

Utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

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Question 1

Although at first, the Utilitarian idea of maximizing happiness is inviting, fulling pursuing the moral doctrine will lead to the erosion of an individual's integrity, specifically when considering negative responsibility, which calls for ownership of inaction. Despite the extreme views of some Utilitarians, a balance can be found which respects the individual's integrity while attempting to maximize happiness. To understand this balance, it is important to understand negative responsibility and the critiques upon it which demonstrate through examples the loss of integrity. Once the problem is seen, a balance between utilitarianism and personal happiness can be made which allows an individual to follow utilitarian morals while respecting their own, and others, integrity.

Utilitarianism searches for actions that maximize happiness while decreasing pain and calls these actions moral. Claiming that if all follow the moral actions, the world's overall happiness will increase. Negative responsibility claims that inaction is also an action, and in turn can be judged. An individual makes the choice of not acting or delaying action in a situation that may increase pain, an immoral (in)action. For example, Singer, a modern Utilitarian, presents the example of a child drowning in a lake. If a bystander sees the child and does not act to save them, they are choosing to increase pain, thus the bystander is acting immorally. Singers continues to extend this example to the world, replacing the child with countries suffering from poverty, starvation, and famine, and the bystander with individuals who have the resources to help. He claims that it is immoral not to help the suffering countries through donations and public service even if it is not the individual's fault that the countries are suffering. This makes sense since it would be seen as immoral for the bystander not to help the drowning child, even if the bystander had no connection to the child drowning. Although the idea of negative

responsibility is inviting in this example, when further extending it, it is seen that individuals lose their integrity.

Critiques upon negative responsibility and Utilitarianism arise when considering how an individual must act, and not act, to be moral. Although moral actions will increase happiness, it reduces individuals to cogs in a system that only searches to increase overall happiness, disregarding an individual's pleasure and feelings. This becomes clear in William's "A Critique of Utilitarianism," where he shows how the broad ideas of Utilitarianism result in an extreme restriction in actions to stay moral, specifically when considering negative responsibility, since ownership of every inaction must be taken into account. He claims that this pursuit attacks an individual's integrity, which can be seen in the examples he presents.

Consider a person walking through a forest named Jim. Jim stumbles across a village where a public execution of 20 individuals is taking place. The executioner sees Jim and claims that a special circumstance will be made, Jim can either kill one of the individuals, saving the others, or he can walk away from the village and the executioner will proceed to kill all 20 individuals. Taking negative responsibility into account, if Jim is to walk away, it is his fault that the 20 individuals are executed making this an immoral action. Therefore, regardless of how Jim would feel, Jim must kill the single individual to be morally correct. William points out how this directly attacks Jim's integrity, disregarding his personal beliefs. What if Jim is a sworn Buddhist who believes that killing is bad under any circumstance. And so, it is shown how negative responsibility attacks Jim. For Jim to act morally in this situation, a middle ground must be found in Utilitarianism.

To find a middle ground between moral and immoral actions in Utilitarian ethics, Singer presents an alternative. Singer talks about how everyone must contribute as much as they can to

helping others. He uses the example of an individual being given the choice of becoming paralyzed to save another person's life. According to Utilitarian ethics, the individual must become paralyzed since anything is better than death. But Singer acknowledges that this is extreme and a very high price to ask, so rather than expecting all to follow this ideology, he presents a less extreme version. The individual must have a broken arm instead of being paralyzed, which is less extreme. Similarly, instead of demanding all to give everything to help others, a less extreme command is brought forth, which is more reasonable to ask of people. This idea translates to negative responsibility, instead of viewing the extreme, a more reasonable approach to Utilitarianism must be present, which allows and preserves the individual's integrity. In some situations, negative reasonability makes sense, but it cannot apply to every situation. Like Singer, less extreme use of negative reasonability must be present.

Although it is impossible to follow extreme Utilitarianism without losing integrity, I believe that a middle ground exists, like Singers' less extreme solution. This middle ground must be taught and learned from for Utilitarian ethics to have value since a lot can be learned from the ideas. Inactions should be considered as actions, but personal integrity must also be respected. It is unreasonable to demand such actions from every human and this is seen by modern Utilitarians like Singer who present a less extreme version of their doctrine. So, while a lot is gathered from the original Utilitarian morals, the ideas must evolve and change according to the situation it is trying to solve. It is unfair and unrealistic to reduce everyone to cogs in a machine, although this would produce more overall happiness, it would ultimately reduce the happiness of individuals and destroy what most an individual unique. The middle ground must be found and taught.

