

Ethics  
theory and practice  
essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Theological and deontological theories are called deontic or action-based theories as their focus is on the actions that are performed by individuals. The theories focus on the action to be chosen by an individual. Virtue based theories focus on how to help people develop good character traits, and put less emphasis on which rules the individual should follow. These character traits are hence forth supposed to help a person make correct decisions in future life. Most of the ethical theories start their focus on what is viewed as being bad or good, right or wrong. The theories look at the inherent of the action and its consequences.

This part of the theories is hard to deal with, since one has to look at the philosophical line of the “ end justifies the means” or the ‘ means justifies the end’ (Thirox, & Krasemann 2006, pp 11). But it is difficult to classify some actions depending on the consequences. For instance, an action might turn out to have negative consequences, but since the actor had good intentions, then it is not good to hold him/her accountable for the actions, i. e. deontological ethical system. In this case, it doesn’t matter the consequences of the action, but rather what matters is the principles of the actions.

An individual can act without considering the means, so long as it contributes to happiness or pleasure, then, it is worth the course. This argument leads to what is known as utilitarianism theory. In this case, so long as an action contributes to adding utility to an individual, then it is a good action to be taken. Before first taking an action, one has to consider the consequences of the action, i. e. the action that will cause the attainment of

more happiness should be taken (Act-utilitarianism). However in some cases, the action has got some rules that should be followed.

Therefore, the actor is supposed to look at the outcome if the rules are followed to the latter, (i. e. rule utilitarianism). If a certain rule produces more happiness when followed, then it should be followed. Ethical practices In utilitarianism terminology, an action does not necessarily have to be performed since it is not right, nor does it have to be neglected since it is wrong. Therefore, a right action means that the action ought to be performed. The agent of an action has to consider the action that generally benefits the whole welfare so as to be performed.

If the agent is aware of such an action and does not perform it, then it becomes that he/she has acted unethical. Hence according to utilitarianism, we ought to maximize the total welfare. However, Maximization of the welfare has caused some disagreement among the utilitarianisms. According to the hedonistic utilitarianism we ought to maximize the well-being or happiness. In their argument, the hedonists feel that at any given time, there is a certain level of well-being. This in essence means that the well-being of an individual at any moment is what matters most.

For instance, how does a person feel now compared to a minute ago? Is it the same or worse? (Tannsjo, 2002, pp 40). In preferentialist utilitarianism, an individual is supposed to choose preferences that give much satisfaction, as compared to the given options. Perfectionist egoism on the other hand allows an individual to choose objective values that will add utility to their lives in one way or another, for instance knowledge or having good and close

relationships. In following utilitarianism so as one becomes happy, we end up with ethical egoism.

Ethical egoism implies that individuals have no duties to anyone else but rather themselves. In this argument the entire world ought not to satisfy all the needs of an individual. In ethical egoism, every individual has got his or her own goal which is opposed to utilitarianism that calls for collective or sharing of goals. When there are goal diversities there is bound to be conflicts. In such a case, then individuals will have to stick to their own goals to avoid further conflicts. In ethical egoism, agents can act wrongly whenever they feel that they cannot maximize their own interests.

In this case, a person acts morally wrong when future pleasures are sacrificed for current inferior pleasures. It is also wrong when an action shortens an individual's life, or affects the individual's health-unless there is a way of compensating for the ill health and brevity of life that increases the general quality of life (Tannsjo 2002, pp 57). According to the egoism utilitarianism, the assumption that quality of life will be compensated is also morally incorrect. Utilitarianisms are ready to act in any form to save not only the welfare of others but also their own welfare.

Therefore, in case of any conflict, the egoist utilitarian is able to act in a manner that will ensure that his/her own welfare is protected. The utilitarianism theories claim that the values of actions are decisive for moral status, hence known as consequentiality. Consequentialist and deontologist differ in a radical way. In deontological theory, the nature of the action decides the moral status of the action. Utilitarianism invites us to consider

the consequences of the actions, while deontologists invite us to consider the action itself without considering the consequences.

When considering deontological ethics, some types of actions are generally prohibited or obligatory, no matter their consequences. According to Kant's deontology approach, he holds that some actions are high or obligatory, despite their consequences, while other actions are wrong despite their consequences. This theory causes some confusion when following it, since according to Kant, it is fine when an action is performed with the right motive (i. e. a good will), but the problem arises when an obligatory action is performed for the wrong motive, or when wrong actions are performed with the right motive. Tannsjo 2002 pp57).

Kant formulated the imperative theory in which he believes that there is only one general perfect duty that is absolute, and that reason alone dictates to any reasonable human being. In this argument Kant believes that even though moral principles can be considered to be commands, they are not issued by anyone, but rather any rational agent has to find that they are binding to them. In categorical imperative, Kant deduces some moral binding duties, for example that it is wrong to kill, to lie, to commit suicide and even breaking a promise.

Kant argued that whatever action that an individual takes, he/she should act in such a way that the action can become a universal law. When applying the rule-utilitarianism, and the rule leads to bad consequences, then on the welfare point of view is that the rule is bad. This can however not be applied in the Kant argument that the actions taken should be in the perspective

being able to be made into universal laws. For instance, as Tannsjo (2002 pp59) argues that taking an example of telling lies, then if the lie is to become universal law, then there shall be communication breakdown, since everybody will be telling lies.

