On Measuring the Moral Value of Action

Abstract Deontology and consequentialism are two prominent, disparate tenets of normative ethics concerned with prescribing norms for ethical action in order to advance human flourishing. While consequentialism in its purest form is practical and realistic, its precepts do not intrinsically consider justice and human rights, which are salient canons of deontology. Contrariwise, though plenary deontology categorically focuses on duty or rule-based ethics, its prescripts overlook the consequences of moral action, which results in indeterminate and conceivably dramatic implications for societal eudemonia and human flourishing. Traditionally, consequentialists have sought to quantify the moral value of action by formulating creative expressions. Attempts have also been made to combine ideologies in order to resolve moral conflicts that arise in both normative ethical positions. This article fuses these approaches, creating a single formulation to measure the moral value of action. Used as a guideline in the moral decision-making process, this formulation enjoins individuals to consider the consequences of action beyond the self, to ruminate beyond the immediacy of an act under consideration, and to regard unqualified societal and global norms for justice and human rights as a baseline for all moral action.

Keywords deontology, consequentialism, utilitarianism, self-actualization, felicific calculus

1 Introduction

Deontology and consequentialism are two prominent, influential and competing schools of thought within the field of normative ethics (Kagan 1998). Their precepts have been seen as part of the evolution of virtue ethics in society, and have been highly debated by scholars. Deontology takes the position that rules, duty, and rights are basic to determining morality, while consequentialism derives morality from the consequences of action (Kagan 1998). For the deontologist, individual rights are unconditionally inviolable. Although Kant refers to happiness
as an “indirect duty,” he asserts the importance of moral duty, and of being morally worthy of happiness, as exceeding the value of simply being happy (Kant 1999). Kant states, “Morals is not properly the doctrine of how we are to make ourselves happy, but of how we are to become worthy of happiness.” The consequentialist, faced with finding actionable resolution, will seek a course of action that maximizes happiness for the greatest number. Though these philosophies propose different methods of determining right and wrong action, they both espouse human happiness and flourishing as the highest good, encompassing all other lesser goods (Feldman 2004; Veenhoven 1988; Zhao 2005).

Traditionally, consequentialists have been instrumental in developing tangible methods for measuring the moral value of action. The first such attempt, by Bentham, gave rise to felicific or ethical calculus (Bentham 1879). Subsequent refinements and critiques have been made by (Mill 2007; Feldman 1997; Mitchell 1918; Mullenix 1987; Lapidus 2000; Baujard 2009; Hirschman 1982; Viner 1949). Consequentialists measure moral value centered around human happiness, as based on the consequences of an action. The consequentialist, thus, does not consider rights and justice as necessary elements of the decision making process. Consequentialism garners criticism both for oversimplification in determining contextual dependencies and extenuating consequences, and for its inability to solve the action guidance dilemma (Kagan 1998). Deontology focusses primarily on rules, rights and justice, but might not be realistic and practical when applied in many circumstances, especially when discounting outcomes in evaluating the morality of an action.

Thought experiments are commonly used dialectics in assessing theoretical ethical positions. Moot dialectics can help illustrate the drawbacks of traditional consequentialism and deontology. Imagine a billionaire philanthropist pledging sizable donations towards alleviating poverty in Africa in exchange for societally sanctioned physical assaults on personal financial rivals. In this scenario, the consequentialist could affirm that assaults on a few individuals should be allowed in order to substantially increase the sustenance and happiness of several thousand people in Africa. However, as this argument blatantly infringes on the basic human rights of the financial rivals, it would be considered a weakness of consequentialism in determining the morality of the action. Imagine a ‘murderer at the door’ asking an individual for the location of a family member hunted as quarry by the murderer. The deontologist could assert that the categorical imperative tells us that one should not lie, and that morality dictates that the truth must always be told. In this scenario, the consequence of telling the truth to the murderer at the door is the execution of a family member. Deontology finds the action of the murderer immoral, but also does not find fault with the individual who follows duty and answers truthfully. A perceived drawback of deontology is
a focus on the literal duties of moral agents instead of what could be judged by moral agents as a best outcome.

