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Consequentialist Ethics and Accountability in Contemporary Society

Viviana IVLAMPIE¹

Abstract

Various trends and orientations stand out from the history of ethics. Our attention focuses on three major aspects in this history, which will help us in the analysis of the decision-making process, in putting these decisions in effect and in taking accountability for the consequences of the decisional act. The perspectives under the lens are: the Aristotelian ethics of virtue, the utilitarian ethics or consequentialism, and the Kantian deontological ethics. By evaluating these types of ethics, we reach the conclusion that, confronted with the changes in the contemporary society, consequentialist ethics proves operational, both at the individual level and at the group, institutional or organisational level.

Keywords:

Ethics, deontology, consequentialism, decision, accountability.

1. Introduction

In our contemporary world, full of challenges and promises, we attempt to find the most pertinent ethical perspective corresponding to the numerous ethical questions we are confronted with both at the individual and the social-political level, where actions and decisions affect the lives of millions of people.

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The best-known reference points of the ethical theories, which can be called upon in this analysis are the Aristotelian theory of virtue, the utilitarian ethics or consequentialism, and the Kantian deontological ethics.

2. Theoretical Background

I was wrong, therefore I pay is a sentence that belongs to ethical deontology, with multiple social, psychological, juridical or administrative implications. Its core is in its moral strength: acknowledging and assuming guilty, with all consequences deriving from it, in other words, in accountability. Full accountability for one's decisions and acts gives one incredible easiness and freedom. Giving up lie, falsity, hypocrisy, duplicity, the role as a victim of persecution entails maturity, fairness and honesty. In the life's experience, to acknowledge one's mistakes in making a decision which not only affects one but the ones around is proof of ethical behaviour.

What we admit at the level of the ordinary citizen is equally valid for the ethical behaviour of the decision-makers at the highest societal levels. The overt taking accountability for decisions which affect large masses is an ingrained, even abused, tradition in the political world. This accountability has no juridical consequences, just electoral ones, every once in a while. Leaders can take accountability for their decisions, but not for their consequences. And some of these consequences can be followed by juridical penalty. Is the statement "I take accountability", freed from consequences, at declarative level, proof of unethical behaviour? The notions of position, job, and administration do not automatically include the concept of ethical accountability. In the case of public decision-makers, the concept of role-related ethics has been imposed, which is why all decisions and actions must be made public and submitted to public debate for full transparency.

3. Argument of the paper

Accountability for the decision made falls under deontology, under that unconditional "must" of Kantian duty. I act according to duty, according to the laws of reason, which prevails in relation to will. Submitting to these laws means submitting to duty, which, in Kantian understanding, is not a constraint, but freedom itself. Being accountable for the consequences of one's decision is advocated by consequentialists, whether they ignore duty or moral intention or not. Speaking of role ethics, we note that certain sectors of public life have specific ethical standards and fall under the

authority of the Machiavellian principle *the end justifies the means*. The consequentialist outlook seems to be the closest to contemporaneity because good intentions alone cannot end wars, famine, environmental catastrophes, nor can completely ethical men put an end to the major crises of the present. Accountability ethics imposes behavioural norms adapted to situations in a dramatic change.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

The central problem of Aristotle's ethics, as well as that of his illustrious predecessors, Socrates and Plato, revolves around nature and the means of acquiring Good, seen as the absolute goal towards all human actions should aspire. However, Aristotle does not consider an abstract, transcendent Good as his master, Plato, did. Being more realistic, he advances the idea of a desirable, doable good, one that is accessible to man. If Plato was certain that the matrix determination of the good in the world of ideas and its mere contemplation were enough for moulding our behaviour, Aristotle differentiates the good based on the specificity of situations, behaviours, character of the persons acting. The Aristotelian good is a personal value of *man*, of the concrete individual. Man's full accomplishment consists in reaching the virtues of the Good as a finality of his existence – the one and only aims for itself and never as an achievement of another goal. This realist aspiration of the human effort results in acquiring the state of happiness [1, 1094, 18-20].