It is not possible to tell lies all the time, but also the truth. There is however a similarity between Kant's categorical imperative and rule utilitarianism. In Kant's theory there exists a maxim. While in the utilitarian rule, each action corresponds to a certain rule. When a maxim is followed in the Kant's argument, and when the rule in utilitarian is followed, then the question is that what happens when everybody is doing the same thing. Neither Kant nor utilitarianism explains what would happen if all were to do the same thing.

There is need for sameness in the actions of human beings but neither Kant nor utilitarianism provides the way to do this. This thus makes both the theories to be vague. According to Kant, there are duties that exist between all human beings without any motivation. This requires only a rational human being to understand that such duties exist. Utilitarianism and egoists also do believe in duties, but originating from the consequences of actions agents take, and with respect to the general welfare of the society. These traditions of moral duties arise from absolute moral rights.

Looking at the utilitarian arguments and the Kantianism theories the virtue ethics focuses on the question that what kind of person I ought to be. Virtue ethics was mostly taken up by Aristotle. Virtue ethics is mostly concerned with character traits in contradistinction to personality traits. It has been

assumed that traits of character can be developed through actions such as education or training but personality traits are biologically acquired. Virtue ethicists have defined various characters and put a list that they feel are virtuous. These include courage, temperance, wisdom and justice (cardinal moral values).

It also includes generosity, benevolence, constancy and industry. Many ethicists have however not unanimously agreed on the characters to be put on the list. In most cases virtues are the basics in the agents' way of taking action. They are the grounds on which we can know the right and wrong, though not solely grounds. This is because besides virtues, our action grounds can as well be influenced by the consequentialists and the deontologists' features. There are however virtue ethics advocates who have explicitly denied that the virtue ethics have to be the basic for actions.

They reject the idea that virtue ethics must, like much modern ethics (say utilitarianism), be hierarchical in structure, with the virtues at the base (say, playing the role of utilities), from which the rest of the structure will, in some sense be derived," (Paul, F, Paul J & Miller, pp57). One important feature about the virtue ethics theory as a normative theory is that instead of focusing only on an act the way utilitarianism does, or concentrating with the intention as Kant's deontology does, both action and intention are considered to be important in the virtue ethics theory.

An action taken by an individual and why it has been taken is important to the formation of character. Character is used to judge persons as being good or bad, to blame them or praise them. Therefore it has been argued that

according to the virtues ethics, an action becomes right when a virtuous agent acts characteristically in the circumstances. The problem with this is that it is not easy to define who the virtuous agents are. In the same manner as the utilitarianism and the deontologist, virtues ethics, don't seem to give much guidance.

For instance act utilitarianism does not specify what are the best consequences, while deontology does not also give the best morale rule. Virtue ethics has however made many researchers to look at the deontologists' theories and the consequentialists' theories. According to Kant, the main function of virtue and character development is that it helps an agent to develop a right maxim for testing. But at some aspects, the Kantian ideas are different from other concepts of virtues. For instance, Kant's argument is based on struggles against emotions.

One may think that emotions should be eliminated, but to Kant, moral worth comes from duty of motive, that struggles against inclination. This is quite different on the Aristotle's way of viewing harmony between reason and desire. Furthermore, Kant fails to show weakness of will as in Aristotle's case, where distinction between continence and incontinence are highlighted. Rather Kant concentrates on fortitude of will which shows self deception. The consequentialists find that virtue plays a role in promoting good consequences.

In this case it implies that virtue is not valuable in itself, but rather in bringing out good consequences. Therefore, the actions taken in deontologists and consequentialists apply the virtues but in a restricted



manner. Human happiness (mostly known as Eudemonia) can be described to be subjective rather than being objective. In this case, the eudemonia characterizes the life well lived by an individual, irrespective of the emotional situation of the person. Both the consequentialist and virtue ethicist described that the life lived by a person can lead to happiness when following the right virtues.

In this case, virtue means a habit that will allow the actor to succeed in the action being taken. According to Aristotle, moral virtues are means between two vices. For instance, a virtue of courage is a mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. Virtue ethics is one of the current normative ethic approaches. It is identified as one of the theories that emphasizes on character development as opposed to deontology which emphasizes on roles or duties, or consequentialism which emphasizes on the consequences of the action taken.

The similarity of these theories taken in the context for instance that a person needs assistance in whatever way, then the utilitarian offering assistance will point out that giving such assistance will improve the well being, to the consequentialist, the action implies a universal rule that one should do to others whatever he/she would like them to do the same to him/her, while to the virtue ethicist, giving assistance implies charitable action, or benevolent.

Virtue ethic lacks decision procedures, which is found in both deontology and consequentialists. According to the consequentialists, the simple rule is that a person should act so as to produce the best consequences, while the

deontology believe that to do the best things, just consult the moral rules. These rules however are denied in the virtue ethicists, that there is no any mechanical rule that generates moral correct actions.