Question 2

In Kantian ethics, one of the central ideas is that of autonomy, which gives the ability to rational beings to impose new moral laws that not only apply to other rational beings but also themselves, and in so, each rational being must respect the dignity of every other rational being. Since this is such a crucial element of Kantian ethics, the supreme principle of morality heavily relies upon, meaning that Kantian morality relies upon the idea of autonomy. Without autonomy, Kant's arguments of morality would have no ground and would be unreasonable, since it would imply that the supreme principle can appeal to some rational beings while not to others since autonomy creates the required respect for others needed in the supreme principle. Therefore, Kant is correct in saying that morality requires autonomy. To demonstrate how this holds, the rationale between Kant's three formulations and the concept of autonomy needs to be shown.

The fundamental idea of Autonomy is that every rational being must have the utmost respect for every other rational being, including themselves. This respect creates self-rule that allows the will to govern itself through moral laws. Although this may seem to create a contraction with Kantian ethics since Kant searches for a moral principle that commands all rational beings on how they ought to act, the idea of autonomy furthers the moral principle. Each of Kant's formulations depends upon the respect of the autonomy of other rational beings. Without the respect gained from autonomy, the formulations, and furthermore the supreme principle, losing meaning.

Going through each formulation, the necessity of autonomy is seen. The first formulation is the Formula of the Universal Law of Nature which states to only act as one would expect others to act. For a person to understand how others would act, it is crucial for autonomy to create respect between rational beings so that it is understood that others will act similarly to

yourself. And in that sense, an understanding that any moral laws presented by others will also have this in mind, that the lawmaker must also comply with the law, which creates a more reasonable law for all rational beings to follow. Without autonomy, there would be no understanding of how others would react to a new law since the connection between the lawmaker and the law is lost. The lawmaker could impose a new maxim with no understanding of how it would affect other rational beings.

The second formulation is the formula of humanity, which states to use no other rational beings for your benefit. Once again, autonomy plays an important role when rational beings search to understand other rational beings. For one to not use another, they need to understand that if they are treating someone else in a certain way, they need to be alright with being treated that way themselves by others. So, autonomy is used to understand that rational beings should only treat others as they want to be treated since all rational beings need to respect each other. Without autonomy, the second formulation would become corrupt as there would be no understanding between rational beings. The being trying to use another being for an end could claim that they are not using them since they have different dignities. A king could view himself as a higher being than his people and therefore could justify mistreating them since they are not of the same status. Only when the king understands that both King and Servant are humans and must respect the servant as one, will the king be able to treat the servant with respect as they both are autonomous agents.

The final formulation is the Kingdom of Ends where autonomy plays a large role. Since the kingdom requires all ends to see each other as equals, all ends must utilize autonomy to view themselves and others as equals and to respect their own and the other's humanity. Only then will the kingdom be fully autonomous allowing for all ends to be lawgivers since they will

only produce laws that not only benefit themselves but for all others. Without autonomy, the kingdom would collapse since respect for others would be lost. Even if all ends saw each other as equals, the ability for an end to be a lawgiver would be lost since they would have no understanding of how the law would treat others.

Since without autonomy, Kantian ethics break due to them being based on respect between rational beings, morality requires autonomy. Each formulation of the supreme principle is a certain form of autonomy and this is one of the reasons why Kantian ethics is so inviting. The formulations state to respect others and their choices, and not to use them for your means which can be reduced to respect other's humanity which is what autonomy promotes. The ability to be autonomous allows the self to understand that all other rational beings are also beings with dignity and freedom much like yourself. Through this realization of autonomy, comes forth Kantian ethics and other forms of morality. Without autonomy, all respect for others and ourselves is lost and there is no common ground upon which morals can be built upon, therefore morals do depend on autonomy.

