

Consequentialism
and deontology will
be critically discussed
philosophy essay



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Consequentialism and deontology will be critically discussed on their impact on psychological research. The following areas will be discussed on how the ethical theories link with the BPS (British Psychological Society) guidelines. How current studies have impacted on both philosophical ideas and the BPS ethical guidelines. Additionally, it will conclude that a mixture of both theories is more morally and ethically valid.

The deontological theory has impacted on psychological research as it argues that human beings are equal so “ act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, 1985 p. 422). This is similar to the BPS guidelines which promote ethical behaviour (BPS, 2000).

For example Milgram (1963) was slated for not being ethically valid however, there were no ethical guidelines during his era (Youngpeter, 2008). Yet, this allowed him to investigate the role of obedience and how this affects a person’s moral value. In addition, how the participants were going to behave and the outcome of the study was unexpected (Russell, 2009). This supports rule-consequentialists who argue that even if there were ethical guidelines in some cases breaking some rules might be beneficial overall, rather than a world where individuals decide whether some rules should be kept or not (Eggeston, 2007).

The impact of the consequentialism theory would argue that current replications of obedience studies are not ethically valid because the participants might think they are harming another individual thus causing the individual stress (Burger, 2009). This suggest that the research was not

maximising the good and supports the BPS code of conduct (2009) which claim that participants must be protected from physical and mental harm. However, replication studies of Milgram (1963) have found that, whilst societal attitudes and changes can affect behaviour, the result indicated that the same situational factors that affected obedience in Milgram's experiment is still present today (Burger 2009). This then outweighs the discomfort in the participants because it can explain the role of authority figures during World War 2 and the present day, thus the research was maximising the good. In addition, one important implication of Burger's (2009) replication study was that it did not violate any ethical guidelines, as the research "excluded people with a history of psychological or emotional problems" (Burger, 2009, p. 10). And the participants were debriefed at the end. Furthermore, the current research links with a consequentialist strength that pleasure is good and suffering is bad (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009). However, consequentialism has issues which surround the idea that if people lived by producing the best possible balance of good over bad then it would not be maximised because people would make miscalculations, allow their personal biases to interfere thus, it may distort their decisions (Shand, 2003). Furthermore, it was found that consequentialism is very demanding as individuals might have to abandon personal projects in order to maximise the good and to resolve issues (McNaughton and Rawling, 1998). Similarly, deontology allows the consideration of a person's autonomy, which allows us to assign more weight to our own personal desires and values (Singer, 1993). Consequently, this will make sure we avoid wrongdoings therefore argues that actions are more important than the consequences (Singer, 1993).

Kant's argues that the moral worth of an action is not determined by its consequences because it is possible that someone does something out of a good intention but ends up bringing about bad consequences (Shand, 2003). Reicher and Haslam (2006) caused stress among the guards and prisoners which violated the ethical code of protection, thus bringing about bad consequences. However, the research provides insight into how social roles can trap us into behaving against what we believe is morally wrong (Reicher and Haslam 2011). This would relate back to a consequentialism idea, that it may be appalling to think of harming the one person but it must be equally appalling to think not of doing so and as a result allowing, the killing of many people (Singer, 1993). Thus maximising the good for the greatest number. Nevertheless, deontology argues that the right should not be defined in terms of the good, " the goodness of the ultimate consequence does not guarantee the rightness of the actions which produced them" (Fried, 1978, p. 9). According to deontologists, it is obvious that the interests of the ' many' does not count nor does it count equally and if they did then it would be obligatory to save all of them and harm the one (Singer, 1993). Furthermore, deontologists forbid harm and criticise consequentialism because it leaves no room for personal autonomy (Singer, 1993). In addition, critics of consequentialism would argue that it would lead an individual to do horrendous deeds, " so long as they promise the best consequences" (Singer, 1993, p. 234), thus consequentialism would support the killing of innocent people however, they argue that the theory should not be judged on wild unlikely possibilities as it is not true to life (Shand, 2003). Although, it has been argued that it would allow and encourage the individual to contemplate more about bad deeds thus by doing this, individuals might not

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recognise the rights of others in consideration which ought to have restrained them without thinking about the consequences itself (Singer, 1993). This relates back to the BPS codes, as psychologists can look back at the ethical guidelines when they find themselves in a tricky situation. In addition, in real life there are laws such as the Human Rights Act (1998) which should help individuals make morally right decisions.

Deontological theories have impacted on psychological research, as they argue that we must not lie (McNaughton and Rawling, 1998). This supports the ethical considerations in the British Psychological Society which argue that we must not deceive participants about the nature of the experiment (BPS, 2000). Most psychological research deceive participants in order to find out what they are thinking. For example, self report measures use deception frequently in order to find out other factors that might affect the results. For example, one contemporary piece of research told the participants that the questionnaire was on memory and on drug abuse but they also looked at the number of mistakes they made on the questionnaire and gender differences (Rodgers et al, 2003). Another current study deceived hospital staff and results showed that experts misdiagnosed healthy patients (BBC, 2008). This suggests that deceiving participants is necessary because it can show the impact on labels and how they affect treatment given (Blass, 1991).

Therefore, they were deceived in order to find out whether they were diagnosed correctly. These findings are important as it allows improvements in diagnostic criteria's, therefore consequentialists point out that in practice most people do lie and we should break 'rules' in certain circumstances (Shand, 2003). However, it has been argued that there is a risk of

psychological harm to the participants and the violation of their autonomy because they are deceived about the true nature of the experiment (Bortolotti and Mameli, 2006). This relates back to a deontological idea on an individual's autonomy.

Consequentialism looks at actions and deontological looks at ' what I ought to do' however, further argument suggests that emphasis should be placed on the individual character which is a virtue ethic idea ' what sort of person should I be' (Shand, 2003). Virtue ethics could impact on psychological research for example if Reicher and Haslam (2006) or Burger (2009) involved virtuous individuals then the results might differ in terms of, participants might not conform to groups or they might be more determined to withdraw. Furthermore, according to Annas (2007) argues that the idea that we have global character traits or virtues is empirically inadequate as it does not have a cross situational consistency. A further weakness of virtue ethics is that it does not provide individuals with enough guidance on what we should do but how we should be ' what would a virtuous person do' (Doris, 1998).

Additionally, as society develops, individuals might find it difficult to decide on what are the most important morals to develop or what type of actions are virtuous or not (Doris, 1998).

It is argued that consequentialist theories achieve moral closure, as the individual acts rightly only when their actions maximise utility, whereas deontologists act may be acceptable without it being the best or possibly a good option (Singer, 1993). If both theories were grouped together then it is possible to look at both the type of action and consequence produced,

whether if it is right or wrong, this would allow a individual to think and behave more ethically.

In conclusion, consequentialism looks at the consequences whereas deontology places importance of the right action to be fundamental to ethics. Consequentialism links with the BPS guideline in explaining psychological research e. g. Burger (2009) and Reicher and Haslam (2006). However, they both maximised the good by giving an insight into social roles. Yet, deontology states that participants in research need to be treated equally. Deontological theories support the BPS ethical guideline e. g. deception, the participants should not be deceived however results will be affected if the participants knew what the research was about. By concentrating on consequences it misses out individual factors (virtue idea). Both theories will be more ethically valid if they were merged together.