Can the morally right action be explained as that action which maximizes good?

Introduction

To be able to answer this question I must address what is meant by ' the good' within this context, as ' the good' is the supposed qualifying antecedent of the morally right action, in other words ' goodness' reports moral rightness of an action. In this way this question has teleological conations as we are judging actions based on whether they maximize goodness or not, this takes into account only the outcomes of an action, disregarding the motive or intrinsic moral worth of the act itself. Therefore we must be aware of what definition of ' the good' we are discussing, as within this question it is the qualifying consequence of the morally right action. Within this essay I will purport that although the term ' goodness' is used to report moral rightness of an action, this term is contingent on the moral theory the action is being judged within. This is because each moral theory has a different definition of what ' goodness' entails.

Aristotle provides a definition for human good as " activity of the soul in accordance with virtue"(1), he goes on to claim that it is " that at which all things aim"(2). This kind of goodness is relative to the kind of object or thing which is being discussed, therefore it is essential when discussing ' goodness' within Aristotelian ethics that we are specific to ' human good', as humans are the only organisms able to have rational capacity, and therefore able to be virtuous, " the good and the ' well' is thought to reside in the function…the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies reason" (3)(4). This is because moral goodness is intertwined with what it is to be a goodhuman being, as practical reason or ' phronesis' is required to

choose virtuous actions, " practical wisdom issues commands…what ought to be done or not to be done"(5). The Aristotelian term goodness is translated from the word ' eudaimonia', which is often associated withhappinessand flourishing (6). Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia is a way of life, and therefore cannot be pinned down to one particular action, the whole life of a person has to be taken into account as to whether they have achieved eudaimonia, " for one swallow does not make a summer… a short time does not make a man blessed and happy"(7). Therefore within Aristotle's view just because an action has maximized goodness once, does not deem it morally correct, the character of the person performing the action is important as to whether the act is morally correct, as it is contingent on whether that person lives a eudaimon life.

Mill's theory of Utilitarianism is similar to Aristotle's view as it also deems ' the good' as happiness, his ' Greatest Happiness Principle' states " actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness"(8)(9). He intended that his notion of happiness would be a way of understanding what constituted human good, in chapter one of ' Utilitarianism' he introduces the idea that we must strive towards the ' summon bonum' which is our ' greatest good'. However his theory contrasts with Aristotle's as he then goes on to describe happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain, " pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends"(10). This species of happiness, and therefore ' the good', differs to Aristotle's as it is equated with mental states at a given time, whereas Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia is not as fleeting.

Having demonstrated how the term ' good' can differ within different theories, I will now discuss Mill's theory of Utilitarianism in more depth, this is because it is a consequentialist theory and the question I am discussing has teleological conations. As a consequentialist theory, Utilitarianism determines the morality of an action via its consequences, the ends justify the means. In this way, the morally right action maximizes total happiness, also referred to as ' utility' within Utilitarianism, " Utility would enjoin... the happiness... of every individual" (11). Utilitarianism deems actions morally right or wrong by appealing to the fundamentally intuitive principle of maximizing good, therefore Utilitarianism, in its most basic form (Act Utilitarianism), would agree that the morally right action can be explained as that action which maximizes good. This is because it is a consequentialist theory, and therefore it is primarily concerned with whether an act has produced the most happiness or not as to whether it is morally right or wrong.

Explaining an action as morally right with reference to it maximizing goodness for the most amount of people promotes Egalitarianism, this deems each person as equally as important as the next, as each person adds to making the most people happy. In this way Utilitarianism can be seen as a democratic theory, hence making it more preferable to explain morally right actions with reference to whether they maximize goodness for the most amount of people. This is also highlighted by the fact that Utilitarianism is concerned with human happiness, which causes it to be common sense system. Therefore it is accessible for all to use as it does not require

capacities of rationality when deciding what is moral and immoral, whereas Aristotelian ethics does require some level of rational capacity.

Despite this when solely referring to the consequences of an action, as Utilitarianism does, this can permit us to do unintuitive and immoral actions to promote greater goodness for the most amount of people. Rawls argues that because of this problem Utilitarianism is unable to protect inalienable rights of people; this is because the overriding goal for Utilitarians is the happiness of the greatest number.(12) Therefore in contrast to the Egalitarian advantage posited before, it can be argued that individuals only have rights in so far as they do not interfere with the greatest good of the majority. This is illustrated in Williams' example of Jim and the captured Indians; Jim is given the ultimatum that if he kills one of the Indians the others will be able to live; otherwise all nine of the Indians will be killed. (13) Not only does this example show that a consequentialist theory treats the individual Indian who may be shot for the sake of the lives of the others as a means to the other's happiness, and in this case infringing upon their inalienable rights, it also highlights that the agent's integrity is also infringed upon. Therefore by merely taking into consideration whether an action maximizes goodness as to whether it is moral or not does not take into account the potential violation of the individualgoalsand projects of the agent performing the action, if it is immoral. (14). Therefore it can be argued that the morally right action cannot be explained via merely its consequences, some attention should be given to how and why the act occurred.

In contrast to Mill, Kant argues that our goal should not be happiness, but the essence of morality is striving towards goodness simplicter.(16) Therefore the ultimate end for humans is to follow the categorical imperative which states " only act on a maxim that you could will should become a universal law"(15), these maxims cause a sense of moral duty within us which determines an action's moral worth, regardless of the consequences. Although Kant's theory does not explain actions as morally right withrespectto whether they maximize goodness, it can be argued that actions of a deontological nature can still strive towards goodness, without it being the fundamental principle of the theory. This is because by following the categorical imperative, and performing acts out of a sense of duty to morality, this would naturally lead to moral goodness within Kant's view; hence all acts performed under the categorical imperative maximize good.

With respect to the above it can be argued that whether the morally right action can be explained as that action which maximizes good is contingent on what notion of good we are discussing. It seems plausible that moral rightness can be traced back to maximizing goodness within the moral theories I have presented above, therefore leading me to conclude that the morally right action can be explained as that action which maximizes good, as the term ' goodness' can be described in a variety of ways to fit the criteria of each moral theory.

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