

A Comparative Philosophical Analysis of the Kantian Principle of Moral Theory and the Utilitarian Theory: Applications and Critiques

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Abstract

There have been several notions about the Kantian perspective and the utilitarian theory from all walks of life in the academic space. Kant spoke widely on morality, rights and justice for all persons whereas Bentham and Mill spoke of an action being right if they are useful for the benefit of the majority. Kant admonished people to act as they would want all other people to act towards them. This paper, therefore, takes the step to critically compare the Kantian principle of moral theory to the Utilitarian theory as an important aspect in general philosophy and the social science philosophy in particular. This critical paper adopts a systematic review approach whereby scholarly articles from different authors and sources were drawn which served as secondary sources of literature for the discussion. This paper argues that the 'Categorical Imperative' is a moral guideline devised to aid an individual in choosing to make the right decision and perform the right duties whereas the Utilitarian approach is an ethical system that proposes that the greatest useful goodness for the greatest number of people should be our guiding principle when making ethical decisions. This paper makes a case by imploring how the categorical imperative of Kantianism and the Utilitarian theory are applied in Social Science Research (SSR). It is therefore recommended that all life matters and persons should not be used as a means for one's satisfaction and what is right in society must be enforced and what is beneficial to the larger society must also be encouraged.

Keywords: Moral theory, Ethics, Kantian Principle, Utilitarianism, Social Sciences, Rights, Duties

Introduction

One of the leading advocates of deontology, Immanuel Kant devised the Categorical Imperative (command), believed by Kant as a supreme principle of morality, one of the greatest contributions to the field of philosophy published in his work 'Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals'. Kant believed and thus argued that practical reason can be sufficient for deriving moral principles and thus he devised the Categorical Imperative (C.I). The objective of this theory is to defend the element of reason comprising human action more specifically adhering to moral action. To understand the function of this theory, first one must understand the elements leading to its formulation [1].

On the other hand, Utilitarianism is the ethical theory which holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness or wrong as they tend to produce pain. Utilitarians believe that the purpose of morality is to make life better by increasing the number of good things (such as pleasure and happiness) in the world and

decreasing the number of bad things (such as pain and unhappiness). Mill indicates that "actions are caused by pleasures or pains, either the pleasure or pain anticipated as resulting from the act, or the pleasure or pain generated by the very thought of doing the act"

Paper Significance

This critical paper will help social science researchers and other researchers in the field of general philosophy appreciate the relevance of the Kantian perspective and the utilitarian perspective to social research and their respective application to research activities, particularly in the humanities. The paper will go further to deepen the reasoning ability of individuals as to what is right and what is wrong and what is good for the larger society and what is not good. It would also help researchers apply theory to praxis and appreciate the relevance of these two theories. Lastly, it would serve as a source of literature to any individual who wants to work in this field or any field related to this area.

Elements leading to the formulation of the Categorical Imperative

The Categorical Imperative can be understood to be an “action considered moral only if one acts out of a sense of duty alone, without resorting to reasons of inclination or self-interest. The two elements one must understand to their respective the categorical imperative is intrinsic goodness and the concept of goodwill. Kant intended to make moral truth a “necessary, absolute, universal truth” instead of it being an empirical observation. Kant also brings up the value of morality to be intrinsic that is, it is valuable in itself [2].

Goodwill according to Kant is something which is “The only thing that is good, good in itself and without qualification”. The basic interpretation of this statement is that a person is qualified to be good if he possesses a will that is guided by the moral law to make decisions. Goodwill is considered to be the ideal form where an individual takes into consideration the moral considerations as the conclusive force in kind of behaviour that an individual adapts to. This is the kind of disposition that is valued by without any limitations and thus is highly valued [3].

Imperatives

According to Kant imperatives are “The conception of an objective principle, so far as it is necessitating for a will, is called a command (of reason) and the formula of the command that it is a form of obligations or duties. Thus, moral duties have an imperative force and he distinguishes two types of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical [4].

Hypothetical imperative does not consider the morality of an action. It is an imperative which considers the means to an end. Hypothetical imperatives are concerned with our inclinations and desires and are therefore subjective. For example, for a healthy lifestyle, one must take care of their body by exercising and eating right [5].

On the other hand, the categorical imperative is the product that globalizes the doctrine of conduct. Thus, described as “act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law.” It is a test devised by Kant to determine whether an action is moral and this principle will help derive all the moral duties. Examples can be duties to respect one’s life, developing skills, duties to others among others can be derived from this imperative [6].