Question 3

In virtue ethics, an individual must learn how to be practically wise through their actions by following those of a virtuous role model. They are unable to obtain virtue without performing actions that can be learned from. Therefore, no one is born virtuous but rather learns how to make virtuous choices that are relative to them by copying and learning from a virtuous role model. To better understand this idea, it is crucial to know what Aristotle means by virtue and to see how virtue is obtained through wise choices, where the wisdom is determined by the ability to choose the mean option in a situation that is relative to the chooser. When they learn how to

make these kinds of choices with ease, then and only then will the person begin to act virtuous and in turn learn how to be virtuous. Therefore, nobody can be born virtuous, everyone must learn and become virtuous.

First, it is important to understand the specific meaning of Aristotle's virtue, as it is the center of virtue ethics. Aristotle describes virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean" where "the mean [is] relative to us" (pg. 144). The state of character that he refers to is the concept that is relative to each person. The state of character of a person is made up of their character traits that define how the person feels rather than why the person feels. The character is unique to each person since it is determined by the events in that person's life and tells them how much of a feeling they should express. For example, the character tells someone to be extremely angry or not very sad in certain situations. The next step in being virtuous is that the state of character makes choices, which are educated rational deliberation on actions that the person has power over. Now that the state of character can make a choice, it must make the choice that is lying in a relative mean. The mean is the middle point of the range of the options that the character deliberates over. This is relative to the character so there is no set meaning for all characters. Once the character develops this ability, the person develops wisdom in their choices for any situation, they make practical wise choices. But how does the character become virtuous?

Aristotle claims that no person is born virtuous since virtue comes from doing virtuous actions. But can there be a person who is born practically wise? A baby that has the ability to be virtuous, but only lack the qualifying virtuous actions which they will naturally make once they are old enough. Aristotle argues that there are three requirements to be virtuous. An individual can act virtuously but a distinction is made between being and acting virtuously. Firstly, the

individual must know. Since a choice is determined by an educated choice, one that lacks the full knowledge, will not be making a truly voluntary choice. Through their lack of education, they are making an involuntary choice. So, the baby would lack the knowledge required to be virtuous. Second, the character must make their choice based on previous mistakes. Similarly, to learning an instrument, virtuous choices must be learned from previous mistakes, actions that were not virtuous. So once again, the ability to naturally possess a virtue is unrealistic since the character would have never learned from previous mistakes. Lastly, the character must be firm and unchanging. With education and past mistakes, the character can evolve and develop into an unchanging state of practical wisdom. The virtuous character will not need to question their options since their character lies in a state of wisdom. The baby does not have the required unchanging character since as it grows older, they will learn new things and develop new opinions and thoughts, changing their character.

Now that it has been established that no one is born virtuous, the question arises of how one can learn to be virtuous. Aristotle claims that one must begin by coping with a virtuous role model. One that is already practical wise and possesses the ability to make virtuous choices. While trying to copy them, the character will make mistakes, act outside of the mean, and through these mistakes will learn, becoming more educated. But one can not simply copy a virtuous person to become virtuous, they need to act virtuously relative to themselves. So, while they are becoming virtuous through repeated copying of actions, they are not yet virtuous. To be virtuous they must meet the three requirements described above and then they will possess the unwavering ability to make choices that lie in the relative mean to themselves and thus have become virtuous.

Aristotle accurately claims that it is not possible to be born virtuous by demonstrating the flaws in the idea and showing how an individual can become virtuous. Through his examples and description of virtue, it is seen that the character must copy a virtuous role-model to grow and learn the ability of virtue, that it takes practices, errors, and time to fully copy the role model but that this only opens the door of virtue. To step through it, the person must learn to make the virtue their own, to apply it to all situations that they have power over. Only then will they be virtuous. If virtue were to be natural, there would be no change, people would not need to strive for virtue, rather they could be born with virtue and never venture out of the comfort zone, there would be no learning. Education only comes forth through mistakes and copy others until they understand it and can apply it to situations unique to themselves.

