On Right and Wrong

Philosophy Unit 2, ‘Ethics and Moral Philosophy’

Utilitarianism

- What makes an action moral right is the degree to which it maximises happiness and minimises pain.
- ‘The greatest happiness for the greatest number’.
- Consequentialist account of morality.

Classical Utilitarianism 1: Jeremy Bentham

- As far as Bentham was concerned, the only thing of significance when judging the worth of an action is how much pleasure it generated and for how many.
- The problem with utilitarianism is that it does not always provide the best answer, i.e. ‘What would derive the most pleasure? -> “watching tv instead of doing homework”.
- Bentham recognised that pleasure is difficult to calculate.
  - In ‘Principles of Morals and Legislation’ (1789) he provides a method in which people are able to measure the consequences of an action, known as the felicific calculus.

Classical Utilitarianism 2: J.S. Mill

- Subscribed to the hedonistic theory of value
- Disagreed with Bentham’s contention that all pleasures should be considered equal.
- In his work, ‘Utilitarianism’ (1861), he distinguishes between the ‘higher’ pleasures (associated with intellect, imagination) and the ‘lower pleasures’ (sensory, base).
  - Mill argues that if basic needs are met and their sensibilities have not been blunted, they will choose the higher pleasures over the lower.
- However, one criticism to this is that in privileging one kind of pleasure over another, Mill is implying a difference between entities, i.e. Is the happiness of an academic of greater value than a child who enjoys playing in the park?

Ideal Utilitarianism

- Moore argues a pluralist idea of good on the grounds that objects can have value apart from, and in addition to, the pleasure we get from them.
  - i.e. A work of architecture may be valued for its beauty independently of any pleasure it might give to the viewer.

Preference Utilitarianism

- Proposed by John Harsanyi (1920-2000)
- Commonly associated with Richard Brandt and Peter Singer
- Harsanyi argues that what is good comes down to the wants and preferences of the individuals involved.
- Harsanyi foresees and addresses the objections that arise (people’s preferences can be morally questionable) by identifying two kinds of preferences.
‘Manifest’ preferences are those motivated by erroneous beliefs and strong emotions.

‘True’ preferences are those carefully reasoned, possess all the relevant information, and are in a state of mind conducive to rational thought.

True preferences are the preferences we should seek to satisfy.

Positive and Negative Utilitarianism

- Classical, ideal, and preference are forms of positive utilitarianism
  - i.e. they seek to maximise happiness.
- However, Karl Popper in ‘The Open Society and its Enemies’ (1945) suggests that we should seek to minimise suffering.
- According to Smart’s thought experiment (1958 paper ‘Negative Utilitarianism’), Popper’s form of utilitarianism would condone the mass destruction of human beings as it would ultimately reduce the sum of human suffering.
  - “…there would be some suffering before all those alive on any proposed destruction day were to die in the natural course of events. Consequently the use of the weapon is bound to diminish suffering, and would be the ruler’s duty on NU grounds.”

Act and Rule Utilitarianism

- Act utilitarian theories hold that each and every action should be judged according to its own level.
  - Flexible
  - Realises there are exceptions to every rule and that such exceptions require personal judgements.
- Rule utilitarianism suggests that an action should be judged according to whether or not it conforms to a rule which maximises utility.
  - Avoids trying to calculate how much happiness an action will produce.
  - ‘One-size-fits-all’ approach.

Deontological Theories of Morality

- Deontology says that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the action itself, not the consequences.

Kant’s Deontology

- According to Kant, the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the quality of the maxim or rule on which it is based.
- For something to be good it must be intrinsically good and ‘good without qualification’.
  - i.e. the desire to do what is right because it is right and for no other reason.
- Intentionalist theory of right action.
- However, its inflexibility can produce consequences that few of us would consider good.
  - Kant believed that telling the truth is always the right thing to do even if it has bad consequences (e.g. results in someone’s death).
He puts it, “better the whole people perish than injustice be done”.

W. D. Ross’ Deontology

- In ‘The Right and the Good’ (1930), Ross distinguishes between two kinds of duties or obligations, which he terms ‘prima facie duties’ and ‘absolute duties’.
  - Prima facie duties are obligations that are both self evident and obvious. These include:
    - fidelity (remain true to one’s word)
    - reparation (or compensation)
    - gratitude
    - justice
    - beneficence
    - self-improvement
    - non-maleficence (avoidance of continuing harm)
  - In any situation, any number of these prima facie duties may apply. However, Ross argues that this does not entail the possibility of a conflict of duty, for one of these duties will be more pressing and thus overrule the others. This is the absolute duty.

Virtue Ethics

- Instead of focusing on the action to determine what’s right or wrong, virtue ethics considers the character of the person performing the action.
- Aristotle’s views regarding virtuous action are rooted in his understanding of humans.
  - He believed what set humans apart from other entities was their capacity to reason.
  - The value of something is defined by how well it performs its function (e.g. we call a musician good if she plays her instrument well).
    - Therefore, a good human is one who uses their reason with the appropriate excellence.
- Aristotle describes the virtuous person in ‘Nicomachean Ethics’ (350 BCE) as one who acts ‘at the right times with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive and in the right way’.
  - To act in such a way requires governance of one’s feelings.
  - The way in which we govern our feelings defines our choice of action.
- Aristotle believes that virtue is a mean that lives between the vices of excess and deficiency.
  - The virtue of bravery is a mean between rashness (excess of confidence) and cowardice (deficiency of confidence)
  - Therefore, a virtuous person is someone who neither overreacts nor underreacts.