Since the Categorical Imperative is a test, there is a procedure one must follow to utilize it. It begins with identifying the maxim of the proposed action. Maxim can be defined as a rule of conduct or a general statement regarding the action the mediator intends to do. An example of a maxim would be if someone needs help, then the maxim regarding this action would be whether assisting them would be an unnecessary burden or not. The next step and most important is whether that maxim can be applied universally. Taking on from the example stated before, a maxim could be universalized if everyone would think about whether helping someone in need would be a burden or not. Thus, if a maxim can be applied globally then that action is permissible to be moral however if it cannot be universalized then the action is considered to be immoral [7]. When comparing both these imperatives it can be seen that the categorical imperative only considers the end that performs the intrinsically right

action. Kant argued that a moral duty must be performed since it has intrinsic value. However, moral duties are sometimes misinterpreted in terms of self-interest thus making them partially moral [8].

According to Palton, the categorical imperative had five representations [3].

The formula of Universal Law

The first representation is the Formula of Universal Law. It advocates that one must act only if the maxim can be universalized. That is, for an individual’s maxim to be morally permissible, it should be willed as a universal law or something achievable for everybody. This theory does not account for the nature of the maxim, that is whether it is good or bad, but whether it is universally acceptable.

The formula of the Law of Nature

The second representation is the Formula of the Law of Nature. It advocates that one must act only if the maxim will become the universal law of nature through your action. The procedure with which Kant commands us to practice this formula is through making this law vivid in our imagination and depict ourselves in a world where everybody acts by it.

The formula of the End in Itself

The third representation is the Formula of the End in Itself. It advocates that an act must be performed as an end to use humanity towards yourself and others and not as a means. This formula propagates respect for men, the only being known to possess rationality. Thus, we are bound to treat ourselves and others as ends and not just the means. One cannot be used as a means to an end since one has an intrinsic value that ought to be respected and value.

Formula of Autonomy

The fourth representation is the Formula of Autonomy. It advocates that one must act for one does will be considered as the universal law through its maxim. This formula is based on the doctrine of rational will.

The formula of the Kingdom of Ends

The fifth representation is the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends. It advocates that one must act using one’s maxim and consider oneself a part of the universal kingdom of ends as a lawmaker. This formula is a comprehensive version of all the formulas put together. The use of the word Kingdom signifies that the moral laws being made and preached cannot be considered autonomously and thus are a part of a system of laws.

Case Study Facts: Categorical Imperative versus Utilitarianism Ebola Vaccine Trial

A clear case of the Categorical Imperative and utilitarianism is the Ebola trial which was to have been conducted in the Volta Region, Ghana to test the efficacy of the Ebola vaccine. The parliamentarians argued that people in the Volta Region could not be used as a means to an end, since the Categorical Imperative (C.I) states that, humans (man) has intrinsic values and therefore cannot be used as a means to an end. Kant’s moral theory through the Formula of the End in Itself, which is acting in such a way that treats humanity as an end,

as opposed to a mere means. To use someone as a mere means is to “involve them in a scheme of action to which they could not in principle consent” [9].

Strike actions by medical professionals especially Medical Doctors

Is it right for medical doctors to embark on strike actions? The Kantianism and the utilitarianism have different ways of determining whether an action is right or wrong. According to Kant, we should look at our maxims, or intentions, of the particular action. Kantians believe “human life is valuable because humans are the bearers of rational life”. Therefore, a Medical Doctor cannot sacrifice the life of a patient at the expense of gauze, needles, money or gloves. In other words, humans are free rational beings capable of rational behaviour and should not be used purely for the enjoyment or happiness of another. Like the calling of strike actions by medical doctors, sacrificing human life and subjecting patients to pain for their wants and happiness in the end.

On the other hand, Utilitarians believe that we should do actions that produce the greatest amount of happiness. The problem with this, however, is that it could involve using people as mere means and may lead to the sacrifice of lives for the greater good.

