

Should the moral worth of our actions be judged solely on their consequences?

In this essay I will talk about the various stances on whether moral worth of our actions should be judged solely on their consequences. I will discuss consequentialist utilitarian viewpoints, looking at ideas from Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. I will also discuss kantian views of intentionality as well as my own opinion in which I disagree with this statement and think that our actions have moral worth if they are judged on intentions and an agreed moral laws which have a high probability of having good outcomes.

I disagree with this statement and believe that our actions have moral worth if they are judged on intentions. This because a person can have bad intentions and good outcomes can arise following, however there is a lack of moral worth to the action as it was intended for bad. For example, a group of five poachers go out looking for an endangered african elephant. The leader is known for a lot of poachings happening in the area and he is a wanted man, while the other 4 poachers have been hired to help assist with the poaching. While they are on the job one subordinate spots an elephant and attempts the shoot it. But the shot went wrong and instead hit and killed the boss of the poachers. This consequently had good outcomes. The rate of poaching decreased and elephant population increased. From this example we can see that the poacher had bad intentions to kill the elephant, it just so happened to kill the boss which in turn had a positive effect on the elephant population. So if we judge moral worth on the actions of the poacher from the consequences then we can say that the poacher had acted morally, when this is not the case, it was an accident which had good outcomes. We wouldn't praise this man - same time we dont mind that it disrupted poacher activity. Therefore we cannot put moral worth of the action from the consequences as the poacher did not intend to help the population of the elephants. So we should judge moral worth on intentions.

A consequentialist would agree with this statement. Utilitarians are consequentialists as they believe that the right action is one that produces the most amount of happiness therefore we can find moral worth in actions when judged solely on their consequences. A view would be that there is moral worth in an action if the action produces a pleasurable result. In the example of the poachers a utilitarian would suggest that there is moral worth in the action of the poacher as good results came from killing the boss. According to traditional utilitarianism, the only sole intrinsic good is pleasure or happiness. Jeremy Bentham would suggest that pleasure is the only intrinsic good through the principle of utility. It starts with recognising that pleasure and pain are the only things that matter. 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*.'¹ Bentham suggests to us that we are run by our innate need to seek pleasure and avoid pain which is intrinsic. Therefore they govern us and our actions on what we ought to

¹ Peter Singer, *Ethics* - Jeremy Bentham, *The Principle of Utility* (Oxford University Press 1994) p.306

do and what we should do² (here we can see a consequentialist side for utilitarianism). This can be seen on an individual scale, and, since we are part of a society, on a wider scale too. So we must look to seek pleasure for the most amount of people. In this sense everyone in a community must look to the general happiness of all people as this will increase the total happiness. To do this Bentham sets up the hedonic calculus to measure the amount of happiness that will occur from an action, and, if the total happiness is met via the seven criteria then the action is a right action. (The seven requirements are intensity, duration, certainty, extent, purity, fecundity, remoteness). Therefore the action has moral worth as the result will bring about the required happiness. Bentham's version of utilitarianism is called Act utilitarianism, as in each situation happiness needs to be measured via the hedonic calculus. I do not agree with this as the calculus can therefore justify any action as being morally right. Let's look at the poacher example, in the example we have the boss killed this is justified by the intensity of the pleasure for the elephant as he didn't die; he survived so the pleasure of living another day satisfies the duration; certainty is met as the poacher killed the boss and stopped the poaching, purity is met for the elephant as he came out of it unscathed, fecundity is met as less poaching happened as a result, also the elephants are spared so the whole plants population can enjoy the animal not going extinct and remoteness is met as the pleasure of surviving occurred instantly. Now let's look at it from the perspective of if the elephant did die and how we can justify this, intensity is met as the poacher can gain money from the tusks; duration is met as he can use the money for living; certainty is met as the elephant died; extent is met as the poacher can feed his family and tribe; purity is met as only one elephant died; fecundity is met as he can go out and kill again and same with remoteness. So here we can see that the hedonic calculus is made redundant because it can justify the action of both sides of the situation. Therefore we cannot judge moral worth from consequences as happiness can be found from both sides regardless of morality

John Stuart Mill is another utilitarian and differs from Bentham in the way that he believes that pleasures can be differentiated in higher and lower pleasures, but I will not be discussing this. Instead I will discuss Mill's utilitarianism - called Rule utilitarianism. Rule utilitarianism differs from Act as instead of moral actions being judged based on the individual's specific case, the actions of a specific case are judged on a set of moral rules made and agreed on by the community beforehand the moral actions of the individual would be judged with reference to the moral code right or wrong depending on the amount of happiness they brought about. This is good in a sense because abiding to moral rules agreed on by with community mean that they bring about the most amount of happiness as having rules can bring about good outcomes of general day to day life. Such as laws we have in the UK now that stop us from harm by avoiding potential harm. The internet encyclopedia of philosophy gave the good example of stopping at a red light. We have a

