

Humanity's survival instinct is the root of many moral dilemmas. Ethics, the philosophy of morality, seeks to understand how people ought to behave in and beyond matters of life and death. The Kantian, Utilitarian, and Social Contract developed by the philosophers Kant, Bentham, Mills, Hobbes, and Rawls each provide rational, systematic, and comprehensive approaches for evaluating the goodness of actions. Yet even when varying ethical theories reach the same qualitative conclusion the rationale may completely differ.

The Kantian ethical framework evaluates the goodness of an individual's action by finding an applicable rule that necessitates the action. These rules are universally accessible to all rational thinkers. According to Kant, the only good actions are those derived by applying the categorical imperative to a *will*. In one sense, it presumes that a will for which no imperative rule can be found is wrong. To determine if a rule meets the categorical imperative, it is evaluated for contradiction when adhered to by all people. From this method stems the general rule that no person should use themselves or anyone else as a means to an end.

Utilitarian ethical frameworks discern between right and wrong actions by weighing the total happiness produced by an action. One conundrum utilitarians face is actions becoming compulsory if they will cause an increase of happiness. For example, a utilitarian with substantial savings cannot ignore someone living in poverty; they must give them some money. However, this can be escaped because unlike the Kantian view, not all participants are moral equals and accounted for in this calculation. A utilitarian could say that the happiness of someone living in poverty is inconsequential. Utilitarianism is not a simple system; in fact act and rule utilitarianism are two similar but different views.

An act utilitarian is most concerned with outcomes and will only consider rules that when broken cause unhappiness. Exactly how happiness is measured can vary by practitioner and detracts from the practicality of this system. Act utilitarians, though not at all concerned with intention, must also weigh unhappiness caused by unintended consequences. This means that an act utilitarianism takes a reflective approach that can only evaluate morality after an action has been carried out. In other words, it is virtually impossible by definition to apply this system when choosing an action.

Rule utilitarians are intrinsically more practical because they anticipate the happiness caused. A rule utilitarian *always* follows the rules if and only if everyone else always following that rule usually leads to happiness. For a rule utilitarian to determine if an action is acceptable it must generally lead to happiness. It is important to note that a rule utilitarian would be willing to break rules, especially those that cause unhappiness when followed. A rule utilitarian still encounters difficulty when evaluating the morality of decisions when they have no knowledge of likely outcomes.

Social contract is based on the premise that people need to cooperate in order to survive and prosper in a hostile world. Moral rules are not universal truths awaiting rational discovery as asserted by Kant. Instead, the rules are those that others in the society would subject upon

themselves. Laws codify the rules and establish rights by imposing obligations (positive rights) and granting freedoms (negative rights) some of which may be limited and others of which may not. Good actions do not infringe on the freedoms of others or fulfill an obligation. Conversely, bad actions violate a person's rights or avoid meeting an obligation. However, even if these rules do not succeed in reaching and preserving equality they may still be justified. According to Rawls, any inequality must benefit the disadvantaged members the most and be positions that are achievable by any member of society.

The moral dilemma posed by the scenario, impersonating a doctor to obtain a prescription when someone else's life is in jeopardy, is not the only dilemma present. In addition to this dilemma, the previously outlined frameworks can also be used to evaluate whether or not it is right for the uncle to request the aid of the pharmacist, whether or not it is ethical for the pharmacist to deny aid, the morality of all doctors leaving a populous to its own peril for a day, and even if it is right for an uncle to take a nephew on vacation.

An uncle taking his nephew on vacation serves as a simple beginning exercise in ethics. A Kantian evaluates this by seeking a universalized rule, a categorical imperative that creates a moral duty to act a certain way. In this case, it seems logical to say that because the rule "take family members on vacation so that they can learn about new places and ideas" does not lead to contradiction it is good. Rule utilitarians reach a similar conclusion but for a completely different reason. They consider the tendency of vacations to produce happiness and based on direct or indirect experience decide that they are good. Social contract theorists (in America) would declare freedom to travel and take vacation as a right and also good. Act utilitarians stand alone. In the scenario posed the uncle and nephew both suffered, albeit in different ways, far more than they enjoyed the vacation. From this perspective, the simple act of going on vacation is ethically wrong having encountering the problem of moral luck.

A rule utilitarian has an easy time evaluating the choice of impersonating a doctor. Established rules prohibit this action. Goodwill, doctors on vacation, and an ailing nephew hold no significance. An act utilitarian has no difficulty reaching the opposite conclusion. The set of factors for judging the rightness of a person impersonating a doctor to obtain a prescription. The action only weighs the happiness of those morally significant beings involved. In this case the surviving nephew could be the only participant. Even though it seems cruel, whether or not the pharmacist loses their licenses may not matter. However, it may not be possible to know if the action was right given a continued risk of legal consequences for the uncle.

For a Kantian to arrive at an ethical decision they must first identify the categorical or hypothetical imperative that demands action. Even though it seems as though the act is based on seemingly good will, the belief that the will is good is not sufficient. All actions must be derived from a will that is universally consistent and does not treat any others as a means to an end. If a Kantian accepts that the will "everyone must take actions that preserve life" withstands the test of universal consistency then it demands action. However, if the action demanded does not achieve the end or requires unknowable information about the outcome then the will becomes

hypothetical. Assuming that the uncle's knowledge and expertise can have the property of certainty the imperative becomes categorical. Not only does this imperative compel the uncle to break laws to do what is right, but the pharmacist may be obligated to do so as well.

Social contract theorists evaluate the ethics of impersonating a doctor by contemplating how other reasonable people in the same or a similar circumstance would decide to act. If it is reasonable to assume that other members of the community would forge a prescription then the action is right. Another, though less correct, perspective would take into consideration what a doctor would do. If a doctor would treat the patient by prescribing medication then the action of forging one given extenuating circumstances also seems right. Even though the result is compatible with other ethical frameworks the reason seems wrong. This line of reasoning seems susceptible to justifications that if followed by everyone might create a shortage of medication.

The evaluation of these circumstances using a number of ethical frameworks reveal characteristic strength and flaws of each system. Rule utilitarianism is a very simple system in application. This makes it well suited for situations governed by a set of rules that require rapid decision making or involve scarce resources. However, it is ill suited for truly exceptional circumstances. Act utilitarianism, because it requires knowledge about the conclusion, cannot be employed as a method for determining whether a future action should be taken. It does seem as though act utility is better than rule utility for judging an already taken action. Social contract theory, a system designed to decide on what rights belong to members of a community, drew a conclusion compatible with act utilitarianism. However, the reasoning seemed rather weak and much like act utility susceptible to unintended consequences. Kantianism seems best equipped, regardless of the actions and outcomes, for determining how the uncle must act in a truly exceptional situation. In conclusion, to do ethics does not mean finding an ethical framework that justifies a behavior. Doing ethics well means selecting the best framework for a given context.