

Accounting for individuality



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Kadejia Jackson

Peppers-Bates

Utilitarianism and deontology contrast on many ethical principles.

Utilitarianism is agent-neutral disregarding individual preferences, whereas deontology is agent-relative and takes a person's preferences into account.

Utilitarianism also has a broad goal to maximize well-being and utility while deontology allows moral decisions to be driven by personal interest and one's own moral principles. Utilitarianism is not agent-relative, unlike deontology, instead it is agent-neutral which causes utilitarians to overlook individual interest and opinion in favor of maximizing overall utility.

Utilitarianism does not account for the moral individuality of people. A utilitarian, unlike a deontologist, would rather have someone do something they dislike for the prospect of the good while a deontologist would allow a person to consider their own interests and account for other options in the moral decision making. In this paper, I will be contrasting the opinions of utilitarianism and deontology on the points of special obligations, options and constraints, topics seen in deontology, and how the lack of these point in utilitarianism cause it to be criticized by deontologist.

In order to grasp the difference in which these two moral standards view people as individuals, it's important to understand the basis of these theories. Starting with utilitarianism, this approach values well-being or utility. The overarching goal of this approach is to lead a life where cumulated decisions are made in the effort to maximizing utility. This approach also hold individuals to be valued the same. Since no one person is

valued more than another, a utilitarian could be seen to value the many over the few if doing so would accrue more utility. This particular view is criticized by deontology for not considering a person's own interest and personal values.

While on the subject of deontology, it's important to recognize that deontology is an agent-relative approach and, unlike Utilitarianism, does recognize individual interest. " Each of us is morally permitted to give special weight to *our own interests* , just because they are ours" (McNaughton and Rawlings 35). A point made in deontology is that a person has special obligations or responsibilities to people they hold close and value more than others. Deontology also gives the idea of constraints that people hold because individuals can have different moral principles that keep them from making morally impermissible decisions. A deontologist can be constrained by the principle that " killing is wrong and should never be done" and in a dilemma where killing is a factor, the deontologist would uphold that principle. A utilitarian on the other hand would consider killing if doing so would have greater utility than not doing so. The third point in deontology involves options which allows people to not always follow through with actions that could be considered " necessary" or actions that maximize utility.

Knowing the bases for these theories it could be understandable why deontologist would criticize utilitarianism's ability to understand individual moral differences. From the utilitarian point of view, it's unnecessary to have special obligations. Take parenting for example, it would be expected that a parent would have an obligation to treat their child well because they value

their child over others. For a utilitarian, treating children well should not be confined to just that one parent's interest because well-being would increase if all children were treated well.

Another point about special obligations is that not only does it allow one to consider those closest to them in their decision making, having special obligations is seen as having a duty to those whom a person has special relationships. “ Many people believe that not only are we *permitted* to do more for those close to us, but we are often *required* to put their interest first. We *owe* things to those with whom we have special relationship [...] that we do not owe to strangers” (McNaughton and Rawlings 37). So, unlike utilitarianism, deontology strongly accounts for individuals' relationships with others, especially those close to them.

The second point included in deontology is having constraints. “ These prohibitions *constrain* in what we may do to *any* person, even in pursuit of good ends” (McNaughton and Rawlings 38). As mentioned before, having constraints allows a deontologist to refrain from committing any act that would not abide by their moral principles. Utilitarianism on the other hand, would commit any act with the reward of maximizing utility. The strength of constraints also vary person to person but they are still something not seen in utilitarianism because an individual's constraints aren't taken into account when making utilitarian actions.

The final point in deontology, options, could be considered a strong factor that allows moral individuality of people. Options create the ability for different people to make a multitude of different decisions in any given

situation because in deontology they're given the option to do so. In Utilitarianism, the "right" option is the choice you make that accrues the most good. Deontology responds, in a way, to this by giving people choices and ability to consider multiple outcomes. Then, with special obligations and constraints taken into consideration, a person is able to make a decision that fits within their parameters rather than the objective decision to benefit the masses.

To reiterate, what strongly separates deontology from utilitarianism is the concepts having special obligations, options, and constraints. Deontologists criticize utilitarians for overlooking these points during moral decision making. Utilitarians don't hold special relationships in regard for their actions because, to utilitarians, decisions are not made for those who a person holds close but instead they are made in order to produce the most good.

Constraints are also disregarded for utilitarians because if a decision can be made that produces the most good, then that would be the right decision for a utilitarian, even if that decision would normally be opposed by a deontologist. Lack of constraints for utilitarians is also criticized by deontologists. Since maximizing utility is the goal for utilitarianism, options are forgone and replaced by the decisions that result in the most utility. It's due to this disregard of a person's personal connections, constraints, and options, utilitarianism is criticized for not considering the moral individuality of people.

Personally, it's difficult to assess which of these approaches are better.

Deontology is appealing because it looks at many factors before coming to a decision. When making a decision as a deontologist, a person looks at how a

decision would affect not only themselves but people they hold close. They would actually put those people before anyone else. A deontologist would also consider their constraints and what they are willing and not willing to do in a moral conundrum.

On the other hand, utilitarianism values maximizing well-being for not only one's self but mainly for the greater population. It seems more selfless to try to do things to help others rather than yourself when contemplating decisions. Utilitarians also are willing to do things some people may be unwilling or hesitant to do if it would have the best benefit.

When contemplating the appeals of both theories, the train track dilemma comes to mind. The train track dilemma has a runaway train that, if a switch is not pulled, the train could kill five people. Yet, on the other tracks, where the train will go if the switch is pulled, there lies only one person. The dilemma is then, if placed in this situation, whether you should allow the train to move forward and kill the five people, or should you flip the switch and redirect it to the one person.

For a utilitarian, the decision is quite simple. Individuals are all worth the same so saving five people would be worth more than saving one person; the switch would be pulled. For a deontologist, it's harder because a strong deontological constraint is against murder and to pull the switch would basically be the direct murder of a person. If a deontologist didn't pull the switch, then they would not have broken their constraint and also not directly have killed.

Personally, the deontological approach to the dilemma is unappealing. Not making a choice can be seen as making a choice in itself. The deontological idea of not pulling the switch leads to five people dead, and in my personal opinion, five people dead is worse than one person dead. Killing may be wrong, but like a utilitarian, it's better if a fewer amount of people die.

Although deontology criticizes utilitarianism for lacking the acknowledgement of individual morality, following deontology could possibly lead to worse consequences than following utilitarianism. This is what, in my opinion, makes utilitarianism better. My decisions typically revolve around finding the best overall outcome rather than the outcome specifically tailored to my interests. Therefore, the theory that prioritizes maximum well-being seems the better of the two.

Works Cited

McNaughton, David, and Piers Rawling, "Deontology." *Ethics in practice: an anthology*. 4th ed., edited by Hugh LaFollette, John Wiley & Sons, 2014, pp. 35-39.