Recent discussions in moral ethics have attempted to bridge the gap between these two disparate schools of thought. Rule utilitarianism (Harsanyi 1980) is an attempt to merge deontology with consequentialism. Proponents of rule utilitarianism argue that following rules leading to the greatest happiness is more practical than simply acting on the basis of the consequences of action, as in the case of act utilitarianism. Critics of rule utilitarianism argue that rule utilitarianism can collapse into act utilitarianism since rules are allowed to be broken depending on circumstances (Lyons 1965).

Kamm’s theories of the “principle of permissible harm” and the “doctrine of productive purity” (Kamm 2007) are attempts to justify circumstances where varying from the prescripts of deontology will promote the “greater good.” Kamm’s theory of the “doctrine of productive purity” combines aspects of consequentialism with deontology to determine the right moral action. Proponents of preference utilitarianism (Singer 2011) argue that the rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the preferences of the moral agents involved in the act. Preference utilitarianism rejects absolute morality for subjective morality, and enjoins that moral judgements be actually made by the agents involved.

King has shown how these contrasting ethical positions need not be mutually exclusive by using quasi-realism to blend consequentialism with deontology and virtue ethics, resulting in an evolved hybrid philosophy (King 2008). King’s quasi-utilitarianism incorporates empathy and obligation into the decision making process, and highlights the issues of justice and human rights, which he feels are not sufficiently taken into account by traditional utilitarianism. He claims that traditional utilitarianism is flawed for several reasons, including its tendency to be self-defeating, to ignore both past events and future considerations, to be unfair, to favor groups over individuals, and to ignore rules (King 2008). King considers his theory of quasi-utilitarianism to differ from traditional utilitarianism in four basic ways. First, King advocates one-to-one empathy rather than empathy for a group or for the greater good. King’s “Help Principle”— ‘Help someone if your time and effort is worth more to them than it is to you’— is a fundamental principle of his ethical postulations and a rule for individual action. Second, he advocates consideration of past and future events in order to determine future happiness. Third, he revises the Judeo-Christian golden rule by asking individuals to consider reciprocity in empathy. ‘Empathize with people only as much as they empathize with others’ is King’s reciprocity rule. Finally, King advocates for the abandonment of sadistic, racist, and discriminatory preferences in society.

This article builds on these recent trends in considering hybrid philosophies in normative ethics. The article begins with Bentham’s utilitarian theory of felicific
calculus, and refines it by adding elements of humanistic psychology, rule utilitarianism, and deontology in order to arrive at a formulation of moral value that encompasses central tenets from all these schools of thought. Based on this expression of moral value, acts that support basic human rights are given highest value, acts that enable sustainable human happiness are given moderate value, and acts that support hedonistic pleasure are given the least value. All known variables are to be entered into the expression, and the goal of the moral actor must be to follow the best possible course of action arriving at the highest possible moral value. Even in cases which find violations of basic human rights in alternate scenarios, the expression can still be used as a guide to assess the best possible course of action. In addition, the expression could also be used to determine the moral value of past and future actions.

Measuring the moral value of an action is challenging considering the unknown variables and unpredictable consequences inherent in the day-to-day complexities of human existence. Furthermore, the decision making process always includes bias based on what is perceived or known to be true, what is valued by an individual or society, and on how an action in question will benefit specific individuals and groups. While moral certainty can be evanescent, the equation presented in this article could be a guide for individuals and policy makers throughout the moral decision making process. Meaningful, positive, sustainable change requires adding components to the decision making process at individual and societal levels that help lead to better overall choices and efficacy in action. Efficacy in action, in this context, requires an ethical construct that petitions actors to examine objectivity, the global community and social norms, and requires of them the wisdom derived from both deontology and utilitarianism. The equation presented in this article allows individuals to continuously assess the morality of their action, and progressively move in the direction of personal and global flourishing. This equation can be used as a guide in the decision making process, helping one consider not only the direct consequences of an act, but also setting a baseline for action that includes justice, empathy, and human rights.

