

The Pleasure Imperative

Utilitarianism, particularly the version espoused by John Stuart Mill, is probably the best known consequentialist normative ethical theory. Furthermore, it is probably the most popular ethical theory in general use today. While the layman is unlikely to be familiar with the actual word, the principle that our actions are to maximize pleasure and minimize pain comes off as simple common sense in any modern liberal society. However, though it is probably the most commonly practiced ethical theory, there are numerous problems with it, mostly seen in its tendency to dehumanize and patronize its subjects. The main opposition to utilitarianism has tended to be the deontological ethics of Immanuel Kant, centered around his categorical imperative which shows humans as rational beings with mutual respect for one another. However, Kantian ethics can be as problematic as utilitarian ethics, primarily because the categorical imperative is too loosely defined, and easily interpreted according to one's wishes. These two normative ethical theories seem to be in contrast with each other because they assert opposite claims as to what makes an action good. However, in observing that both of them have very unique shortcomings on certain terms, it would seem that there is a potential benefit in one drawing from the other. In this paper I will defend a utilitarian ethical theory which draws on Kantian ethics at its roots. I will then demonstrate how, in applying this theory, it can be advantageous over basic utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. It is important to note that this paper is not a refutation of either utilitarian or Kantian ethics; it intends to put forth a different ethic entirely drawn from both.

Kant's categorical imperative, which is central to his ethical theory, is generally put to the following effect:

- (i) Act only on a maxim that you can also will to be a universal law
- (ii) Treat all human beings (Yourself or others) always as an end in itself, and never a means to an end only.

This is essentially a combination of two things; a sophisticated version of the so-called “Golden Rule” and a requirement that humans, as rational beings, be respected. This is groundwork for a solid moral theory, but its flaws are found in the first rule. The principles, or “maxims” which are followed can vary widely. Certainly, there are a few principles which a vast majority of people can agree upon (I have an overwhelming desire not to be killed, and very little desire to kill another, so the principle that “murder is wrong” is a very easy claim that I would will to be a universal law, and most others would agree upon) but when ethics go beyond the simple to the complex, it becomes difficult. If it were to become necessary to kill someone in a self-defense situation where lethal force was the only option, for instance, several maxims come into conflict. Killing another to preserve one’s own life is using a person as a means to an end (survival) and allowing oneself to be killed violates the universal principle that murder is wrong. While a few particularly clever Kantian ethicists have proposed extremely complex interpretations of the categorical imperative to remedy this problem, by claiming it never existed at all, this is a problem without any clear resolution. It is difficult to take such a general rule, referring to multiple “maxims” and apply it to specific situations.

This is where utilitarianism can step in. The principle of utilitarianism is that an ethically correct action is one with the most social utility—that is, one that produces the greatest good/pleasure to the greatest number of people, and minimizes pain to the greatest possible degree. Its focus is not on the rules being followed, but the consequences, and as a result it is criticized for

echoing the doctrine that “the ends justify the means”. A common criticism of utilitarianism is seen in a thought experiment in which a doctor has five patients in need of an organ transplant who will die if they do not get one shortly after. Later in the day, a traveler comes in for a routine check-up and, after putting the patient under an anaesthetic, the doctor discovers that the traveler’s organs are a perfect match for all five patients. Assuming nobody finds out about it, it would be ethically permissible (and in fact morally required) for the doctor to harvest this man’s organs and save the five patients. This is a chilling image of a situation which many of the same people who acknowledge utilitarianism as “common sense” would reject as “just wrong”. As a result of this, many utilitarian writers have attempted to resolve this problem by recalculating the pain and pleasure to suit the situation. However, a reading of utilitarianism as it is still used makes harvesting this man’s organs permissible. Under Kantian ethics, the use of a person as a means to an end would forbid that in the first place. Thus, Kantian ethics is at an advantage in this particular situation. This is basically where the benefit in drawing from Kant in Utilitarianism comes from. The actual theory being proposed combines Kantian ethics with utilitarianism by qualifying them with their categorical imperatives. A way of putting this could go as follows:

- (i) An ethical person is one who follows ethically sound maxims.
- (ii) An ethically sound maxim is one which serves to produce the greatest social utility possible.
- (iii) An ethically sound maxim must also only be implemented if it would continue to maximize social utility were it a universally known and/or implemented law.
- (iv) An ethically sound maxim must also treat living beings as automatically being positive consequences (ends in themselves) and never merely as means to one.

The advantage in this method of rationality comes mostly from using (ii) as a general guideline for more practical application of the others. Therefore, using this, we know that all maxims, to be ethically sound, must serve to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (or create social utility) but it does not permit the ends to justify the means quite as often. For instance, under the previous problem with utilitarianism, even though it would maximize social utility to kill one person to save five, it would not be an ethically sound maxim that it is permissible to kill one person to save others. First, it conflicts with (iii) as very few utilitarian calculations come out as showing such actions being permissible if the public were to know of it. The pain caused by passing a law which claims you can be killed at will to save others would be great simply by knowing such a law exists. It would then have even worse social consequences if it were implemented in society, as people would be constantly murdered to save a greater majority. This would also conflict with (iv) as living beings are positive consequences in themselves, and thus they cannot be removed merely for the sake of an equation.

The Kantian-influenced utilitarianism seems to be beneficial over utilitarianism in this case, but this does not necessarily show that it is advantageous over mere Kantian ethics. What is it that makes this version preferred over a simple following of the categorical imperative? Two things: First, it resolves the issue of how general the imperative is. The guidance of social utility makes it much clearer what maxims are to be considered and followed. Second, it has a better practical application. The imperative must follow maxims which produce positive results, rather than simply acting out of obligation to a duty. Therefore this theory can be seen as more consequentialist than deontological. Adherence to a moral duty is central to this belief, but in the end, the duty is centered around its consequences and results. This also means that where it is advantageous over the ignorance of the undesirable means in utilitarianism, it is also

without the problem of draconian adherence to rules and duties over the practical context it is being placed in. A follower of these principles, when conflicted over which maxims to follow, must select the one which best fits the other provisions. If faced with two maxims in direct conflict, choose the one which best maximizes social utility (it is already assumed that all maxims are under the “ethically sound” provisions already listed, so while situations where it is morally sound to do things which appear immoral because they maximize social utility more should not come up) and the conflict is resolved.

Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics need not be in conflict. In truth, a utilitarian ethic holds many of the same values in high regard as Kantians do. Much of the disagreement is over semantics and supposed rules. However, when creating an ethical system, it is more important to utilize one which works best rather than adhere to traditions within them. Looking at their flaws apart, and their advantages together, it is best that these two theories are harmonized, rather than separated.