Utilitarianism and Kant

As far as philosophical theories go, John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism and Kantian theory could not be any more opposite. While the former is a consequentialist position, focused solely on the outcomes of an action, Kant is only concerned with the reasons, or will, of an action, regardless of the outcome. Both of these theories have compelling arguments in their favor and though each may appear at first glance to be relatively simple, both theories show themselves as complex conceptions. A close analysis, however, will show that a Kantian doctrine is superior to the utilitarian position.

According to John Stuart Mill, a renowned utilitarian philosopher, an action is right if it maximizes the happiness of a majority of the people. To put it even more simply, the utilitarian will almost always act in favor of the majority. Although the utilitarian position may at first glance seem rational, the notion that people can be reduced to mere numbers is undoubtedly controversial. However, Mill attempts to offer proof for the susceptibility and desirability of the principle of utility by proving that “people do actually desire [happiness]” (Mill 162). To do so, Mill points out that “No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness”. Furthermore, Mill shows “happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; from whence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole” (Mill 162). Thus, by using basic logic that humans desire happiness
and will therefore act in order to attain it, Mill proves the plausibility of the utilitarian view, because it logically follows that happiness should then be maximized for the greatest number.

Although this proof certainly makes sense, it can just as easily be argued that there are times when a person will not act in order to attain the highest pleasure; sometimes, a man will choose a lesser pleasure. For example, a man may choose to eat a sandwich rather than read a novel, even if reading that novel would ultimately bring him the greater pleasure. Mill has an answer to this credible scenario, however. He argues that men may choose the lesser pleasure “because they have not time or opportunity for indulging [higher pleasures]; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them” but rather because the inferior pleasures are more easily accessible or because they are “the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying” (Mill 160). Evidently, then, there are cases in which a man may choose the lesser pleasure, but that does not automatically imply that human action is driven by preferential pleasures, according to Mill.

Another strength of the utilitarian position is that is useful in the public policy realm. While opponents of the theory such as Robert Nozick or John Rawls will argue that no individual can just be counted as a person and “gains do not justify the losses, even when they are bigger,” philosopher Jonathan Wolff points out that there are few better options than utilitarianism in terms of public policy decisions (Wolff 2). Wolff acknowledges Rawls’ justice theory that everyone should be provided with a “fully adequate set of equal basic liberties,” that there should be
“equality of opportunity,” and that the public “should act so as to maximize the wealth and income of the worst off” (Wolff 12). According to Wolff, though, this theory “fails to yield a determinate decision procedure for policy makers” (Wolff 15). While Rawls’ theory is certainly attractive, it is not necessarily practical. Wolff explains that although the utilitarian position appears to disregard human rights, it is easily applied in complicated situations that inevitably take place in large communities. He points out that “in order to make the worst off as well off as possible, society needs to take risks which may in fact, over the short term, make the worst off worst off” (Wolff 27). By putting the utilitarian theory in a practical context, Wolff proves that the theory should not immediately be disregarded; rather, utilitarianism is shown to be a logical and applicable rule in the public setting.

Even after accepting Wolff’s public policy example, however, it is still hard to deny that the utilitarian position seems to disregard human rights. In his paper “Utilitarianism and Moral Rights,” R.B. Brandt seeks to find compatibility between these two seemingly opposite things. Mill, and Brandt, favor rule-utilitarianism, which follows that “the moral rightness of an individual act is fixed by – or even defined as – whether it is permitted or required by the most desirable... moral code for that society” (Brandt 4). Brandt argues that by adopting the rule-utilitarian theory, “there is no inconsistency in claiming that people have rights,” but that the problem is about rights in and of themselves.

To rectify this inconsistency, Brandt argues in favor of a utilitarian morality that examines long-range utility and that “should have room for recognition of
rights which cannot be overridden by marginal gains in utility” (Brandt 18). In order to maximize long-range utility, agents must act according to a principle that they, as a utilitarian, would like to see prevail in that particular case. Thus, a person should perform an act “by following moral principles, the acceptance of which in society would maximize expectable utility”. Furthermore, Brandt argues that the “right” act is the one that does not “compromise, except in extreme circumstances, in order to do what in a particular situation will maximize utility, where so doing conflicts with the utility maximizing code” (Brandt 19). Brandt’s claim, therefore, is that the right thing to do is to maximize the happiness of the majority while still obeying a moral code, except in the most extreme of cases. By proposing these applicable methods, Brandt attempts to show that the utilitarian theory does not violate human rights for marginal gains in utility.

While Brandt’s theory is somewhat convincing, it is hard to deny that the value of an individual simply cannot be reduced to a number. Although he attempted to reconcile utilitarianism and human rights, the fact remains that even in extreme cases, choosing to maximize the utility of the majority still discounts individualism by grouping people into the majority or the minority. Thomas Nagel argues in favor of human rights, and against utilitarianism, when he says that the recognition of rights “even if they make more difficult the achievement of a good or the prevention of an evil” values persons as “inviolable and independent subjects, whose status as members of the moral community is not exhausted by the inclusion of their interests as a part of the general good” (Nagel 86). In light of this definition, there is no soundproof counter-argument that shows that the utilitarian view and
human rights can be entirely compatible. Nagel uses the case of murder to prove this, by stating that it is wrong to kill one person even if it is to save two more. He points out that such a case “implies a profound difference in the status of everyone,” for in the absence of the right that no one should be killed, “no one is inviolable: Anyone may be killed if it would serve to minimize the number of killings” (Nagel 90). Nagel argues against the utilitarian position by using the same argumentation as the rule-utilitarian—albeit at an extreme—that an act should be judged according to the consequences its universalization would have. Thus, Nagel proves that the rights of an individual must be inviolable.

