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Normative Ethics: Duty and Consequence

by Angelo Andriopoulos

(Philosophy 1100)

The most ponderous question we often ask ourselves is how one is to achieve an actualized existence, while adhering to a system of moral principles that ratify the notion that humanity indeed can be righteous in their exploits. This inquiry of moral abstraction can be approached with two normative ethical theories in mind; deontological and teleological ethics (also known as consequentialism). Before one can scrutinize these two theories it is imperative to first understand them correctly in their most rudimentary definition. The Greek prefix *deon* means “duty,” and in this sense deontological ethics impose the notion that individuals are subject and bound to an unequivocal code of conduct that is solely concerned with the inherent moral nature of an action. The possible consequences of actions hold no bearing on morality; in this regard it is prudent to assert that the “ends never justify the means” and there can be no room for interpretation nor is any matter subject to relativism. In the word teleological the Greek prefix *telos* can be translated to “end” or “purpose.” Teleological ethical theories can thus be generalized as a system in contrast to deontological ethical theories due to the fact that in teleological ethical theories the morality of an action is entirely contingent upon the consequences it produces. In teleological ethics it is possible for one to assert the notion that the “ends can justify the means” and that matters indeed can be subject to relativism. In this essay it is my contention to explore both deontological and teleological ethical theories and examine but a mote of their multiple facets in order to come to a verdict regarding the validity of both theories and to determine which is more conducive to what may be considered of greater moral integrity.

One of the most prominent deontological ethical theories is that of Immanuel Kant and is labeled Kantian ethics. It is Kant’s view that morality is derived from one’s ability to reason; furthermore such reason will manifest itself in a logical form known as moral imperatives or duties. It is also important to note that according to Kant the only unconditional good is a “good will” because he contends that actions that might be considered good in themselves can be utilized to harm with immoral intent. Kant’s congregated work lead to the birth of his cardinal conception which is known as the categorical imperative, a moral principle that is pertinent to all beings that are capable of reason. The categorical imperative is universal and absolutely mandatory towards all individuals eternally. Kant’s categorical imperative can further be analyzed in the form of four central formulations. Firstly “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”(Kant, pg 30), according to Kant the only way an action can be deemed morally right is if said action is applicable universally to all. This assertion acts as a test in order to deem if a maxim or rule is moral. For example “it is acceptable to borrow currency without the intent of returning it.” Such a maxim would fail the test as if everyone was to borrow money without intending to return it then no one would lend money; this in itself diminishes the universality of the maxim and thus makes it immoral. Kant’s next formulation is to “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (Kant, pg 43). In this affirmation Kant is stating not to simply objectify other humans but rather view them as rational beings and act in accordance so that they may benefit also. Kant’s third formulation is one of autonomy, Kant believed that the only reason one should desire to make any moral law is if it came forth from their rational will, any other motive to create moral law would thereby corrupt the moral law itself. Kant’s final formulation is one of

unison that combines the previous three in order to create an ideal community known as the “kingdom of ends,” in this hypothetical community all members are rational beings who follow laws in accordance with the categorical imperative and act as an end only to themselves.

Another deontological system is known as moral absolutism, which is an ethical theory that asserts actions to have an absolute moral connotation in the form of right or wrong. Furthermore the intent and consequence of the action holds no bearing on if it is considered to be moral or not. Moral absolutism is often presented in a form known as divine command theory. In the divine command theory all notions of right and wrong are entirely at the discretion of a God, it is then feasible to assume that said deity is of benevolent nature. To be moral in accordance with this ethical system one would have to follow the will of God without question.

Practitioners of this ethical system are often motivated to act moral out of respect and love for God; however a more cynical mind might assert practitioners might be motivated out of fear of divine punishment and hope of divine reward.

A third type of theory that can be considered deontological is Intuitionism. In intuitionism morality is simply derived from human intuition, although considered to be fallible it provides us with an instant sense of what is right and wrong, it is then possible to utilize said intuitions as a basic foundation in order to formulate moral principles.

Among teleological ethical systems, utilitarianism is by far the most pronounced. Utilitarianism is often attributed to Jeremy Bentham and his later student John Stuart Mill. Unlike Kantian ethics and other deontological ethical theories that argue that the consequence of an action is irrelevant to morality, utilitarianism holds consequences to be exceedingly relevant to morality. According to Bentham the most sensible approach is of one that amplifies utility, which is usually construed as the ascension of pleasure and the attrition of pain, not unlike the central notion of hedonism that argues that only pleasure merits any intrinsic value, it is for this reason hedonism is often viewed as a foundation for utilitarianism. But unlike hedonism and egoism, utilitarianism asks us to regard everyone’s happiness and not simply our own. Furthermore, Mill makes the distinction that it is “better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question” (Mill, pg 13). In the previous statement Mill contends that there are lower and higher forms of pleasure, it is the obligation of the individual to refrain from self-indulgent instant gratification. Unlike deontological ethical systems that would argue that the highest form of happiness is obliging to one’s duties, utilitarianism allows for the most happiness possible in a relative sense, in order to determine this Bentham attempted to devise a mathematical system that attempted to quantify good and evil, took into account factors including intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity and extent. This mathematical system came to be known as *hedonistic calculus*.

It is important to note that I have barely scratched the surface of both deontological and teleological theories; both notions attempt to answer the same fundamental question, how should one behave? It is my opinion that the teleological ethical theory is of greater validity in this regard. I cannot subscribe to the divine command theory as it is impossible to know that there is a God, his will, and whether he is benevolent. Furthermore if someone acts morally simply to avoid punishment or gain reward then they have diminished the righteousness of their action. Kant’s categorical imperative is of noble conception but in order for it to be successful every single individual must act in accordance with it which is theoretically impossible. I disregard intuitionism as I simply do not believe all moral truths are self-evident. I reject hedonism and egoism as I feel such self-indulgence is ultimately destructive. I find utilitarianism to be the most excellent ethical system because it acknowledges that our world is dynamic, and that we should act accordingly in order to attempt to do right by everyone in society while attempting to not violate the individual for the greater good of the whole if possible. I do however find *hedonistic calculus* to be grossly absurd as I do not feel one

could possibly quantify right and wrong in a definite form. Once more, if it is not obvious, I feel the need to reaffirm that these are solely my opinions and my contention is not to convince the reader of anything. It is my aspiration that this paper has sparked insight within the reader and has inspired them to embark on their own journey of philosophical inquiry, in order to answer the question of how they should conduct themselves in order to lead a moral life.

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