

Deontology, Consequentialism, Virtue Ethics and a suitable theory for Christian Ethics

Compare and contrast Deontology, Consequentialism, and Virtue Ethics. Does any of these serve as a suitable theory for Christian Ethics?

There are two major and diverging views when it comes to ethical theory, consequentialism and deontology (Preston, 2007, p. 36). Consequentialism considers the consequences that would result from a decision, whilst deontology considers the right or the duty of the decision itself. Another theory, virtue ethics, considers the moral character of the person and what they ought to do. Each of these different frameworks has strengths and weaknesses for building a Christian ethic and will be examined in turn.

Consequentialism considers the consequences of an action and based on the harm or pleasure resulting from it, decides if it is good or bad. Under the category of consequentialism, utilitarianism is the main ethic proposed. The goal of utilitarianism is to maximise the most good for the most amount of people. When deciding what is good the happiness of all parties involved is considered not just the decision maker. Although this sounds objective, it can be subjective. It is hard to consider all consequences from one action and objectively weigh the result for others (Preston, 2007, p. 38). Another shortfall is that its goal is to please the most people, meaning that minorities may be mistreated at the expense of the majority. The method used to decide what is moral is normally considered in transactional terms, failing to consider the whole experience of humans, such as their will and their motives. In society, government policy and multinational corporations who have finite resources, is generally uses utilitarianism when making decisions for the good of all (Preston, 2007, p. 38).

Two other frameworks under consequentialism are situation ethics and ethical egoism. Situation ethics does not make broad decontextualised decisions, but rather considers the

loving consequence for each action in context (Preston, 2007, pp. 38-39). Unlike utilitarianism it tries to focus on the motivation of the decision maker, and not just the result of the action. However, it leads to relativism and is too individualistic to function at a societal level (Preston, 2007, p. 39).

Ethical egoism considers human selfishness as the goal of human ethical action (Preston, 2007, p. 39). In this framework the subjectivity of considering others is removed and only the decision maker is considered. In practice, it does not deal with conflicting self interest, or how in society (or in any meaningful relationship) compromise and sacrifices are needed (Preston, 2007, p. 39).

For the Christian, ethical egoism is the most realistic as it aligns with human nature (Preston, 2007, p. 39). Ultimately everyone has rejected God and His rule and serve themselves. Caring for others and considering their needs is one of the central ways Christians are to demonstrate their faith. Although caring for others is a major theme in the Bible, faith in Jesus is central. Christians are to demonstrate their faith by obeying what Jesus has taught them.

Deontology defines “right action independently of value” (Elliot, 2006, p. 145) and instead actions are based on duties regardless of the consequences (Preston, 2007, p. 40). Kant, one of the main proponents of this position, argued for duties based on a basic moral law called the “categorical imperative” (De Vries, 2005, p. 358). These are considered actions that one would do and allow others to perform to them, almost like the Golden Rule¹. Deontology is assumed to lead to moral absolutism, that actions are to be enacted under all circumstances regardless of the result (Elliot, 2006, p. 145). However Kant may have originally envisioned a more flexible set of guidelines (White, 2009, p. 304). The major objection to deontology is

¹ Two main differences between Kant’s categorical imperative and the Golden Rule are that Kant explicitly included duties to the decision maker and Kant denied any moral concern from the outcome of an action (De Vries, 2005, p. 358).

that when confronted with two conflicting rules it collapses into consequentialism (Elliot, 2006, p. 145; Preston, 2007, p. 42). Kant did anticipate this when he put forward a hierarchy of actions between “perfect duties” which did not have exceptions and “imperfect duties” that were flexible in their execution (White, 2009, p. 303). The duty that had the “stronger ground of obligation” was to be considered over conflicting duties (White, 2009, p. 304). Another objection to deontology, which can also be aimed at consequentialism, is that it relies too much on a rational position. It is one thing to work out what is best to do; it is another to act accordingly (White, 2009, p. 305). This does not necessary negate either position as their purpose is to prescribe moral actions, not guarantee them (White, 2009, p. 305). Deontology may be considered restrictive or even irrational when confronted with a situation where doing one morally objectionable action prevents more of the same (Brook, 2007, p. 439). For example, killing someone who will kill one or more others.

The use of religious authority has traditionally been used within this framework (Preston, 2007, p. 40). The laws from God are inherently good because God is good and so should be obeyed. In modern ears this may not sound appealing, but that may come from a lack of belief that God is good (or exists). A Christian understands that both God and His laws are good and so seeks to obey them, for it pleases God. A Christian however does not merely perform actions for their inherent goodness; they are also motivated out of love for God.

Virtue ethics does not look at rules or consequences but instead the focus is on the moral character of the decider (Preston, 2007, p. 49). In order to work out what is good one needs to consider the end goal or teleological pursuit for living and to work back from there (Preston, 2007, p. 49). This is not only focused on the external outcome of a decision but also the internal characteristics that are needed to achieve its proper end (Preston, 2007, p. 50). This inclusion and distinction between the internal and external is helpful as it is about developing

the person's will rather than educating their mind (Preston, 2007, p. 50). Virtue ethics may result in relativism (Preston, 2007, p. 51), depending on what teleological reason is given for living. It can also be seen as reducing the correct action as determined by the ends, hence having the means justifying the ends (De Vries, 2005, p. 358). Virtue ethics also does not give much guidance when confronted with conflicting virtues and provides no grounds for one over the other (Preston, 2007, p. 52).

For a Christian the ultimate purpose of living is not to seek pleasure or even the betterment of society. The Westminster Confession famously starts by stating that a person's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. The Bible encourages virtues such as kindness, humility, meekness, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness etc... (Gal 5:22; Col 3:12) for the purpose of being holy (1 Pet 1:15-16). It is by holy conduct that Christians are to be known and this is only possible because Christians have been given a new heart, desire and motivation to seek this.

There is no one guiding framework that the Christian must adhere to, as different situations may require different responses. However, rather than Christian ethics being reduced to only situational ethics, there are still overarching boundaries specified in the Bible, such as a love for God and for others. Rahab was praised for lying instead of giving up the spies who would have been killed (Jam 2:25). Likewise the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah lied to Pharaoh in order to save lives and were blessed for their actions (Exo 1:19-20). In both these cases they sought a higher ethic of preservation of life over lying (Geisler, 2000, pp. 433-434). A Christian holds that God does not only look at the actions and the consequences of a person, but also their heart and motivation. Even though Israel performed sacrifices, God was not pleased with them when they were not given out of love for Him (Isa 1:13; Hos 6:6; Mal 1:10). Jesus also stressed that God looks at people's internal motivations (Luk 6:45, 11:39-40).

When faced with a decision a Christian is to consider the consequences of their actions towards others, is to obey God and His rules and is to be motivated by holiness. It is a Christian's response to God that makes why they serve and how they serve important.

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