Question 4

The three branches of ethics, Utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Virtue bring forth appealing ideas on how humans should interact with each other and lives their lives. Each section focusing on a different section of ethics that searches to answer how human behavior should be conducted. Utilitarianism searches to maximize happiness, while Kantianism focuses on how an individual rational being should treat others, and Virtues show how individuals can live their lives, each has its strengths and weaknesses. When trying to answer which branch is the most appealing, it is important to understand that a certain aspect of philosophy is the reader's interpretation of the philosopher's text. I do not believe that anyone's idea needs to be limited to themselves but rather that readers can learn from multiplied writings and can combine and choose which elements they find the most pleasing and derive their meaning. That being said, I found Kant's work to be the most appealing since my interpretation of his work did not lay that

far off from what I thought Kant was trying to say and the critique upon Kant's work seemed to have solutions. To better understand this, I will show my takeaways and the weaknesses of each branch.

The doctrine of Utilitarianism determines the correctness of an action by the amount of happiness generated by the action. At first, I found this idea very appealing while reading Bentham's work, he presented a logical argument which creates a physical formula, felicific calculus, to compute the rightness of an action. The variables of the equations are based on the amount of happiness created, the spread of the happiness, the duration, the intensity, and other factors that can be optimized to create the most happiness and the least pain. Being a math major myself, I loved this idea, it was a formula that easily solved ethics. But I began to see the weaknesses of this approach while reading Singers' and Williams' work. Although Utilitarianism creates the most happiness, individuals are reduced to cogs in a happiness machine. All sense of self is lost while worrying about if every action and inaction will cause more happiness or more sadness. Reading Singers' essay, it also becomes clear that Utilitarianism demanded an unrealistic amount of dedication from everyone.

My conclusion with Utilitarianism is that a middle ground must be found to be able to follow the doctrine, but I struggled to determine what this middle ground would be and it seemed that even the idea of a middle ground broke Utilitarianism since the core idea is maximizing happiness but the middle ground would not successfully do these for all. What I am taking away from Utilitarianism is that sometimes actions that may appear wrong could be right on a larger scale since they create more happiness.

Reading Aristotle's work on virtue ethics was a refreshing change of pace from search of moral principles. Virtue ethics presented a very relative option on how an individual should live

their lives. Searching for the relative mean choice makes sense, a certain amount of anger or sadness is correct in situations and this is something we learn from others and then make relative to ourselves. This doctrine of ethics also acknowledged that virtue is something that does not come easily or naturally, Aristotle encourages mistakes and promotes learning which I feel like the other two branches skip the other. Morals demand that everyone must act upon them with no room to learn how to live by them. I believe that the weakness of virtue ethics lies in the long-term result. If unvirtuous actions are required to be learned from to become virtuous, in the space between becoming virtuous and being virtuous, any immoral action can be disregarded as a learning experience. What I take away from Aristotle's work is to search for the mean choice, that there always lays a correct amount of action and that the extremes of the action are harmful.

When I began reading Kant's work, I was interested in the idea of finding a single moral principle that applies to all rational beings. I found the three formulations to be very appealing and create a single moral principle that was also appealing and which I thought would end meaning current problems in the world. Just creating a base of respect between all humans would end problems like racism and agism. Treating everyone with respect for their humanity, understanding their freedom, and not using anyone for your benefit is such an extremely inviting idea. Laws would be made without evil intent, corruption would disappear, and equality through the race, age, and social classes would be promoted.

The main critique I have upon Kant's work is where the line is drawn with a rational being. If a child is treated as a rational being, parents must respect the child's wishes even if they are uneducated and would be harmful to the child. But I believe that by blurring the line between rational beings and irrational beings a lot can be gained. If we extend the second formulation to animals, we no longer can use them as our means, which would prevent animal testing and

animal cruelty in racing. Therefore, my takeaway from Kant's work is his three formulations and an understanding that rational beings and irrational beings interact with each other and no hard line should be drawn between us.

While I claim that Kantianism is the most appealing and presents solutions for modern issues, I think a better understanding and take away is a combination of each doctrine. It is important to learn how to live your life virtuously especially in times where the influence of other's lives is projected onto the public. For example, an Instagram influence may promote a rich and carefree life that is not obtainable by everyone. It is also important to understand that some actions need to be performed even if they cause pain since they will increase the overall happiness of more people. While Kantianism ethics may be the most appealing and may present many solutions for modern problems, a combination of the three moral theories will give the reader the most out of their time instead of attaching onto one and dismissing the others.

Work Cited

1. Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie, *Ethics History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*
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