to all people the impractical nature of this law becomes apparent.

At this point, one can examine Kant's views on the philosophy of human

nature. The question of whether all rational humans should judge their actions through the prism of these maxims arises. Any rational being exists as an end in oneself, not only as a means to be randomly used by others will, but in all one's own actions, whether they concern oneself or other rational beings - one must always regard oneself at the same time as an end. It follows that all objects of the inclinations have a conditional worth since if the wants founded on them ceased to exist, then their object would also cease to have any value. Thus the value of any given object that is to be obtained by one's action is always provisional. Those beings whose existence is not dependent on one's own will, but on the will of nature, have nevertheless a relative value as means and one can, therefore, classify them as 'things.' On the other hand, one can classify rational beings as 'persons' since their nature indicates them as ends and restricts their freedom to act as freely as irrational persons.

The most important assumption of the philosophy of human nature according to Kant is rationality since it is this factor in human nature that exists as an end in itself. It, therefore, follows that humanity and rational human nature is an end in itself. This is true because firstly, the principle is universal and applicable to all rational beings with experience playing no significant role in the principle. Secondly, the principle does not present humanity subjectively as an end to people, but as an objective end in the form of a law that contains the highest limiting condition of all our subjective ends. Thus, the principle springs from pure reason and leads to a third principle of the will, "the idea of the will of every rational being as a universally legislative will." (365) This principle places a reliance of a higher

degree on the assumption of rationality among human beings much like Kant's basic assumption of human nature.

The formation of the will of a rational being as the source of all universal laws, so as to judge one's actions leads one to the concept of the kingdom of ends. The concept is an ideal one and something towards which humanity can aspire to reach. In case of all rational beings, in this concept, each one must not treat oneself and others as a means, but in every case and every time as ends. This behavior results in an organized union of rational fellow beings united by a common objective - the objective could be laws, morals or such other ethical principles. Such a union was termed by Kant as a kingdom of ends, since the laws in such a case would ideally view the relation of these beings to each other only as ends and means. In such a kingdom, morality would be determined by appropriate legislation and duty would be applicable to all members of such a kingdom, except the sovereign. However, the necessity to perform duties in these cases would not depend on whims, inclination or fancies, but, rather, on the relation between rational beings and the legislative nature of the will to perform such duties.

One can now examine the positive and negative critique of deontology. The positive critique of deontological theory is that it does away with the highly demanding and cold aspects of consequential ethical theories such as utilitarianism and lays conventional notions of one's moral duties. Also, unlike utilitarianism, the theory gives a certain space for individual rationality and accords to a higher level of freedom to an individual, albeit with certain boundaries. Most importantly the emphasis that the theory places on concepts such as goodwill and duty make it an ideal theory to

nurture and promote good behaviors between individuals in a society.

There are several negative critiques for deontology; one can view the most important of these critical points as outlined. The most important one is the supposed irrationality of according one's duties or permissions. Such an anomaly could make the world morally worse since it restricts human freedom to a very large extent. The second problem is the absence of hierarchy of duties; if ethical standards demand that one perform all duties categorically and if two or more duties pull one in multiple directions, deontology cannot provide a solution due to the absence of the hierarchical principle. The third problem in the theory is the inability of a person to extract information by force from a miscreant or a terrorist since the theory forbids any kind of torture or force on another person and prohibits the use of any person as a means. This can have disastrous consequences for the majority just because of the applicability of deontology to the welfare of a single person. The last problem is that of the moral irrelevance of consequences for this theory does not consider the consequences in most cases. For instance, if one follows the categorical nature of duty and gives away a secret that causes bodily harm to others deontology might view it ethically while principally the action may be wrong. Such paradoxes are the bane of deontology. Thus one can understand that the theories of deontology fail to account for many different modern day scenarios. If one applies these principles to such scenarios the results could be potentially disastrous.

In conclusion, one can understand that while both the utilitarian and the

deontological have several problems in their practical implementation both the theories have contributed to the philosophical understanding of life.

Works Cited

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