

Chapter 2: Introduction to Ethics

2.5 Ethical Egoism

Definition of Ethical Egoism

- Each person should focus exclusively on his or her self-interest
- Morally right action: that action that provides self with maximum long-term benefit
 - For example, suppose I depend upon a friend to give me a ride to work every day. If my friend's car breaks down and she doesn't have \$100 to fix it, I ought to loan her the money. Although I'm out \$100 until she pays me back, I'm better off giving her the loan because I'm still able to travel to work and make money. If I don't lend her the money, I'll lose my income. Lending \$100 to my friend is the right thing to do because it provides me the maximum overall benefit
- Ayn Rand, author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, espoused a theory akin to ethical egoism

Case for Ethical Egoism

- It is practical since we are already inclined to do what's best for ourselves
- It is better to let other people take care of themselves
- The community can benefit when individuals put their well-being first
- Other moral principles are rooted in the principle of self-interest

Case Against Ethical Egoism

- An easy moral philosophy may not be the best moral philosophy
- We know a lot about what is good for someone else
- Self-interest can lead to blatantly immoral behavior
 - Here is a true story. An affluent doctor in a small Southern town in the 1970s was visited by a poor, uneducated African American woman, who had a variety of minor complaints. The doctor quickly determined that the woman was suffering from malnutrition. He knew that she worked a variety of menial jobs, but earned very little money to support herself or her children. After spending no more than five minutes with her, and doing nothing for her, the doctor told her the charge would be \$25. The woman had only \$12 to her name, so the doctor took the \$12 as payment, leaving the woman with no money to buy food.

Case Against Ethical Egoism

There were no negative consequences to the doctor as a result of his action. According to the theory of ethical egoism, the doctor did the right thing: he was only supposed to take his own interest into account, and receiving \$12 from the woman was to his advantage. This answer, however, is incorrect; what the doctor did was morally reprehensible.

- Other moral principles are superior to principle of self-interest
- People who take the good of others into account lead happier lives
- By definition, does not respect the ethical point of view
- Not a workable ethical theory

2.6 Kantianism

Critical Importance of Good Will

- Good will: the desire to do the right thing
- Immanuel Kant: Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is a good will
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing

Categorical Imperative (1st Formulation)

Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

Illustration of 1st Formulation

- Question: Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?
- Proposed rule: “I may make promises with the intention of later breaking them.”
- The person in trouble wants his promise to be believed so he can get what he needs.
- Universalize rule: Everyone may make & break promises
- Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed
- The rule is flawed. The answer is “No.”

A Quick Check

- When evaluating a proposed action, reverse roles
- What would you think if that person did the same thing to you?
- Negative reaction → evidence that your will to do that action violates the Categorical Imperative

Categorical Imperative (2nd Formulation)

Act so that you treat both yourself
and other people as ends in themselves
and never only as a means to an end.

This is usually an easier formulation to work
with than the first formulation of the
Categorical Imperative.

Kant: Wrong to Use Another Person Solely as a Means to an End



Plagiarism Scenario

- Carla
 - Single mother
 - Works full time
 - Takes two evening courses/semester
- History class
 - Requires more work than normal
 - Carla earning an “A” on all work so far
 - Carla doesn’t have time to write final report
- Carla purchases report; submits it as her own work

Kantian Evaluation (1st Formulation)

- Carla wants credit for plagiarized report
- Rule: “You may claim credit for work performed by someone else”
- If rule universalized, reports would no longer be credible indicator’s of student’s knowledge, and professors would not give credit for reports
- Her Proposed moral rule is self-defeating
- It is wrong for Carla to turn in a purchased report

Kantian Evaluation (2nd Formulation)

- Carla submitted another person's work as her own
- She attempted to deceive professor
- She treated professor as a means to an end
 - End: passing the course
 - Means: manipulate professor
- What Carla did was wrong

Case for Kantianism

- Aligns with common moral concern: “What if everyone acted that way?”
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Treats all persons as moral equals

Perfect and Imperfect Duties

- Perfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill without exception
 - Example: Telling the truth
- Imperfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill in general but not in every instance
 - Example: Helping others

Case Against Kantianism

- Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
- Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
 - In a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, perfect duty prevails
 - In a conflict between two perfect duties, no solution
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties
- Despite weaknesses, a workable ethical theory