Thus, Aristotle makes a distinction between values as goals and values as means, intermediary in achieving higher goals. The good, identified par excellence with the value as goal, is happiness, which all men naturally desire and aim at as a goal in itself and not as a means for anything else. Unlike the happiness formula advanced by the Cynics, Cyrenaics, Epicureans or Stoics (obtaining pleasure and avoiding suffering), Aristotle claims that happiness is not represented by either accumulating wealth or rushing for power and fame. Such pleasures are unstable, discontinuous, arbitrary, and their satisfaction strains us, enthrals us, and enslaves us. Ergo, in Aristotle's view, true happiness is a state of stability, hard to obtain, but ensured for a long period of time. Happiness is not a state or a quality in itself. It is conditioned by the acquisition of mid-values that the Stagirite names *virtues*. Starting from the structure of the soul, the philosopher establishes a hierarchy of the virtues corresponding to each of its parts: *dianoetic virtues*, which pertain to the intellectual part of man, are learnt through the exercise of reason. They are, in fact, just rules of reason which condition the

existence of any ethical virtue, ensuring moral rectitude to it. The dianoetic virtues (speculative wisdom and the practical one, intelligence) are imperative norms. The ethical virtues (of the character) entail, besides the exercise of reason, long practice - an *assiduous exercise in action*. Just as the violin virtuosos do not reach the grand stages of the world without a lot of practice, we cannot become righteous, honest and brave just by reading or listening to moralising lectures. Life gives us the quality of moral beings. The long exercise of ethical virtues, as Aristotle says, or of the cardinal ethical values – courage, justice, honesty, benevolence, etc. – is what forms a man of character. His good habits make him take the path of virtue, the only one that leads to true happiness, and not imperatives such as ‘Do this!’ or ‘It’s forbidden to do that!’

Without formulating a moral code, Aristotle makes up a general ethical principle, which helps our orientation in making the right decisions and our self-education through exercising virtues. This philosopher stresses that virtue is the *via media* between two vices, one induced by excess, the other – by insufficiency (for example, the excess of courage is temerity, foolhardiness, and its insufficiency is cowardice.) This is why he promotes moderation, harmony, balance, avoiding deviation – in just two words, “the golden mean”.

Essentially, Aristotelian ethics can be restricted to a few questions: What kind of human being do we want to become? What are the essential traits that we want to appreciate in people’s personality? What specific, concrete actions taken in a given situation will bring us closer to the human ideal that is the Good and Happiness? Acquiring happiness with the help of measure, the good functions in concert, because man is *zoon politikon*. In other words, not confining the good and happiness of the other leads to the general good (one’s happiness can only be regarded in relation to the happiness of the others).

If Aristotle focused his ethical construction on the virtue of the citizen, of the polis dweller, the Utilitarians shift the emphasis on the general good. They consider that if all human actions are motivated by the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain, a motivation that is the fundament of happiness, seen as finality of the human action, then the means of promoting happiness (measurable and quantifiable according to Bentham) can be regarded as judgement criteria for the entire human behaviour. The Utilitarians identified the Good with happiness, pleasure or usefulness. In their identification with happiness, they seem to walk in Aristotle’s footsteps, but radically divert from the theory of virtue when they state that happiness means “acquiring pleasure” and “avoiding suffering”. With this association, the Utilitarians move into the hedonists’ camp, harshly criticised by

Aristotle. In truth, in the Utilitarians' case, one cannot speak of classical hedonism, as these thinkers do not promote selfishness and the exclusive interest in the strictly individual pleasures and pains. The classical Utilitarians, both Bentham and Mill, practise a form of "social hedonism" based on the principle of *the greatest happiness*, which claims that the actions are right in the extent they tend to promote happiness and wrong if they tend to promote the opposite of happiness. The maximum of pleasure is morally right when is not overflowing over one individual, but over as many people as possible.