2 A New Equation for Determining the Moral Value of an Action

The British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (Bentham 1879) invented felicific calculus and proposed that increasing pleasure and reducing pain was of foremost importance in the pursuit of the highest good. Bentham was also the founder of utilitarianism, one of the preeminent schools of thought within consequentialism. Utilitarianism claims that the greatest happiness (or pleasure) for the greatest number of people would increase the moral value of an action
and in turn advance society toward a flourishing state. In this context, utilitarianism can give us direction in working through the moral decision making process.

The use of the words ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’ renders the theory hedonistic, since pleasure is usually related to hedonic well-being. Mill refined the theory to separate higher pleasures from lower pleasures (Mill 2007), calling the higher pleasures, pleasures of the intellect, and the lower pleasures, pleasures of the body. A quality parameter with values between zero and one gave higher value was to higher pleasures. Mill’s revised theory, titled qualified hedonism, failed to clearly address the specifics of measuring moral value using a mathematical expression or algorithm. This article further refines the moral value expression by correlating the works of (Bentham 1879) and (Mill 2007) to theories of modern day humanistic and positive psychology, including the ‘hybrid philosophy.’

Humanistic and positive psychologists make a clear distinction between hedonic well-being (hedonism) and subjective well-being (flourishing) (Maslow 1970; Ryff 1989). The American psychologist Abraham Maslow defined self-actualization as the highest of the five types of human needs outlined in his Hierarchy of Needs theory (Maslow 1943), where Self-actualization is a vital, evolutionary process through which an individual satisfies most hedonic needs and strives towards satisfaction of higher, subjective needs as well (Maslow 1972). Self-actualized individuals are fulfilled in themselves, and thus spend most of their time caring about causes and issues outside of themselves. After basic needs are satisfied, an individual can focus on the full realization of potential through creativity, search for knowledge, a desire to help society, and spiritual exploration. (Maslow 1972) called hedonic needs deficient needs or D-needs, and higher well-being needs, being-needs or B-needs. D-needs include physiological health, safety, love and self-esteem, while B-needs include cognitive and aesthetic fulfillment, self-actualization, and self-transcendence (Maslow 1970).

Simply increasing deficient pleasure does not automatically lead to a eudemonic, flourishing society. For humans to flourish, self-actualization must be a possibility (Maslow 1970). Satisfaction of hedonic needs is short-lived and, like an addiction, habitual and chronic, requiring reiterative action for future hedonic need satisfaction. Given the appropriate psychosocial developmental conditions and support, an individual will typically begin to self-actualize at middle-age (Ivtzan 2013). As an individual becomes more self-actualized, he or she pays less attention to personal, deficient needs, craves less hedonistic pleasure, and pays more attention to needs and causes outside of themselves (Maslow 1972).

On the other hand, if psychosocial developmental conditions are not appropriate to foster self-actualization, an individual might never self-actualize
and can stay perpetually frozen in state of psychological fixation and hedonic addiction (Freud 1954; Erikson 1993; Geissman 1998). Typically these individuals seldom find sustained fulfillment or long-term happiness. Basic tenets of humanistic psychology make a distinction between higher and lower happiness or needs. According to positive and humanistic psychologists, hedonic pleasure has high intensity, short duration, low purity, low certainty, high propinquity and low fecundity as compared to sustainable or “being” happiness (Maslow 1972; Ryff 1989). Hedonic pleasure is universally sought after and necessary for survival. However, simply facilitating hedonic pleasure does not guarantee a eudemonic and flourishing society, and could possibly lead to individual hedonic addictions and fixations. For society to flourish, individuals must thrive physiologically and work towards self-actualization. Significant numbers of individuals working toward self-actualization will move beyond the scope of any one individual to create societies of high virtue, creativity, scientific advancement, environmental sustainability, innovation, care, compassion, solidarity, equality, peace, justice and happiness. It can thus be argued that attempting to bring about being (higher) happiness is of more moral value to society than simply satisfying hedonic needs. But, as mentioned, in order for an individual to self-actualize and move towards higher happiness, lower needs must be met. However, this is not enough reason to give high moral value to the satisfaction of lower needs, since this satisfaction does not guarantee self-actualization. Maslow estimated that only two percent of the people in the world self-actualize and consciously spend significant amounts of time on causes outside of themselves (Maslow 1970).