² Peter Singer, *Ethics* - Jeremy Bentham, *The Principle of Utility* (Oxford University Press 1994)p.306

rule of stopping at a red light for our safety however if it down to our own judgement then we would probably see an increase in the amount of collisions.³ Therefore we would see an increase in the amount of happiness generally as less pain would be caused. I would agree to this because if we are following a moral law that has been set up by the community we know that the consequences will result in happiness. Therefore our actions can be judged on our consequences for moral worth as we know we like the outcomes.

A deontologist in the example of the poachers would say that there is no moral worth in the action as deontologists believe that moral worth comes from intentions from a duty to do moral good. Immanuel Kant would disagree with this statement and would suggest that the intentions of an action have moral worth as opposed to the consequences in every circumstance. Kant uses maxims. Maxims are principles of intentions which we use to act on. For example, 'I want to live I life with no regrets'. This would guide a moral agents decisions⁴. This is different from a consequentialist view as it suggests that the moral worth of an action counts in the true intentions of a moral agent rather than the outcomes of an action. For Kant acting morally is a duty, therefore these maxims we act on are moral duties followed from a moral law, but how can we know that they are moral? Kant states that we are all rational beings, therefore we can rationally reflect on actions and intentions. As rational beings we have autonomy⁵ or the right of self-governing 'He is the subject of the moral law which is holy, because of the autonomy of his freedom'⁶. So, as we are not creatures of impulse we can rationally reflect on what is good on our intentions and the actions which proceed. We are free rational beings we have the option to do good and it is therefore our duty to do good as that is the moral law obliging us. Describing the 'moral law' as 'holy' suggests it is something beyond us this entails a certain obligation or duty to do what is morally good. This begs the question; What is good? Well good for Kant is something which is good 'in itself', meaning it is good without qualification. It does not necessarily lead to good outcomes nor does it count to virtues as these can be used for bad. This is the only moral good. Kant calls it 'The Good Will'. When there is rationality to do good there is a moral law or duty to do 'the good will', a moral agent can do this duty in two ways: acting in accordance with the duty or acting motivated by duty. Acting in accordance with duty is doing the morally right action because of self interested reasons. Acting motivated by duty is doing the morally right action because it is the morally right action. We can see from this that Kants' deontological ethics is intention based as it demonstrates that what matters is the intention we have which influence our decisions we make and in turn the actions we do. Kant believes that moral worth is in the intention of an action and he

³ Stephen Nathanson, *Act and Rule utilitarianism* <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/util-a-r/#H2>>, [accessed 12/10/19]

⁴ Michael Lacewing, *Philosophy for AS and A level* (2017 Michael Lacewing, Routledge)

⁵ Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy, *Kant's Moral Philosophy* (publication in 23rd Feb 2004) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/#AimMetMor> [accessed 09/10/19].

⁶ Peter Singer, *Ethics - Immanuel Kant, The Noble Descent of Duty* (Oxford University Press 1994) p.39

gives suggests that it is reason that we should act on. I agree with Kant as if we have good intentions regardless of consequences most of the time, we will see good being consequently of our actions but the true moral value was how are intentions were at the time as they would influence our actions.

In conclusion I believe that moral worth can't be judged solely on the consequences as the poacher example demonstrates the inconsistency of a good outcome with moral worth. In my point of view with Act utilitarianism we cannot judge the moral worth of our actions from our consequences as our individual judgment can breakdown in regards to a community as we will all look to seek our own personal pleasures and not the pleasures of the community. As well as this we cannot accurately predict the consequences of our actions as seen in the poacher example when talk of the hedonic calculus. So we need something more structured from a place of moral law or moral code. Rule utilitarianism provides us with rules which satisfy our happiness and therefore increase general happiness among a community. The example with the traffic light shows us that we have these rules to stay out of danger and because they protect us from harm the consequently increase happiness. A drawback to this would be that sometimes we need to step out of the rules to find happiness, but as a general rule I believe this works and I think that the UK has adopted this principle as we abide by laws which avoid pain and seek happiness, so I believe this principle works well at finding moral worth from consequences. Kantian ethics with intentionality finds moral worth from intentions as we have intentions which can either be bad or good and these influence our actions so moral worth can be found in intentions.

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