Phil1200 Assignment 44

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The study of ethical history is an essential component of philosophy. The 19th century saw two prominent British philosophers who developed a fundamental framework for addressing social and ethical problems. The doctrine of utilitarianism was formulated that determined ethical objectives, relying upon the notions and concepts of pain and pleasure. The paper will be examining the system of classical utilitarian ethics from the perspective of the two English thinkers, John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, and compare it with the categorical imperative proposed by Kant, to explore which account is more practical and plausible.

Both Mill and Bentham were fundamentally cornered with social and legal reform in order to provide a basis to end corrupt social practices and laws. For Bentham, utilitarianism was based on the greatest happiness principle. He held that an individual must always act in a manner, within reason, which would result into the maximum greatest happiness. Conversely, Mill formulated his idea of utilitarianism based on a qualitative distinction between pleasures. Both sought to answer the question about what makes a policy, law, or an act a fundamentally moral one; for utilitarians, it was the lack of utility.

The ethical theory proposed by Bentham was grounded on the presumption that human actions have to be evaluated according to the consequences they produce, and the only consequences which matter are those that help achieve happiness, in the sense of achieving maximum pleasure and minimizing or avoiding pain. Bentham’s hedonistic utilitarianism, in determining the value of the utility, considered how intensely something brings about pleasure, how quickly it follows the act, how long it lasts, and how effectively does it avoid collateral harms while producing benefits. Mill agreed with Bentham’s propositions but modified the theory to include intuition. For him, some pleasures were higher than others; for instance, intellectual pleasures surpassed sexual pleasures. Mill's utilitarianism was thus not hedonistic and significantly departed from Bentham's theory; however, he still accepted good to exist in the psychological state of pleasure. This led him to understand the rationale for having rights to be utility, which was in contrast to the indiscriminate hedonistic view of Bentham, and to many seems more plausible to be institutionally implemented. The qualitative measures of pleasure, though included Bentham’s ideas of duration and intensity, began to diverge from the hard utilitarianism proposed by Bentham.

Another place where Mill differed from Bentham was the emphasis on internal feelings of remorse and guilt as a means of regulating an individual’s actions. Since human beings have social feelings besides individual, the perception of social or physical harm to another individual creates painful feelings within a person, a view that Mill’s utilitarian ethics accommodated. In contrast, Bentham valued autonomy and liberty, any violation of which is consequently immoral. The view sharply contrasted with that of natural law approaches and the ethical theory of categorical imperative that was proposed by Kant.

Kant’s ethical theories were based upon the idea that reason should be used to govern how people should behave and act. He discussed his theory in a number of works in which a common reference to the concept of duty can be frequently found. Kantian ethics saw an act of virtuous if it was based on goodwill, which surpassed other human virtues. Goodwill is a unique virtue which maintains a high ethical value even if the moral intentions with which that act was performed failed to achieve its objective; thus it was virtuous and good. Another related concept that Kant discussed in his works on ethics was duty. Duty referred to a will that overcomes certain barriers to sustain an ethical intent or act. Such a will would be observable in adversity, and in such a case, Kant saw such acts to hold a moral worth if they were performed with regards to that duty.

The Kantian view based itself on the principle of the Categorical Imperative (CI). The maxim which defined CI was to act in accordance with that which you would desire, at the same time, to become universal law. The CI was instrumental in the formulation of Kantian ethics, using which he proposed further formulations. A CI binds humans regardless of what they desire, such as having a duty to speak the truth, even it goes against us, or what the circumstances would entail. Moreover, since the CI is based on sound reason, they are ethically binding, and through this arise duties. A failure to fulfill these duties would contradict with good will. Moreover, he classified these duties as perfect and imperfect. A degree of flexibility exists within an imperfect duty such as the choice of acting beneficently. Furthermore, because we are rational agents, therefore individuals also owe a duty to rationality, and thus moral principles based on rationality apply to humans at all times.

One of the central aspects to Kantian ethics and the CI principle is that humans should not be treated as a means to an end, and thus people should not be exploited to gain what you desire. Thus human actions can be evaluated through their motives, which become moral or permissible if they pass the CI test. In contrast, utilitarianism allows any means necessary, regardless of motives, to achieve an outcome that leads to pleasure or happiness. They ‘why' behind the action is not significant as is the end result and the happiness that it brings. It is for this reason, Bentham’s greatest happiness principle which was used to formulate his ethical theory is flawed. Another reason is the subjective and non-universal nature of what happiness is or how it can be measured. Applying Bentham’s utilitarian ethics can justify slavery, imperialism or fornication since each of them brings about certain pleasurable consequences. In contrast, I find the Kantian view to be much more plausible as it values the cause behind an act rather than its outcome; notwithstanding that in certain situations, it can be the more difficult option.