Deontologists assert that one fundamental problem with utilitarianism is that its precepts do not intrinsically consider justice and human rights when determining the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Salient canons of deontology maintain that the rightness of an action must be based on rules, rights or duties (Kagan 1998). Several formulations of deontological ideology have evolved over the years. Kant outlines three inviolate moral laws or maxims that all individuals must respect and model in order to live moral lives (Kant 2002). The consequences of action in this case are immaterial, and moral value lies in the dutiful adherence to these moral laws. Rawls focusses primarily on principles of justice, liberty and equality (Rawls 1999). Nozick and Locke stress the natural and legal human rights of every individual that society must uphold (Nozick 1974; Locke 1700). While deontological theories divaricate, they all claim that individuals have basic rights, that rules or laws must be setup to protect those rights, and that it is every individual’s duty to obey those rules in order to be deemed moral and help achieve social goodness. Although nation states have their own interpretation of what constitutes basic human rights, unqualified global and societal norms set general consensus that basic rights to life and
personal safety for each individual are inviolate and must be safeguarded (Glendon 2002).

Based on the preceding discussion, an expression for measuring the moral value of an action has been formulated using tenets from deontology, consequentialism, positive psychology and humanistic psychology:

\[ M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2) \]

In the above expression, \( M \) stands for the moral value of an action whose unit is *morals*. The goal of the moral actor is to act in a way such that the outcome of actions produces the highest possible value of \( M \). The equation sets positive values for life, pleasure and happiness and negative values for death, pain and suffering of moral agents.

\( d_1 \) represents the total number of moral agents whose basic human rights to life and physical security are protected by the action. \( d_2 \) represents the total number of moral agents whose basic human rights are violated by the action. \( b_1 \) represents the number of moral agents that experience or move towards experiencing being-happiness by the action. \( b_2 \) represents the number of moral agents that are deprived of being-happiness or move away from experiencing being-happiness by the action. \( h_1 \) represents the number of moral agents that experience hedonistic happiness by the action. \( h_2 \) represents the number of moral agents that experience hedonistic suffering originating from deficient need deprivation by the action.

All values in the equation are whole numbers. The equation accounts for direct consequences and does not account for unforeseeable indirect consequences, since estimating based on the complexity of the human condition globally is difficult. The moral value of each action is measured independently. In order to measure the total moral value of a set of actions, the formula must be used repeatedly for each action. The total moral value can then be determined by summing the individual moral value of each action measured in *morals*. The moral value of an action can be a positive or negative number depending on the consequences it has on moral agents. Negative values would typically indicate an immoral act.

Bentham’s theory of felicific calculus used seven variables to account for the amount of pleasure that is derived from an action. These are intensity, duration, purity, extent, certainty, propinquity and fecundity. Intensity accounts for how strong or weak the pleasure is. Duration accounts for how long the pleasure can last. Purity is the probability that the action will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind. Extent accounts for the number of moral agents that will be affected by the action. Certainty accounts for the likelihood of the occurrence of pleasure. Propinquity accounts for how soon pleasure will occur. Fecundity is the
probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.

The proposed equation directly accounts for the extent of happiness caused by determining the number of moral agents affected positively or negatively by the act. Multiplying factors account for the rest of the six variables. The multiplying factor of 0.001 is used for hedonic happiness as compared to 1 for sustainable happiness, since it is argued that hedonic pleasure has high intensity, short duration, low purity, low certainty, high propinquity and low fecundity. The multiplying factor of 1,000 is used because the expression places high positive moral value on protecting the basic human rights to life and security and high negative value (1,000) on threatening these same basic rights, regardless of the values of the variables. This large multiplying factor assures consideration of a baseline for action that values justice, empathy, and human rights irrespective of societal norms and other hedonistic or pleasurable consequences. Though morality and the value of human life and well-being cannot be numerically quantified, the numbers are symbolically used to denote high, moderate and low moral value.