Evidently, the consequences of a utilitarian mindset can be grave. Although it may seem like the most practical solution in some contexts, a utilitarian ethical code cannot be applied in all cases because of the potential for dangerous outcomes. The answer, so to speak, to the utilitarian problem of violating human rights is found in an entirely different philosophical theory, starting from the very basic issue: Immanuel Kant’s ethics. Kant’s ethical theory is on the entirely opposite end of the spectrum from that of the utilitarian, for Kant theorized that human rights are of utmost import and that reasons and motives matter while consequences do not. For example, while the utilitarian will base his actions on whatever the best end result for the greatest number of people will be, Kant argues that a good will “is good only through its willing” (Kant 220). In fact, Kant argues that even “with the greatest effort it should yet achieve nothing, and only the good will should remain, yet would it, like a jewel, still shine by its own light” (Kant 220). Obviously, this belief is far different from the utilitarian who is primarily focused with the end result of an act.
However, the mere fact that Kant's theory differs from utilitarianism is not enough proof that it is superior. As stated earlier, the utilitarian philosophy could be summarized as seeking the actions that bring the most happiness for the greatest number. While Mill believed that each person simply desires his own happiness and thus reasons by considering his happiness, Kant pointed out that "we find that the more a cultivated reason devotes itself to the aim of enjoying life and happiness, the further does man get away from true contentment" (Kant 221). Instead, Kant believed that the purpose of reason is to guide the will, for if man's reason were always guiding him to seek pleasures, he would ultimately be unhappy, or the opposite of what he initially sought. Thus, reason's "true function must be to produce a will which is not merely good as a means to some further end, but is good in itself" (Kant 221). Kant's argument is more convincing than the utilitarian's because he is able to prove that happiness is not reason's true function.

In order to further outline what a moral action is, other than that it is guided by reason, is that it is done out of duty rather than with consideration of the consequences. For example, consider two volunteers at a soup kitchen: one volunteers because he is sympathetic and because serving his community makes him happy while the other volunteers because she feels a duty to help those in need even though she feels no sympathy toward them. Ultimately, the latter volunteer shows true worth of character—"incomparably the highest of all"—because she will perform her service regardless of her emotions that day because it is her duty.

Kant also proposes the importance of the universalized maxim of an action: he writes that one "should never act except in such a way that [one] can also will
that [his] maxim should become a universal law” (Kant 224). For example, suppose a man needs to borrow money, but knows that he will not be able to repay the lender. If this act were to become universal law, however, then no man would ever be able to borrow money, for “no one would believe what was promised him” (Kant 230). Evidently, this formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative differs from the utilitarian theory because generally, the utilitarian acts casuistically. If the utilitarian were to hypothetically universalize his maxims, though, he would see that there would ultimately be chaos. For example, if a utilitarian were to kill one person in order to save three and then universalize this maxim into law, there would be an absurd amount of deaths. Thus, Kant’s ethical theory breaks down the utilitarian philosophy.

Kant also effectively breaks down the utilitarian theory with his position that humanity must always be seen as an end in itself. He proposes that persons are “not merely subjective ends, whose existence as an effect of our actions has a value for us; but such beings are objective ends, i.e., exist as ends in themselves” (Kant 233). In contrast, the utilitarian, in certain cases, will treat a human being as a means to an end. For example, consider the extreme case in which a utilitarian might torture an individual in order to obtain information and subsequently save the lives of five others. In this case, the utilitarian would be using the individual as a means to saving the lives of another rather than considering the individual as an end himself. This case is undoubtedly controversial, but it shows the stark difference between the utilitarian position and Kant’s. In addition, Kant offers proof for his principle of treating every human as an end. He shows that if every rational being were to “think
of his existence on the same rational ground that holds also for me," then the principle "is at the same time an objective principle, from which, as a supreme practical ground, all laws of the will must be able to be derived" (Kant 233). Maximizing this principle would then serve as a practical moral code: that one should act in such a way that all people are always an end and "never simply a means". This moral code is absolute, whereas the utilitarian position is merely casuistic.

Finally, similar to the utilitarian position, Kantian ethics can also be put into practical terms. However, these ethics are superior to the utilitarian principle because in Kant’s case, human beings obey a law that they have formulated on their own, as opposed to having some outside law imposed upon them. Thus, humans are both the subject and the object of the law. This notion fits into Kant’s categorical imperative because "if there is a categorical imperative... then it can only command that everything be done from the maxim of such a will as could as the same time have as its object only itself regarded as legislating universal law" (Kant 234). Therefore, the will obeys this law unconditionally.

Naturally, Kantian ethics are not flawless. However, Kant offers a better ethical code than the utilitarian by placing the highest importance on human life and human rights. His categorical imperative ultimately leads to a "kingdom of ends," in which norms that contradict the value of human life are not made. It would be hard to argue against this, for every man values his own life. Although it has been shown that the utilitarian view has its strengths and is certainly logical in some cases,
following Kantian ethics offers a more stable set of moral principles in a logical manner.
Works Cited