Reason versus Happiness: Kantianism recognizes reason, not happiness or pleasure, is the foundation of the moral law. The reason is the faculty of humans, which enables us to choose the principle or rule on which we act [10]. The categorical imperative is an underlying moral system based on reason; the integral link independent of a particular context - it is universal. To understand the basis of morality (the existence of moral law) you must look for it in the capacity for reason and not in the capacity for pleasure and pain. The very foundation of Kantianism is that you must treat people the way they would consent to you treating them the same way. Your act is universal with no contradictions. Kant considers immorality as the product of individuals trying to create a different standard for themselves compared to the rest of humanity. Immorality ignores the categorical imperative. The Right comes before the Good (happiness); in other words, there are moral constraints on what one may do to promote happiness. One must obey the moral law, and the moral law is not determined by figuring out what promotes happiness [10]. You cannot reduce humans to mere means - treating someone is a way in which they would not consent.

Applying Kant’s Categorical Perspective and the Utilitarian Perspective to Social Science Research (SSR)

In applying Kant’s work to social science research, your research participants must be duly informed before used as a sample or a study population for your study. That is what we term as respect for all persons. Based on Kant’s categorical imperative, all life matters and some persons should not be used as a means to your research. We should respect the rights of our research participants. With this, research ethics must be duly followed when conducting any research that affects human objects. This brings us to the research ethics of respect for persons, beneficence, justice and protecting human subjects (rights to privacy or non-participation, right to anonymity, right to confidentiality, and right to expect experimenter responsibility).

The Utilitarian perspective as explained by Bentham and Mill sees to the good and benefit of all in the society. This perspective sees actions as right if only those actions will benefit society at large. With its application to social science research, if a research activity intends to bring up findings whether negative or positive, which aim at helping society improve, utilitarianists see it as a right but if the research activity will harm the society and not bring benefit to the people, then that research activity need not be conducted.

Criticisms levelled against the Kantian and the Utilitarian Philosophical Perspectives

Kantian Perspective

One of the critics against Kant’s Categorical Imperative is that it symbolizes absolutism. The moral rules generated by this imperative are exceptionless and universal. This can be illustrated with an example of telling the truth. A man gives shelter to an innocent man by name Mr. Mensah running away from gangsters, however when the gangsters come looking for him and question the man hiding Mr. Mensah, Kantian ideology would advise the man to tell the truth and give away Mr. Mensah. This reiterates that moral law does not deviate. It demands that a man does his duty without considering its consequences.

Another criticism against the categorical imperative is from the evolutionists. Evolutionary philosophers such as Daniel Dennett inferred that “the Kantian ideology is a fantasy in which you somehow strengthen your pure-reasoning muscle to such a fine pitch that you can make pure, emotionless judgments untainted by tawdry guilt feelings or base longings for love and acceptance”.

Another argument which the evolutionists have against the Categorical Imperative is the definition of morality. The evolutionists think about morality through questioning in terms of survival and reproduction. Such thinkers understand that if one has morals then an immediate reward is provided on the three levels of natural selection that are; the gene, the individual, and the group. They believe that the origin of morality comes from groups that held moral codes that were more successful in reproducing [11].

When the categorical imperative becomes the guiding principle of morality, it becomes the impetus for determining whether an act is moral or not. At this point, it should be emphasized that Kant's categorical imperative is concerned only with general and abstract moral actions. Therefore, the categorical imperative determines whether or not an act is right or wrong. It is at this point that to do the opposite (to not will to do an act that everyone in similar circumstances would do) would be to invite contradiction. This is to say that something is morally wrong when it would result in a contradiction. By contradiction, we are referring to a practical contradiction (i.e. when something is self-defeating). Kant himself uses four examples, one of which illustrates this ethical antinomy. He posits a man in extreme despair who considers whether or not he should take his own life.

The dilemma is this: Either he takes his own life thereby thwarting the threat of ongoing dissatisfaction or he remains alive to face his situation. Kant states that the nature of feeling despair is one that

impels one to improve life (for example, feeling bad requires one to do something to feel good). If he chooses to take his own life, he is universalizing the maxim, "To love me, I should shorten my life." This maxim is a practical contradiction because of the consequent works opposite to the antecedent. That is, killing myself does nothing to improve my life.

Kant writes, "If now the action is good only as a means to something else, then the imperative is hypothetical; if it is conceived as good in itself and consequently as being necessarily the principle of a will which of itself conforms to reason, then it is categorical" So he says that for an act to be categorically imperative, it must be thought to be good in itself and conformity to reason. As a categorical imperative, it asks us whether or not we can universalize our actions, that is, whether it would be the case that others would act by the same rule in a similar circumstance.