Aiming to modernise social justice, Jeremy Bentham, an illustrious jurist, philosopher and social reformer, set to provide legislators a hierarchy of juridical prescriptions so that they be as compatible as possible with ethics. Consequently, he tried to build quantitative ethics, a form of arithmetic of pleasure. Various pleasures, Bentham says, are differentiated only according to quantitative criteria: some are more intense, take longer, are more economical, as they require a lower quantity of energy for obtaining them. This is why he recommended that we choose actions whose consequences provide maximum pleasure, not only for ourselves but also for as many people as possible, and not only in the near future, but also on long term. Bentham's attempt to evaluate each act after the principles of this arithmetic of pleasure is equivalent to the moral analysis of the consequences of a single ethical act or decision. From the radically consequentialist outlook, the *intention* of an act is irrelevant, and only consequences matter. We shall further make reference to a famous example: a man saves a rich person's child from drowning with the intention to ask a reward. In the consequentialist perspective, this deed is better than the failed attempts of another individual to draw the authorities' attention to the measures of preventing drowning. This way of interpreting the consequences of a single act without consideration to the intention that led to it has been named "act utilitarianism". Experts consider that the doctrine of the act utilitarianism is philosophically irrelevant, logically inconsistent and practically inapplicable, positing the following arguments: pleasures and pains are not qualitatively equivalent (one's pleasure to take drugs cannot be equated with other's pleasure to read, sing, dance, etc.); pleasures and pains cannot be quantified or compared (how much more pleasant is to listen to music than to taste a delicious meal?)

Bentham was wrong when he tried to propose the measurement method. We cannot foresee with certainty the effects on long term of our acts. You can save one man today and he can kill other four people in an accident tomorrow. Similarly, the consequences of our decisions can impact a large number of individuals positively but seriously affect a minority (e.g.

Peter the Great's reforms, the extermination of Jews). Consequentialism cannot promote and protect the rights of minorities because of its orientation towards achieving the greater good for the many, while disregarding the interests of the few.

John Stuart Mill [3] amended Bentham's utilitarianism, which generated strong reactions in his time. He kept nonetheless the utilitarian principle of the greatest happiness for the most people, but introduced a hierarchy of pleasures: the spiritual pleasures are superior to the vulgar ones. Mill practises a *rule (normative) utilitarianism*. According to his view, we can outline norms to determine what is good, based on what produced the best consequences in the past (patterns). In this case, the deed can no longer be judged by a calculation of the pleasures offered in an indeterminate future to a number as large as possible of individuals. Mankind's long experience has proven that *certain* action and decision-making strategies have led, more than others, to positive results for a majority. To put it otherwise, Mill considers that there are patterns whose application generated consequences of certain moral value and that reusing them should be fairly successful.

The utilitarian perspective does not privilege the individual, but, according to Mill, we have to seek the best state of facts that we can possibly create with our actions and decisions, with consideration to the interests of all persons and institutions morally involved. The essential questions that can be posited are: what will be the consequences of our act to society? What decision or action will lead to a better state of fact? Oftentimes, regardless of our decision, this will certainly lead to losses and gains, to both positive and negative consequences. The consequentialist perspective is not the ethics of "the decisions that suit me best", but one of the well-calculated, well-judged results for the society and world.

Mill's attempt to reconcile utilitarianism with the evidence of common sense did not save it as a coherent and independent ethical theory. Neither have the ulterior attempts at reformulating it fully saved it, but, going in the direction of rule utilitarianism (normative), brought it closer to the Kantian ethic of duty.

From what has been so far outlined regarding the question as to why should we be ethical, we note that Aristotle claimed that happiness, the supreme goal of human existence, can only be reached by way of virtue. The Utilitarians, supporters of a consequentialist view, claim that what truly matters in judging our actions and decisions are the results we get. German philosopher Immanuel Kant posits that *intention* should also be considered when assessing an ethical action. Regardless of the value of the consequences, if our action was marred by interests or hazard, it cannot be ethical.

