

PHI334: Utilitarianism and Deontology

As I have mentioned on Monday, there are two very popular moral theories, and then another one on the side. I know most of you have iPhones, but if you look at the world, it is kind of half and half. Presumably some people are still using Nokias. The iPhone is the deontology of ethics, the android is the utilitarianism of ethics, and, presumably, Nokia is the virtue ethics of ethics. Today we are doing the main ones.

First, a distinction. Though we are talking about utilitarianism, it is important to note that it is a species of a genus, the genus being consequentialism. I mentioned this before, but consequentialism is a moral theory that evaluates whether some action is right or wrong based on the consequence. The opposite of consequentialism is deontology.

Deontology is an ethical theory that evaluates whether some action is right or wrong based on whether it fulfills or violates duty, where duty is conceptualized in terms of universality and necessity and your intention and purpose behind the action. The consequence of the action does not enter into the moral calculus, for as long as the intent and purpose behind it was to fulfill the duty (or violate it).

Let us begin with utilitarianism since it is the simpler of the two. Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism that, in general, claims that the right action is one that maximizes utility, and the wrong action is one that minimizes utility. What is left ambiguous here?

What is utility and for whom it is maximized or minimized. This is where we enter into forms of utilitarianism. First, let us discourse about utility.

Utility usually denotes pleasure, benefit, advantage, and other positive things, roughly what is considered to be good. There are debates on whether the absence of the bad is in itself a good, or if the absence of good is in itself a bad. This is not something we will talk about because I do not think this is a question there is ever an answer to.

Utility, some say, can be higher or lower. So, for example, some assert that the pleasure one gets from a meaningful conversation at an art gallery about an art piece with a friend over a cocktail is a higher pleasure, as it were, compared to a rowdy talk over burgers and beers with mere acquaintances. Does that seem right?

This may seem subjective, and almost elitist to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures. However, consider that we in fact do distinguish so. Generally, most of us, tend to say that heroin is a bad way to spend one's time. Yet, science and phenomenological reports show us that heroin, supposedly, provides feelings that are hard to replicate in intensity and pleasure. Heroin addicts often speak of just how good it felt to be high.

Yet, we do not think this makes sense. Though it may be pleasurable, this is a base pleasure with a lot of harm, and should be avoided. Indeed, what we traditionally associate with lower pleasures are fulfilling in the short term, but, in the long term, prove to be harmful, or, otherwise, preventative of higher

pleasures. There is something to be said about traveling Europe versus staying in Lexington for example.

Again, though, this is a contested topic, and I for one do not have an answer. I think that some utilities are higher than others, objectively, but this is only for edge cases. Such as heroin versus not heroin. Burger and beer at a bar with a friend might be more casual but that does not make it lower. Indeed, though utilitarianism is all about quantifying and maximizing utility, there is hardly ever consensus or agreement on how utility ought to be quantified. That is one issue with the model.

Now, in terms of for whom the utility is maximized. The first view is the “Total Utility” view, which seeks to calculate the entire utility calculus for all involved in an action. If one individual acts in a way that only they themselves are affected, then their utility would be the only one that counts. Suppose there is five people in a room, then if a decision affects all five, then their utility should all be taken into account. So the total utility view holds that total utility is what matters when evaluating actions.

The other view is the egoist based utility account. Egoist here is not pejorative, rather it merely points to the ego as being the one entity who’s utility matters. Here, the idea is that the person who acts is the person whose utility matters. It is relatively simple and straight forward.

Utilitarianism has a hard time incorporating rights. Mainly, because if it benefits me or everyone involved for me to violate any one person’s rights, then, if the utility is maximized, it is fair game. For example, the trolley problem—who can describe it? The utilitarian says that the right thing to do is to pull the lever. Yes, one person will die, but the harm of that one person dying will be outweighed by the benefit of the five people surviving.

In the same vein, it is moral to kill homeless people to harvest their organs to relieve the suffering of talented people who need organs, dependent on one’s view of value and utility—this is real scholarship that has been discussed, I am not making it up. In China, prisoners sentenced to death have their organs harvested. This is a thing that is done.

Finally, there are studies that show that human beings tend to be more utilitarian when they drink. Essentially, utilitarianism expresses our intuition that in acting, we should maximize the outcome, whether it is for ourselves alone, or for all involved. However, this theory clashes with other intuitions, such as human rights, dignity, and the fact that we do not always know in full the consequences of our actions.

This brings me to deontology. As I have said, this is a theory that evaluates whether some action is right or wrong, good or bad, based on whether the person acting is conforming to their duty in their willing of that act. This is a complex way of saying that it says that some action is right if it is an action that anyone else would feel obligated to do, in good conscious.

The main form of deontology is Kantianism, named after Immanuel Kant. Kant’s theory is as follows. When we act, we either act because we have appetites and animal natures, or we act because we feel obligated to out of a sense of duty. When we act as animals, such as when we eat our food, notice

our food and not someone else's, we act in a morally neutral way. However, at times, our animal nature drives us to act in a way that violates the categorical imperative.

The categorical imperative is a formulation of the feeling of duty or obligation. Sometimes, you feel like you must act a certain way because anyone else in your shoes (universality or categorical) would feel obliged (necessity or imperative) to act in such a way. You feel like it is the right thing to do. Often, it is not a thing you actually want to do—it usually goes counter to your animal nature—but you know that you must do it. Here are the three formulations of the CI:

1. Kant's Version: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction."
2. Casual English Interpretation: "Only do something if you think it'd be okay for everyone to do the same thing in the same situation." The Formula of Humanity:
3. Kant's Version: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."
4. Casual English Interpretation: "Treat people as valuable in themselves, not just as tools to get what you want." The Formula of Autonomy:
5. Kant's Version: "Act only so that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxims."
6. Casual English Interpretation: "Act in ways that respect the freedom and autonomy of others, as if your actions were setting a law for everyone."

These essentially capture the essence of the CI, which is basically a secular golden rule. Kant justifies it via a complex metaphysical argument that we will not cover. But, fundamentally, the idea of Kantian Deontology is that an action is right or wrong based on **WHY** you are doing it, and not on **WHAT** happens.

This captures our intuition about acting in complex situations. For example, suppose you see a person having a heart attack. You might run up to them and try to do CPR. But suppose that you are not good at CPR, and you end up cracking their ribs. Luckily, the ambulance gets there on time and revives the person. You might feel bad about breaking their ribs, but you also feel like you still did the right thing, because your intention was good.

The world is incredibly complex and we do not always know in full the way in which our actions will play out. Moreover, the theory captures the fact that merely acting 'correctly' because that is what is expected of you does not make you a morally good person. You are only acting morally good when you do something strictly because it is the right thing to do, and for no other reason what so ever.

However, the theory also has issues. One, it is unable to guarantee a happy life. Two, we still think that consequences matter and so completely disregarding

them is foolish. Three, it assumes we have free will. Fourth and finally, there is the old expression: ‘the road to hell is paved by good intentions’.