

Can an argument be provided for why a person should act morally?

Introduction

This essay contains an argument for why a person should act morally. The essay considers egoist, consequentialist, deontological and virtue ethics theories and acknowledges their merits but highlights some of their weaknesses; the essay goes on, in the light of these theories, to claim, firstly:

- (i) human beings generally pursue their own ends such as acquiring material goods, securing success at work and forming successful personal relationships;
- (ii) human beings also behave philanthropically and whether or not such behaviour is motivated by: (a) self interest *and* the interests of others or (b) solely the interests of others, in both (a) and (b) such behaviour is intended to be beneficial to others;
- (iii) therefore, it is possible at least for human beings to act otherwise than *solely* in their own interests and it is claimed that this means moral conduct is possible and accordingly moral concepts can have meaning.

The first part of the argument (above) therefore claims moral behaviour is at least possible.

The second part of the argument goes on to claim :

- (i) the criteria for moral conduct can be accessed from a number of sources ranging from an understanding of the classic virtues of kindness, loyalty, courage, honesty, truthfulness, integrity, justice and fairness etc. to more modern ethical principles such as equality (e.g. non-discrimination on grounds of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, disability, age etc.) freedom of expression, respect for animal welfare and minimising damage to the environment . Also, inevitably because of the claim in part 1, drives for self-interest have to be accounted for in moral criteria;
- (ii) in a world where human beings understand and adhere to moral criteria: (a) individuals may come to be virtuous (or more virtuous) and (b) in so doing may do less harm to themselves as individuals, to other human beings, to animals and to the environment;
- (iii) therefore human beings should act morally.

Part 1

acting out of self interest

It has been argued by philosophers who accept egoist theories that individual human beings only act in their own interests. In the case of psychological egoism this is because it is believed that to be human is to act only in one's own interest. In the case of ethical egoism, it is considered that to act in one's own interest is morally right. Importantly if psychological egoism is correct, there would be no room for morality at least in the way that term is generally understood because humans would never be able to behave consistently with any moral criteria (except perhaps ethical egoism and that would just be by accident).

Every day life seems to be full of instances where people act in their own interests. People go to work to earn money to buy the things they need to survive. People study to obtain qualifications and work hard to gain promotions to increase their capital and to save for their later years. Every day we also experience instances of people putting their own interests first. Employers resist workers' demands for higher salaries because this would reduce the employers' profits. It seems to be an accepted way to behave provided things are not taken too far. Indeed people are not generally criticised for looking after themselves. In fact people who fail to look after, for example, their own finances are often thought to be at fault.

Our lives also seem to be full of instances where individuals appear to put the interests of others ahead of their own. On a busy train an elderly person or a pregnant woman may be offered a seat if they cannot find one that is free. Also occasionally we hear that a large donation has been made to a good cause by an anonymous benefactor. The later example goes a long way towards refuting the claims of psychological egoism as there seems to be little to benefit the benefactor. (A case of an anonymous donation to a cause that could provide no possible future benefit to the benefactor - such as a charity maintaining WW1 and WW2 war graves- would be even more difficult for psychological egoism. However, it has to be acknowledged that it is not possible to prove what the motives of a benefactor were.)

While the claims of ethical egoists are at least grounded in the terminology of morality, they are if anything more disturbing than those of psychological egoists. According to writers such as Ayn Rand, it is morally right to pursue one's own interest, therefore morally wrong to consider any one else. Before going on to consider why it is considered that ethical egoism is unsupportable, it is noted here that the sentiment that every individual should assume responsibility for him or herself does have some merit, at least in the sense that every one should do what they can to support themselves and not rely on the efforts of others to sustain them. However the argument made here is that ethical egoists go too far in saying anyone who does not sustain himself is a parasite. A parasite is an organism having a physiology that has evolved directly to exploit the resources of other organisms. A human being who is *unable* to sustain himself, for example due to physical or mental disability is not thereby a parasite but is a person in need of help, who may also desire help.

Another aspect of ethical egoism that seems to have merit is the recognition of the importance of the individual. Ayn Rand abhors the idea of an individual sacrificing his or her life by helping others because all the vitality and drive of the individual is lost in the pursuit of the interests of others. It may be arguable to say that an individual's personal ambition is put on hold if one's life is spent caring for others but again Rand seems to go too far in saying that to help others amounts to sacrifice of the personality. This is an important point because a successful claim that philanthropy destroys the person strikes at the root of morality. Morality only has any meaning in the context of a human mind considering moral criteria so Rand's claim must be met. It seems clear that a person is not destroyed (and their vitalism not lost) by helping others: there are numerous examples of women who have spent years rearing children and then returned to work, thereafter successfully running businesses or practicing in the professions. It seems clear therefore that the individual who devotes time and energy to helping others can survive unscathed and undiminished. It can also be argued that personal drive can be expressed in a caring role: it is possible to put enormous effort into caring for others.

philanthropy

It is not denied here that individuals do in fact pursue their own interests and to an extent this is morally right in terms of doing what one can to maintain oneself and lead an active and dynamic life, that is, to make the best of oneself. However, it is individuals who have made a great success of their lives in business (who Rand would presumably have applauded had they not stopped) but who go on to become philanthropists that can exemplify the next claim, that is, *that individuals can act in the interests of others (whether or not at the same time they act in their own interests)*. Such individuals may have demonstrated they have great energy and drive, which has previously been directed at solely self interested projects, but they go on to act beneficially towards others.