In what happiness is concerned, Kant was fully aware of the people's natural tendency of being happy and looking for happiness, but he contested „the incoherence of practical recommendations and advice” on happiness, proposing a practical guide instead, a theory proper, a coherent system of rule that any reasonable man could understand and put into practice. Consequently, the ethical value of our acts exclusively depends on our intention to abide by certain ethical norms or rules. *Intention* becomes *duty!* The question that immediately arises is: what kind of rules can be construed as ethical laws? Kant responds: those with the attribute of universality and necessity. In other words, any reasonable man must accept their validity as soon as he devises them and must be convinced of their necessity, as long as they mutually support and do not contradict one another. The search of a universal ethical judgement led Kant to the formulation of the *categorical imperative* – “Act as if the maxims of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature” [4, p. 118], which corroborates with the principle of respect which affirms the supreme value of morality: humanity.

The idea of universality and necessity of ethical laws is closely related to a great and generous idea such is the equality of all individuals as reasonable human beings. An action is morally right when the one who pursues it does not appropriate any advantage and privilege at the expense of others, but admits that all people have equal rights to benefit from the outcomes of his action. “Act so that you can use humanity both in your person and in the person of anyone else always at the same time as end, and never just as a means [4, p. 47]. For Kant, the supreme value of morality is humanity. Man is a supreme value whose price cannot be evaluated and who must be respected above everything. Man is an absolute end in himself, which is why no one should use him as a means in view of achieving personal interests. The man Immanuel Kant was not so naïve as to admit that we must use one another: a teacher is a means of education for his students, the grocery man is an instrument of providing service, etc., but as reasonable, equal beings we must not treat the others only as simple means, but with respect and consideration. To respect the humanity within one's own being means to have dignity.

5. Dismantling the arguments against

The three ethical theories presented are not the only ones ethical constructions that should be considered when we speak of decision making and accountability of the decision-making factors. It is also obvious that it would be completely inappropriate to start wondering which is the best

because – though having their weaknesses – each one presents aspects of ethical life that are worth considering. The questions that could be reasonably posited are: is any of these theories more adequate, more effective and closer to the present-day reality? Could we draw any moral teaching from them to guide us in our decision-making?

As apparent, despite their being so ancient, Aristotle's ideas are pertinent and actual. The principle of virtue, of *via media*, guides us in making the right decisions and in moulding our personality. To the cardinal virtues – bravery, justice, honesty, and benevolence – values such as loyalty, keeping one's promises, altruism, and accountability are added nowadays, values which, in Aristotelian understanding, define the man of character.

Utilitarianism rests on maximising happiness and general usefulness and on minimising suffering of the self and of the others. According to utilitarian ethics, the aim of virtue is to increase happiness and general usefulness. In politicians and high officials, the sacrifice of the private interests in favour of the public ones is not supererogatory (above duty), but a duty derived from their status, as their role is to devise and implement public policies. It seems, in the case of present-day politicians and institutions, that utilitarian ethics prevails more than the deontological one. Their principle, the end justifies the means, is more often called upon than in the case of private persons. And their professional roles seem to isolate their occupants from personal moral accountability for their decisions, being construed that they are not made in their name, but in the name of the institution. Could the representatives of institutions (presidential, governmental, banking, etc.) be, thanks to the protection conditioned by the requirement of impersonality, held accountable in their names if the decisions of the majority they represent do not coincide with the greater good of the society? The accountability for the final decision should be eventually ascribed to somebody. Even the supreme leaders are morally accountable, history has proven that they have constantly been made responsible for their action.

In Immanuel Kant's case, we note the respect for human dignity and the acknowledgement of humanity in any individual considered as an end in himself or as a supreme value. In the Kantian ethics of duty – characterised as rigid – one also encounters the ethics of the fundamental rights of man.

6. Conclusions

We live nowadays in a completely different world, one more diverse and dynamic, more and more open to multiculturalism and globalisation.

Compared to relatively stable world of the creators of the aforesaid ethical theories, the world of today is a confrontation field for major geopolitical and strategic interests in domination and supremacy. Only are sacrificed the private interests of individuals today, but also those of nations. The man of character, the greater good and the respect for human dignity are just hypocrite words in the universal demagoguery repertory.

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