Free essay on ethics: what is the most convincing ethical system

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Introduction

Ethics refers to the branch of philosophy that deals with values relating to human conduct especially with respect to the wrongness or rightness of actions and also to the badness or goodness of the cause and ends of such actions (Franena, 1973). An ethical system is a set of correlated values that concern preferable modes of conduct. In other words an ethical system could refer to " a map of the good life" or " ground rules" that aids a person to make the right decision when in a dilemma. Several philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and Jean Jacques Rousseau have over the years suggested different ethical systems. These include divine command system, utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics and ethical relativism. Each ethical system is convincing, right and suitable for different situations. Regulating human behavior in light of the expansion of democracy in contemporary societies, calls for adherence to an accommodating yet firm ethical system (MacKinnon, 2011). I find utilitarianism more compelling than the others. Based on the principles of utilitarianism, what is good to one

person must not necessarily be good to other people provided it is aimed at reducing human suffering and promoting the well-being of humans.

Which is the most convincing ethical system?

Utilitarianism is based on the philosophical theories of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). According to Mill, pleasure and the freedom from pain are universally desirable ends. He asserted that all desirable things are desired for their ability to inherently give pleasure, to promote pleasure or to prevent pain (Lutzer & Lutzer, 1989). As such, utilitarianism ethical system is anchored on the principle of the greatest happiness for all. That is, " actions become proportionately right as they tend to promote happiness, and wrong if they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (John Stuart Mill) (Lutzer & Lutzer, 1989). Mill further explained that happiness could insinuate pleasure, as well as the absence of pain while unhappiness refers to the reverse of these situations.

In order to fairly advance utilitarianism as a more convincing ethical system, it is imperative that I compare and contrast different ethical systems. The Divine Command ethical system bases moral standards on God who is perceived as all knowing. All acts that conform to the regulations laid out in Holy books such as the Bible, Quran among others are perceived to be right while those that do not conform are perceived to be wrong (MacKinnon, 2011). A classic example of Divine Command ethical system is the Christians adherence to the Ten Commandments in the Bible. In this case, the Bible and other Holy books are perceived to contain all the rules and regulations to guide human conduct. Across entirely all religions, Holy books condemn acts

like murder, stealing among others in almost equal measure. Mackinnon, (2011) states that the articulation, enforcement, practices and cultures associated with each religion differs from the others thus diluting reliability on Divine Commands as the basis of a universal ethical system. The stereotyping across religions only serves to alienate Divine Commands from becoming the basis of universal ethical systems. Utilitarianism principles cut across all religions and comprehensively address contemporary ethical dilemmas regardless of the religious settings (Mackinnon, 2011). In comparison to Divine Command, utilitarianism principles are not bound to adhere to certain religious beliefs but rather they advocate for the alienation of pain and the giving of pleasure to all mankind.

Ethical Relativism sometimes called Ethical Cultural Relativism is closely related utilitarianism. This ethical system was fronted by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1112-1778) and states that there are no universal ethical principles; all moral principles that people adhere to are valid relative to cultural tastes (Rachels, 1989). An example of a situation based on Ethical Relativism is the fact that the inhabitants of the South Seas practice cannibalism while the practice is deemed as the most inhumane act in most societies across the world. In an era where globalization has taken root as characterized by massive migrations and the existence of multicultural societies, this ethical system serves to bring tolerance of other cultures and the maintenance of peace in such cultures (Mackinnon, 2011). Miller (2003) asserts that ethical relativism is what helps to keep societies from falling apart. Ethical relativism almost resembles utilitarianism but it is based on cultural beliefs and as such it confuses people on the universal standards of

what is right or wrong. This is especially so for people in multicultural societies. In other words, ethical relativism opens several loopholes for people to justify their actions by their cultures, regardless of whether those acts infringe on the fundamental rights of other people in the society (Mackinnon, 2011). Utilitarian principles could be the key to limiting the confusions brought about by ethical relativity since it is accommodating yet specific.

