
ESSAY ON KANTIANISM AND UTILITARIANISM

Kantianism is the ethical theory that the right action in situations does not come from the consequences, like the consequentialist ethical theory of Utilitarianism, but rather from the moral laws that can be derived from our reasoning to decipher if an action is right, making Kantianism a deontological theory. Kant based his theory around four main principles: duty vs inclination, do we freely choose to act upon our duty to uphold the moral laws that come from our reasoning rather than acting solely out of our nature as human beings; the formulation of maxims, the general rules of behaviour for particular situations that show what the moral law actually states; the categorical imperative, to “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will should become a universal law”; and universality, can that maxim be applied to everyone and everything.

A Kantian would first formulate the appropriate maxim according to their reasoning to discover if they would act in the same way as Fiona did. Under the maxim of ‘Give an equal opportunity to everyone’, which stands under the categorical imperative as this maxim could be willed as a universal law, a Kantian would not tear up the CV’s like Fiona did. A Kantian’s duty under the moral law would be to give everyone who had applied for the job a fair opportunity, which is in accordance to the formulated maxim, and to not give in to the inclination to help Natasha. If the maxim was formulated differently however, the Kantian could act in the same way as Fiona. Under the maxim, ‘Always give help to your friends rather than those you don’t know’ a Kantian would tear up the CV’s to help Natasha, as long as this was done out of duty to the moral law and not out of your own natural inclinations. This maxim fails under the categorical imperative however, as the maxim could not be willed as a universal law. If this were to come about, a loss of community would inevitably come about as people would start looking selfishly out for their own small groups, rather than for the benefit of the wider world.

Rule Utilitarianism is a branch of Utilitarianism which is an ethical theory that strives for the greatest aggregate happiness for the greatest number. A rule utilitarian uses a set of rules intended upon creating the greatest aggregate happiness, and on this basis they may either follow Fiona’s actions or not. A Utilitarian would usually not follow Fiona’s actions, as this would not create the greatest aggregate happiness, if this situation was solely focused rather than taking into perspective a wider rule, which is what an act Utilitarian would do using Bentham’s hedonic calculus or Mill’s lower or higher pleasures principle. The same could also be true for a rule Utilitarian, although they would usually pick the correct action according to a rule, in this case the rule of ‘Give an equal opportunity to everyone’ gives an equal amount of happiness to everyone who is applying, and could also give more happiness to the wider family of the successful candidate who gets the job as they would know they won the job without any advantage. If the rule was however ‘Help those in need’, which seems like a reasonable enough rule as in the long run this would create more happiness, the rule Utilitarian would probably follow Fiona’s actions to help Natasha as in need of a job.

From the scenario, a problem over Fiona’s duty appears to be a cause for criticism of Kant’s theory. In Kantianism, the maxim of action is formulated through reasoning to decide on a person’s duty, but are there not situations where more than one duty needs to be upheld by a person. For example, Fiona has a duty to help her friend, Natasha, who is in need of a job but she also has a duty of upholding the equal opportunity of everyone who is applying for the job. A related problem is that these acts are all part of the moral law, and so if Fiona upheld one she would be breaking the other, which in Kant’s eyes is not acceptable. Many people suggest that this problem could be solved by including a consequentialist viewpoint into Kant’s theory, like Utilitarianism, as this could allow for the maxim which causes the least ‘damage’ to be chosen. Some of the maxims derived in Kantianism also seem to fall far outside our moral boundaries, another criticism of Kantianism. For example, is it right that Fiona’s deprives the other candidates of the opportunity for the job? This is exactly what Kant would say we have to do however, under the maxim of ‘Always give help to your friends rather than those you don’t know’. On the other hand, a strength of Kantianism can be found in the universality of its maxims. For example the maxim of ‘Give an equal opportunity to everyone’ from the dilemma, can easily be willed as a law