Some examples of actions protecting basic human rights include firefighting, effective policing, healthcare, human rights activism, and poverty alleviation. Some examples of actions fueling hedonic happiness include providing most goods and services beyond basic needs needed for human survival and functioning. Some examples of actions enabling being (higher) happiness include preventing child abuse, counseling and therapy, rehabilitation, self-help activities, promoting spiritual knowledge, advancement and education, nourishing strong positive parental support for children, and enabling long-term sustainable human relationships.

### 3 Application of the New Expression

Thought experiments can illustrate how the equation can be used in determining the best moral action in specific situations. In revisiting the case of the murderer at the door, lying to the murderer will save the life of an individual’s family member, setting the value of $d_1$ to 1. As a result, the murderer’s hedonistic pleasure is thwarted, setting the value of $h_2$ to 1. In this case, the values of the other variables are 0. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

\[
M = (1,000 \cdot d_1 + 1 \cdot b_1 + 0.001 \cdot h_1) - (1,000 \cdot d_2 + 1 \cdot b_2 + 0.001 \cdot h_2)
\]

\[
M = (1,000 \cdot 1 + 1 \cdot 0 + 0.001 \cdot 0) - (1,000 \cdot 0 + 1 \cdot 0 + 0.001 \cdot 1)
\]

\[
M = 1000 - 0.001 = 999.999\text{ morals}
\]
If the individual did not lie to the murderer the value of $h_2$ would be 1 since the murderer would be granted hedonistic pleasure in committing a violent crime. The equation would then give the result:

$$M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)$$

$$M = (1,000*1 + 1*0 + 0.001*1) - (1,000*1 + 1*0 + 0.001*0)$$

$$M = 0.001 - 1,000 = -999.999 \text{ morals}$$

Evaluating multiple courses of action is beneficial in considering more than the immediacy of the act and recognizing consequences of action beyond the self. Since 999.999 is higher in value than -999,999, the first action could be considered a more moral course of action.

In revisiting the case of the billionaire philanthropist pledging to guarantee financial support to uplift 10,000 people from extreme poverty in exchange for license to physically assault 10 financial rivals, the value of $d_2$ would be 10 and the value of $d_1$ would be 10,000. In this case, the values of the other variables are assumed to be 0. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

$$M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)$$

$$M = (1,000*10,000 + 1*0 + 0.001*0) - (1,000*10 + 1*0 + 0.001*0)$$

$$M = 10,000,000 - 10,000 = 9,990,000 \text{ morals}$$

If the billionaire philanthropist freely donated the money to support African charities without asking society’s permission to assault financial rivals, the value of $d_1$ would be 10,000. In this case, the philanthropist, and possibly other family members, might ‘suffer’ repeatedly over time by not realizing hedonic pleasures. This sets the approximate value of $h_2$ greater than 1. In this case, we selected 500 for argument’s sake and the values of the other variables are assumed to be 0. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

$$M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)$$

$$M = (1,000*10,000 + 1*0 + 0.001*0) - (1,000*0 + 1*0 + 0.001*500)$$

$$M = 10,000,000 - 0.5 = 9,999,999.5 \text{ morals}$$

Since 9,999,999.5 is higher in value than 9,990,000, the second action could be considered a more moral course of action.

One commonly weighed thought experiment is the trolley problem (Thomson 1985). In this case, a moral agent is faced with the dilemma of pulling a lever controlling the trajectory of an approaching trolley down one of two possible
tracks. If the agent pulls the lever, the trolley will go down the first track killing one person, but saving the lives of five people. If the agent does not pull the lever, the trolley will go down the second track killing five people, and saving the life of one person. No other options exist. If the agent pulls the lever and the trolley kills one person but saves five lives, the value of $d_1$ would be 5 and the value of $d_2$ would be 1. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

$$M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)$$
$$M = (1,000*5 + 1*0 + 0.001*0) - (1,000*1 + 1*0 + 0.001*0)$$
$$M = 5,000 – 1,000 = 4,000 morals$$

On the other hand, if the moral actor does not pull the lever, the value of $d_1$ would be 1 and the value of $d_2$ would be 5. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

$$M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)$$
$$M = (1,000*1 + 1*0 + 0.001*0) - (1,000*5 + 1*0 + 0.001*0)$$
$$M = 1,000 – 5,000 = -4,000 morals$$

Since 4,000 is higher in value than -4,000 the first action could be considered a more moral course of action.