Utilitarianism contrasts sharply with some ethical systems such as deontology. Deontology was fronted by Emmanuel Kant and is a type of ethical system based on duty and morality. Deontology ethics emphasizes on autonomy, kind acts and justice (Franena, 1973). Based on this system, an act is deemed right or morally permissible if everyone is willing to adhere to the rules directing the act. The strength of this ethical system is based on setting a special moral status for all humans. The United States is seen by many as the world's most advanced democracy and its emphasis on human rights stems from its people's willingness to reason and apply justice universally. This is a good example of an ethical system based on deontology. The fact that moral rules are deemed universal under deontology, removes confusion as all people regardless of their cultures are tuned to adhere the same sets of rules (Miller, 2003). However, deontology specifically addresses human-human conduct and does not address their relationship with other living things. As it stands, rules are abstract. In as much as deontology sets a universal standard on morality and ethics it seems blind to the cultural differences in the society and as such appears domineering and impractical in contemporary societies.

Virtue ethics is another ethical system comparable to utilitarianism. This ethical system states that people can internalize morals and spontaneously act in accordance to the morals they have mastered. This system emphasizes that people ought to live well and achieve excellence by gradually mastering moral behaviors, and continually acting for the good of all. According to (Franena, 1973), the strength of this ethical system lay in its emphasis for people to internalize moral behaviors. Miller (2003) cautions that while mastering moral behaviors seems the ultimate way to cause people to live harmoniously, Virtue Ethics ethical system offers no guidance when it comes to solving ethical dilemmas. The society is rapidly changing and moral issues that were previously frowned upon such as homosexuality and prostitution have been legalized in some societies. These issues are leading ethical dilemmas to which virtue ethics offers no solution for those people cultured in societies where they internalized principles that are reverse to controversial issues. If anything, virtue ethics in ethical dilemmas serves to fuel animosity due to hard lining (Miller, 2003). It is therefore imperative that society adopts an ethical system that is accommodating of divergent views such as utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism closely mirrors modern day constitutions especially in the regard to human rights by aiming at promoting the greater wellbeing for all while ensuring respect for the rule of law in a democratic society. Utilitarianism is pragmatic. The fact that utilitarianism considers the end as a means to justify the acts causes it to gain popularity. In contrast to other ethical system such as deontology, divine command and ethical relativism, utilitarianism is a practical approach to affairs and problems. It focuses on

the consequences of actions and in the process appeals to the common sense of human beings (Mackinnon, 2011). John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) another pioneer of utilitarianism ethics logically supported the resolution of issues that were controversial during their time. They for instance supported the abolition of slavery, suffrage for women and men without property, reformation of criminal as opposed to punishment, cruelty to animals and meritocracy (Franena, 1973). In their arguments with authorities Mill and Bentham insisted that everyone's happiness counts equally.

Though most of the issues stated above have been resolved by the evolution of all inclusive democracies, there have been several emerging ethical issues such as contraceptives, abortion, cloning, and biotechnology among others. These issues are weighty. Different cultures and religions handle them differently. The issues create divisions among people even among people in the same cultural group. For instance, the Catholics religious leaders condemn the use of condoms as a contraceptive method, claiming that it as negating nature. Other Christian denominations are, however, accommodating of diverse contraception methods and it is never an ethical issue in their circles.

Utilitarianism has been condemned in some quarters as overly dedicating human existence to pleasure. Some people have even termed utilitarianism as a " doctrine worthy only of swine" (Rachels, 1989). According to Rachels (1989) utilitarianism promotes selfish indulgence to pleasures regardless of the fact that one's pleasure might be the displeasure of other people. However, Mill addressed this issue in his theory by stating that other than

physical pleasure, he also meant that people can have pleasures of " higher faculties" such as intellectual pleasures which elevate human dignity above that of other animals (Mackinnon, 2011). This way Mill showed that people should not misconstrue his theory to hedonism but rather they should strive to follow utilitarianism principles to promote love among all mankind.

Conclusion

Ethics refers to judging between rights and wrongs and there are various systems that aid people to make decisions. Some of the systems such as Divine Command are based on religious teachings to regard acts as either right or wrong. Ethical Relativism on the other hand is closely relates to utilitarianism but it is based on cultural beliefs and practices. Virtue ethics insists on internalizing moral behavior. While each of these ethical systems has its strengths in terms of specificity, the existence of various divergent views, practices and doctrines limits their applicability. Utilitarianism which emphasizes on the pursuing acts that bring about pleasure and alleviate pain comes out as the most convincing ethical system. In light of globalization and the emergence of multicultural societies in most parts of the world, utilitarianism seems the most plausible ethical system because it is devoid of hard-lining, biasness and religious affiliations. Most importantly it is practical because what is good to one person must not necessarily be good to other people provided it is aimed at reducing human suffering and promoting the well-being of all.

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