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Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics

Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics are the two main theories of ethics that are widely discussed and accepted. There are fundamental differences in both the theories based on how on action and consequences of the action. The Kantian theory is very close to deontology as both are based on the principles which govern the action. On the other hand, utilitarianism is based on the action which results in maximum pleasure. It is based on grater pleasure for a greater number of people irrespective of the harm that may be inflicted on a lesser number of people. In utilitarianism, the end result justify the right or wrong of any action. By deep analysis through a critical understanding of both the theories of ethics, we will take an overview of a case study and determine which ethical theory fits here.

Alex is a lady who promised her spouse that she will continue to visit her grave at every anniversary no matter how much time passes. After her death, she remains stick to her pledge and continues to visit her grave. After some years, due to Alex’s deteriorating health and aging, it became difficult for her to remain true to her pledge. As mentioned in the case study, Alex believes in utilitarianism so she does a hedonistic calculus in her mind and decided that she will not be able to continue visiting her dead spouse anymore.

Is Alex’s abandoning an annual visit to her spouse true according to the utilitarian theory of ethics? According to consequentialism, Alex is very right in giving up visits to her spouse’s grave because in consequentialism actions are justified that their consequences, not intentions. It is possible that her intentions are against the decision. The utilitarian approach is characterized by the pleasure at the end of action and if it is present in a greater amount for a greater number of people it is fair and justified. In this case, she was not getting enough pleasure in doing continuous visits rather it was becoming painful owing to her age and illness. She made a felicific calculus inside her head and the result was in favor of giving up. Felicific calculus is a formulated algorithm presented by Jeremy Bentham, a utilitarian philosopher to calculate the amount or degree of pleasure that is specific to a particular action.

Now if we relate Alex’s decision with that of Kantian theory of ethics, her action is not justified at all. Immanuel Kant, who presented this theory believes that this theory is based on two fundamental capacities that are rationality and freedom(*Kant, Immanuel | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Freedom does not mean that everybody has the freedom to do whatever he considers true based on his own free will. A free-will is one which is under moral laws and happiness, sufferings, pain, and pleasure are not the sovereign masters. As far as rationality is concerned, it is judged by the inherent dignity of a person which is an end result in itself. A man’s reason determines his will which then ultimately effects on a bigger scale and affects the inclination, natural circumstances, and interests. In Alex’s case, her decision to visit her spouse on every anniversary after her death was not only based on good moral grounds but also it was a promise which she is liable to fulfill. Irrespective of the consequences and end results she must fulfill her oath and continue visiting her spouse’s grave.

Comparing similarities and differences when applying both the theories of ethics to Alex’s case, her decision to stay true to her promise was according to the principles of Kantian theory of ethics. Because the moral worth of an action is based on the intention or motive of the action, even if the consequences are not favorable for the majority of the people or a single person. The consequences were not as good in this case as far as the health of Alex is concerned. While on the other case, her decision to abandon visiting her grave every year was due to achieve comfort at the end which is the purpose of utilitarianism. In utilitarianism, moral autonomy is restrained that means it is the responsibility of a person to choose only path that leads benefit and if an action results in a loss, the person is to be blamed for not making the right decision. On the contrary, in Kantian ethics, a person is not restricted to make a judgment or make a decision that necessarily has to produce good and beneficial results. He just has to make a true decision and must not worry about the results because he will not be considered guilty. Alex has taken a decision and made a promise and if for some reason that is out of her control, she cannot fulfill her oath she is not guilty according to Kantian ethics. Another relation between the two theories is moral reasoning. The reasoning in utilitarian is more conditional and hypothetical which suggests that to acquire a particular result, one must behave in a certain way to get that. As an example, if somebody does not want to get caught, he must not commit theft. On the contrary, moral reasoning is just categorical which suggests that it is independent of itself. It has no reference or dependency on any other purpose. For example, you should not commit theft, in any case, irrespective of the fear to get caught or left.

**Works Cited**

*Kant, Immanuel | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://www.iep.utm.edu/kantview/. Accessed 25 Nov. 2019.