Importantly, it is argued here that it is the *act of choosing* the beneficial action that seems to reveal two things. One, that the interest of at least one other has been *considered* because an actual choice must be made among many possible good causes. Two, that the particular views of the benefactor have led to the choice of one good cause over another. It is not denied that aspects of self interest may also have been a factor in making a choice (such as an association of some kind with the good cause) but the fact that an actual choice has been made by the philanthropist makes

it very difficult to argue the interests of others were never considered and were not a motivating factor.

altruism

One case that suggests individuals may be capable of acting solely in the interests of others is that of a death bed organ donation, that is where a dying person agrees to allow their organs to be used to help others. However, even this case is not conclusive as self interested motives may be present (possibly based on religious beliefs about consequences in an after-life). However, the claim made here is that whether or not all actions are self interested, some acts are also carried out to benefit others.

conclusion of Part 1

The conclusion of this part of the argument is therefore that human beings can act in the interests of others and therefore the door is open to morality: human beings can and do act in the interests of others and the criteria for acting in the interests of others has meaning and may influence human behaviour.

Part 2

Philosophers have sought to establish moral theories based on a number of factors such as observation of human behaviour, abstract reasoning about correct moral actions and the identification and analysis of so-called virtues and their role in constructing a moral agent.

Consequentialism

Utilitarian moral theories focus on the consequences of actions in determining whether they are morally right. Classical utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and JS Mill justify their principle that right moral action is that which gives the best consequences for the most people by claiming this is the logical consequence of the premise that individual human beings desire their own happiness. This seems to be an invalid argument because the conclusion that each person must act so as to produce the greatest happiness is not implied by the hedonistic premise that all humans act to produce their own happiness.

Non-classical, act utilitarianism drops classical utilitarianism's premise about the desire for personal happiness but still claims that moral acts are those that maximise the happiness of as many as possible. However this principle can be used to justify what many would regard as outrageously cruel behaviour. For example, in India in the 1980s the country was undergoing vast population growth leading to a perceived risk of famine. In response the Indian Government established forced sterilisation teams (teams that abducted males and forcibly castrated them). Utilitarian arguments could be made to justify this policy, but in this and in similar cases where quite dreadful treatment is seemingly argued to be morally justified, it is the principle's focus on arithmetical measures of happiness of the greatest number of people (compared to the measure of happiness of one or a minority) that often leads to perverse conclusions. Classical utilitarianism's claim that each individual has an ultimate end of personal pleasure/happiness seems to identify that humans act in their own interests but: the claim (a) fails to recognise the variety of human emotional responses to differing situations and (b) wrongly implies that humans seek the general happiness of all other humans. The act utilitarian's claim is unrealistic in assuming humans are capable of acting so as to produce the general happiness of all others even if that is to be achieved by harming the agent or those close to the agent, or would otherwise require actions that would debase the agent.

The conclusion drawn here is that act utilitarianism is inherently unreliable as a guide to moral conduct. In its original form it was derived from an invalid argument. In modified form it can be used to justify heinous actions and so should be substantially revised or if necessary abandoned.

Moral duties

Kant's ethical theory set out in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* seeks to exclude human instincts and sentiments from the formulation and evaluation of moral conduct. Kant saw the exercise of human *reason* as the well spring for moral conduct (reason acting on the good will). Kant's categorical imperative requires one to rationalise what one's duty is in any particular situation, to construct one's own duty as what one would want all to comply with, and to be compelled to discharge that duty. Perhaps understandably Kant gives few examples of what one's duties should be (as we are supposed to construct these ourselves, using reason- this is what gives them force). Kant does argue that we should see other people not as the means to our ends, but as ends in themselves. Arguably, this is a necessary feature of Kant's principle because for the principle to be applied by all to determine individual moral conduct, each person must respect the role of others in rationalising his or her duty in any situation: A should not be used and subsumed in B's moral project because this denies A's role in formulating his/her own duty. Kant excludes the actual consequences arising from an action from the moral evaluation of the action; moral worth arises solely from the performance of a reasoned duty.

For Kant, all sentiments must be excluded and compliance with a reasoned categorical imperative is what makes an action moral and such compliance is what makes a person good (and so worthy of happiness). As it is only the so worthy (moral) who may rightly be happy, Kant's theory cuts diametrically across the utilitarian claim for actions producing general happiness: Kant sees nothing moral in the general happiness as some bad people are being made happy.