2.7 Act Utilitarianism

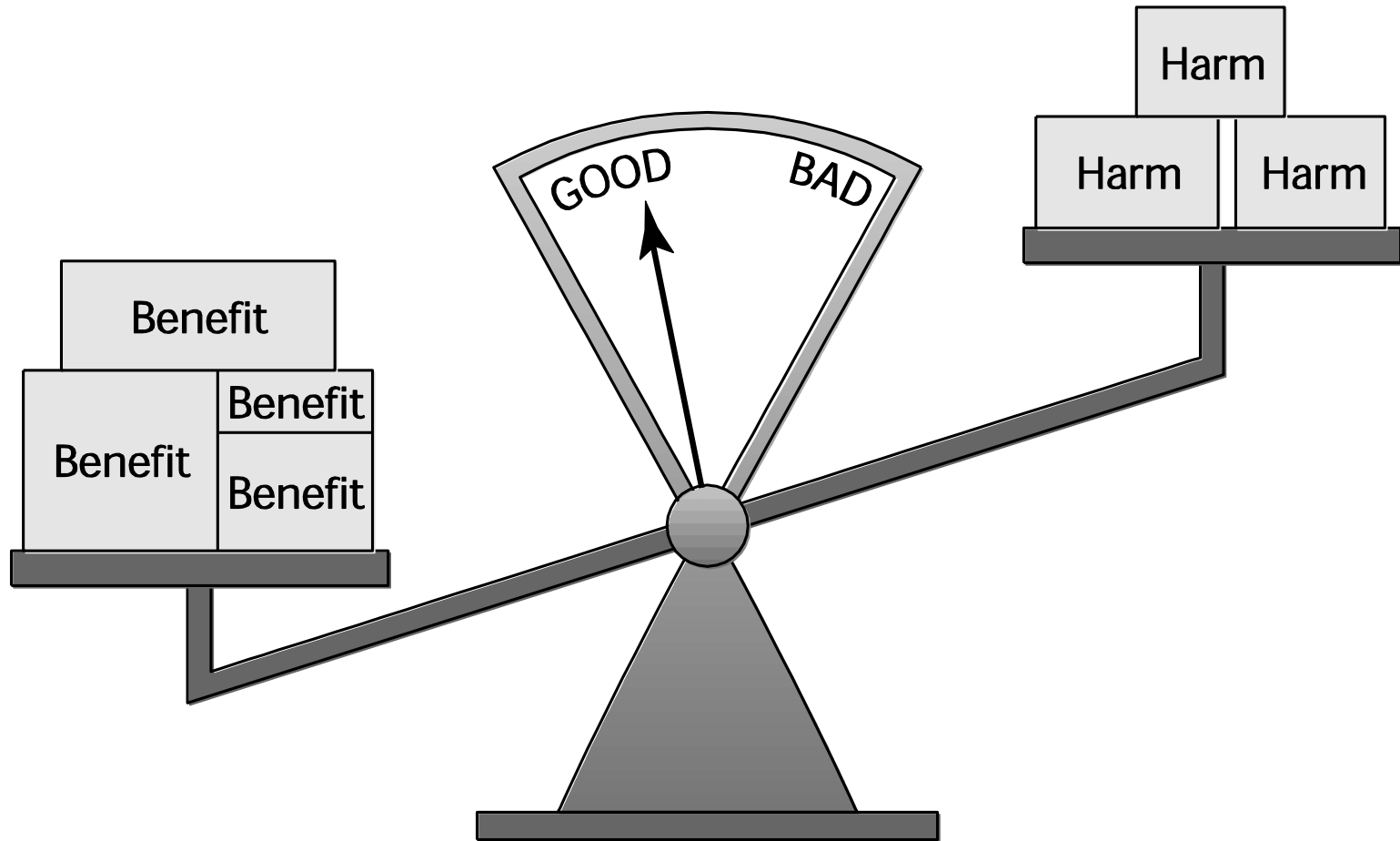
Principle of Utility

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- An action is good if its benefits exceeds its harms
- An action is bad if its harms exceed its benefits
- Utility: tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community
- Happiness = advantage = benefit = good = pleasure
- Unhappiness = disadvantage = cost = evil = pain

Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness Principle)

An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.

Principle of Utility



Act Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism
 - Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent
 - Focuses on the consequences
 - A consequentialist theory
- Act utilitarianism
 - Add up change in happiness of all affected beings
 - $\text{Sum} > 0$, action is good
 - $\text{Sum} < 0$, action is bad
 - Right action to take: one that maximizes the sum