Philosophy Term Paper

Classical Utilitarianism, which I will be discussing, states that:

I. You ought (morally) to choose the best of options available to you

II. Goodness of an option is determined by the overall goodness of it’s consequences

III. Goodness of a consequence is determined by the totality of happiness or pleasure that it contains

Concluding with the statement that:

One is morally obliged to choose the option which maximizes happiness.

This theory seems extremely practical at first glance, as it aims to maximize happiness for as many people as possible. If everyone on Earth were to subscribe to this belief, the logical result would be the entire world experiencing an overall boost in happiness. However, despite what Classical Utilitarianism suggests, the supreme generation of happiness is not always intrinsically valuable. The fact that some people derive pleasure or happiness from doing harmful, cruel, or unjust things destabilizes the notion that gaining happiness is always a good thing. As a result of this, the value of happiness that is generated by our actions must be taken into consideration; only happiness that results from morally acceptable actions can be seen as valuable.

Immanuel Kant’s concept of deserved happiness versus undeserved happiness directly addresses the ways that universal happiness can be problematic. While Utilitarianism advocates happiness no matter the circumstances, Kant believed that, at certain times, happiness is not valuable or beneficial. He differentiates between two kinds of happiness: deserved, and undeserved. He claimed that the happiness that people derive from doing bad things - a sadistic man taking pleasure in torturing a prisoner, for example - does not contain any intrinsic value. This is because the happiness stems from actions that violate a separate moral code. Kant actually believed that not only was this happiness devoid of value, but also that it detracted from the overall state of the world. This paradigm forces the supporter of Classical Utilitarianism to consider the potential negative ramifications of supporting universal happiness. If happiness for all is indeed the ultimate goal, the Classical Utilitarian must also support morally offensive actions that bring pleasure. On the *other* hand, Kant did very much support the happiness of those who bring it about in a morally acceptable fashion. He believed that by “deserving” and then acquiring this happiness, someone was contributing to the overall good of society.

It is impossible to consider both an evildoer and an honorable man equally deserving of the happiness that they achieve by their own means. In fact, Kant believed that those who committed morally wrong acts, despite gaining pleasure from them, must be punished before they are worthy of being happy once more. Kant also said that this punishment should be proportional to the intensity of the moral offense. This concept, known as “Just Desserts,” suggests retributive justice in order to hinder further violations. In Layman’s terms: what goes around comes around. Kant’s argument of “Just Desserts” resonates soundly, as very few people advocate for evildoers to be jubilant. The “unfairness” of said people being happy is unsettling; something about the human brain screams that those who break the rules do not deserve to be rewarded for their actions. This notion calls into question the very core principles of Classical Utilitarianism. Society makes use of traffic tickets, prison cells, and the death penalty to address this; we seek to match a punishment with every moral offense fathomable. Despite deriving pleasure from speeding on the highway, being drunk in public, or murdering his or her boss, a person must face the consequences for their actions.

The concept of Just Desserts is not perfect, however. Just as is the case with Utilitarianism, the entire argument is built upon the notion that happiness can be quantified or measured. Utilitarianism suggests the method of discourse that will result in the “most” happiness, whereas Kant’s differentiation between deserved and undeserved happiness requires that actions be designated as “good” or “bad”. The fact remains that, no matter the intent behind it, an action can result in *both* misery and happiness. Things become tricky when one begins to measure these “levels” of happiness and misery against one another. A starving child that steals a bushel of apples from a wealthy merchant has just committed a crime. Yet, this may be the first time that his hunger (something which he has no control over) has been satisfied in days. Much joy has come from this relatively minor offense. This would suggest the possibility that violator’s happiness could potentially outweigh the misery that the victim experiences. No matter how deserving or undeserving, the fact remains that the boy’s joy surpasses the merchant’s grief. This presents an entirely new set of questions about Just Desserts. Is there a threshold, perhaps a mathematically acceptable difference between happiness and misery caused, that makes an action morally acceptable? Does the sole fact that an action causes misery, despite also causing happiness, automatically make it morally reprehensible? This entire counterargument is dependent upon exactly how happiness is quantified. In certain cases it is clear that an action may result in “more” good than bad or vice versa, but the grey area in between poses some serious questions for the supporter of Just Desserts. While the Utilitarian simply looks for the greatest amount of pleasure that these actions would result in, a Kantian must consider if the happiness resulting from an “evil” deed could ever justify the misfortune that it also causes.

Though Just Desserts and the theory of deserved/undeserved happiness do have their flaws, they still present a sound counterargument to the principles of Classical Utilitarianism. While it may be easy to mentally comprehend misery and happiness outweighing or even negating one another, it is difficult to prove this in reality. Unlike temperature, weight, or distance, happiness can not be tangibly measured in everyday life. As a result of this, we can not accurately weigh the positive and negative consequences of an action against one another. Due to this, an action should still be punished or rewarded based upon the intent of the perpetrator.

Professor Oddie’s slides were the only material consulted for this essay, specifically the lecture slides for Utilitarianism 1.0 and Kant 1.0