Kant's moral agent is to use reason to formulate duties that he must then perform. However, Kant's moral agent is arguably a cold and calculating individual. What matters is the personal moral esteem arising from the performance of one's duties. The action is formulated by reason to the exclusion of instincts, passion, compassion, empathy etc. There is the overriding requirement not to use others for one's own ends but this seems rather weak when the whole purpose of Kant's theory is to identify a method for reasoning out moral actions that if performed elevate the actor, regardless of the consequences. Kant's theory seems to dehumanise the agent in that the agent is required to suppress human emotions, when for many people emotions such as empathy prompt actions helping others. There seems to be something worryingly mechanical about Kant's moral actor: to achieve moral status as a person involves the suppression of human attributes (the emotions) and this seems to produce not a moral human but a duty producing machine that cares nothing for the consequences of its action but everything for its status as a moral actor (albeit now relieved of the burden of human emotions, at least when identifying its duties).

An aspect of Kant's theory that may at first appear appealing is its requirement seemingly to compel moral action: acceptance of the requirement to formulate duties necessitates full and continuing compliance. However those duties seem cold and inhuman and forced compliance now seems to compound the concern arising originally from the enforced absence of any emotional content in duties. In any event, the force of compulsion is actually only as strong as the agent himself as there can be no external sanction for non-compliance, only the shame of not being a moral agent.

Kant's moral theory does require an agent to engage with moral questions but only after excluding from the mind all inclinations. This seems to take the theory outside the scope of many agents and has the unfortunate effect for those who do seek to apply it of eliminating the kindlier emotions that may have been expected to motivate many beneficial acts.

Virtue ethics

In virtue ethics the focus seems generally to be even more on the agent. Virtue ethics has been criticised for claiming that virtuous acts are those acts performed by a virtuous agent, on the basis

that this provides no guidance for those who are not (or fear they are not) virtuous: if you do not have virtue you cannot identify someone who is virtuous. In Normative Virtue Ethics, Rosalind Hursthouse has answered this complaint by claiming that if the virtues are enumerated in a manner that is available to all, it would be wrong to say that a virtuous agent cannot be identified because such an agent would be simply someone acting in accordance with the enumerated virtues. Such an agent would then be available as an example for the non-virtuous. More practically Hursthouse has argued that enumeration and understanding of the virtues begins seriously at a very young age and that there is much to be gained from early training and later education in order to understand the virtues of character, here echoing Aristotle's views on the importance of education in the virtues. However Hursthouse seems to be moving away from the primary claim of virtue ethicists, that is, virtuous acts are those acts performed by a virtuous person, towards a claim that a virtuous person is someone who has over time been trained to become virtuous, which in turn suggests a metamorphosis during which a person may sometimes act virtuously and sometimes not, at least until the metamorphosis is complete. However it seems unlikely that Hursthouse would agree with this formulation because of her belief that a person either is or is not virtuous.

Hursthouse's suggestion that virtue ethics can provide guidance (assuming there is an accessible enumeration of the virtues) for moral conduct is appealing because the virtues do seem to be a valuable set of criteria for determining what amounts to moral conduct. It seems to be the case that the classic virtues can sit alongside other evolving principles such as equality, freedom of expression, respect for animal welfare and minimisation of harm to the environment. This in turn seems to demonstrate that the stock of moral criteria is capable of changing over time, reflecting changes in the way humans live their lives and respond to matters such as the mass migration of people and the pressure imposed on the environment by the increase in the number of people on the planet.

Based on what is set out above, the claim made here is that early training, and thorough education in ethics (the virtues) together with exposure to modern ethical principles such as equality, human rights, animal welfare and environmental protection can be invaluable in guiding human behaviour. In many cases the interaction of these criteria may be complex and challenging but they should serve as rich resources to help us resolve difficult moral questions.

Importantly, by engaging with moral criteria, an agent is not only given guidance on how to avoid harming others but also may derive the personal benefit of an enriched intellectual process involving reflection on moral criteria, considering the interaction of the criteria, and working out how they should best be applied in any particular case. Whether or not there can ever be a transformation into a moral agent seems to be less important than all agents having access to rich moral criteria and having the opportunity to behave (and actually behaving) consistently with moral criteria, even if they cannot achieve this at all times.

It may be that virtue ethics creates a target of a state of virtuousness, partly as a plea to the drive for self interest; arguably, it would not be the first ethical theory to try to harness self interest to secure moral conduct: Kant's theory only accords moral approval to those who comply. The plea to self interest here lies in the intellectual enrichment of an individual who accesses, considers and applies the virtues, which is present whether or not the individual is able to master the process and apply it at all times.

conclusion

Accordingly,
human beings can act in the interests of others
we have moral criteria,
accessing moral criteria and acting morally is an enriching rewarding thing in itself,
moral behaviour as so defined should also be beneficial for others and for the planet,
therefore human beings should act morally.

Rand, Ayn, (with additional material by Nathaniel Branden) *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*, (London: Signet, 1964)

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross: Oxford World's Classics, 2009 (Book I)

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* Chapters 1 and 2

Mill, J.S. *Utilitarianism* in *On Liberty and other essays* (OUP 1991)

Hursthouse R, *Normative Virtue Ethics* from Roger Crisp ed. *How Should One Live?* (OUP, 1996)

Rachel J, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* 8th Edition (New York, McGraw Hill 2015)