The reason the categorical imperative appears to be empty is that indeed on its own it provides neither specific goals to achieve nor specific means to achieve them." So, it is only a means to decide existing rules not an attempt to create new ones. So how well does Kant's formulation achieve this end?

The categorical imperative fails to distinguish what is right and wrong when presented with conflicting principles. The obvious example here is I should not lie and I should not hurt someone's feelings, both of which pass the categorical imperative but it cannot tell you which you should follow when your girlfriend asks you whether she looks fat in a dress when it does indeed make her look fat.

Another assumption that Kant makes is that everyone will be motivated by a sense of duty. Ross argues that this may not necessarily be the case [5]. "I can act from a certain motive only if I have the motive; if not, the most I can do is to cultivate it by suitably directing my attention or by acting in certain appropriate ways so that on some future occasion it will be present in me, and I shall be able to act from it. My present duty, therefore, cannot be to act here and now from it." This is another strong criticism of Kant's formulation to rid moral philosophy of subjectivity and tie it to an objective law. He must insist that it is only the duty to be dutiful that gives moral worth to action but if one does not have this motivation then it is not possible to act morally. He seems to suggest that through reason one sees that to perform a duty is what one should do because it is the right thing to do but such an abstract notion is not necessarily given. Kant has perhaps set himself impossible goals to achieve. It is not clear that the formula for universal morals is possible; indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that it is not.

Utilitarianism

One common criticism of the utilitarianism theory is that it is too difficult to apply that we cannot calculate all the effects for all the individuals (either because of the large number of individuals involved and/or because of the uncertainty) [12]. According to Brandt, John Stuart Mill's idea of higher and lower pleasures has been viewed as flawed in itself [13]. It has been criticised as a self-serving idea. For example, an intellectual will view his preferred enjoyments as a higher, more important pleasure. Therefore, as an intellectual, it could be argued that Mill himself is biased towards

what constitutes as higher and lower pleasures.

Another problem with utilitarianism is the impracticality of calculating the utility of actions in real-time. The calculation of utility is said to be self-defeating as by the time the best utilitarian course of action has been calculated and decided, the opportunity to take this action may well have passed. How can one calculate which of all possible actions will maximise the most happiness overall? What if one is in a dilemma and has a decision to make quickly? In high-pressure situations, one usually does not have time to sit down and make exact calculations regarding which decision will bring about the most happiness and minimise pain. Utilitarianism does not account for justice and fairness since the rights of an individual are less important than the good for the many for utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism does not look at individuals as unique but groups people together without regard for their individuality. It is clear that utilitarianism, although often considered a simple theory which declares that the morally right action in any circumstances is the one which is most likely to maximise happiness, is a very complex cluster of related theories which have developed rapidly since the 18th century [14].

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the theory 'Categorical Imperative' is a moral guideline devised to aid an individual in choosing to make the right decision and perform the right duties. This theory was chosen because of its analytical and reasoned arguments. Even though this theory believes in absolutist ideas, it propagates a very sound argument regarding morality and its implementation [15,16]. In today's world morality is something which is being lost as the world progresses, thus this theory reinstalls faith in morality and the value of duty. Contrastingly, utilitarianism compares all available acts and sees which has the best effects. Although utilitarianism has a larger scope than Kantianism, it is a timely process. The decision-making method of calculating all of the potential costs and benefits of action is extremely time consuming and leaves little time for promoting happiness, which is the Utilitarian's goal. Lastly, Utilitarianism is an ethical system that proposes that "the greatest useful goodness for the greatest number of people" should be our guiding principle when making ethical decisions. On the contrary, Kantianism suggests that the morally correct action is "an absolute, unconditional requirement that allows no exceptions, and is both required and justified as an end in itself, not as a means to some other end". As for the Kantian conclusion, the choice represented a universal expression of the moral law. In both cases, the personal relationship did not and should not come into play as a significant fact. Similarity between Kant's ethics and utilitarian is that there is an objective good which can be sought. In public policy and decision making, governments, researchers and other relevant stakeholders should not make decisions that are self-gratifying. On the other hand, there are individuals that genuinely may need help, therefore, governments should not practice wholesale interventions but also pay attention to individuals that may need peculiar help in society since every life matter. It is therefore recommended that one should make a careful balance or choice in the decisions they make or in applying any of these moral principles.

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