Another commonly contemplated thought experiment is the organ transplant problem (Kamm 2007). A doctor is presented with the dilemma of using the organs of one healthy individual in order to save the lives of five sick patients. If the decision is made to kill one healthy person to save the lives of five sick patients, the value of $d_1$ would be 5 and the value of $d_2$ would be 1. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

$$M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)$$
$$M = (1,000*5 + 1*0 + 0.001*0) - (1,000*1 + 1*0 + 0.001*0)$$
$$M = 5,000 – 1,000 = 4,000 morals$$

Alternatively, if the doctor could use organs of voluntary donors without fatally harming any donor, the value of $d_1$ would be 5 and the value of $d_2$ would be 0. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

$$M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)$$
$$M = (1,000*5 + 1*0 + 0.001*0) - (1,000*0 + 1*0 + 0.001*0)$$

Alternatively, if the doctor could use organs of voluntary donors without fatally harming any donor, the value of $d_1$ would be 5 and the value of $d_2$ would be 0. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:
M = 5,000 – 0 = 5,000 morals

Since 5,000 is higher in value than 4,000 the second action could be considered a more moral course of action.

Imagine a mother choosing between buying her child ice cream or taking the child to a counseling session. Buying ice-cream satisfies the child’s hedonistic need, but circumvents the child’s being-need development, denying the child additional resources to cope with stress and eventually self-actualize. In this case, the values of \( h_1 \) and \( b_2 \) would be set to 1. Assume all other variables in the equation to be 0. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

\[
M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)
\]

\[
M = (1,000*0 + 1*0 + 0.001*1) - (1,000*0 + 1*1 + 0.001*0)
\]

\[
M = 0.001 – 1 = -0.999 morals
\]

On the other hand, taking the child to the counselling session sets the value of \( b_1 \) and \( h_2 \) to 1. Assume all other variables in the equation to be 0. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result

\[
M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2)
\]

\[
M = (1,000*0 + 1*1 + 0.001*1) - (1,000*0 + 1*1 + 0.001*1)
\]

\[
M = 1 – 0.0001 = 0.999 morals
\]

Since 0.999 is higher in value than -0.999 the second action could be considered a more moral course of action.

After considering these thought experiments, it can be argued that an actor should look for the best course of any set of possible actions to maximize the value of M. In cases where time is of the essence and the options are very limited, the user can still apply the equation to help extrapolate the best possible course of moral action, causing the least possible harm to the moral agents involved. The equation can help determine the best course of moral action in the face of a dilemma, as well as determine the moral value of past and future actions.

For example, to calculate the moral value of a past action, imagine a leader-of-state declaring war on another sovereign state in order to gain access to disputed resources. Assume this war had 1,000 casualties \( (d_2) \), deprived 10,000 moral agents of hedonic pleasure \( (h_2) \), thwarted 10,000 moral agents from self-actualizing and experiencing being happiness \( (b_2) \), and enabled 10,000,000 moral agents to experience hedonic pleasure from the resource gain \( (h_1) \) for the first state. Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:
\[ M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2) \]

\[ M = (1,000*0 + 1*0 + 0.001*10,000,000) - (1,000*1,000 + 1*10,000 + 0.001*10,000) \]

\[ M = 10,000 - 1,010,010 = -1,000,010 \text{ morals} \]

To predict the moral value of future action, imagine a corporation with a product to sell planning to launch a new advertising campaign rooted in the objectification of women. Assume that the advertisement promoted sales of the product and gave hedonic pleasure to 1,000,000 moral agents \((h_1)\) but demoralized 10,000 individuals by thwarting their ability to self-actualize and experience being-happiness due to the inherent nature of the advertising campaign \((b_2)\). Applying these variable values to the equation gives the result:

\[ M = (1,000.d_1 + 1.b_1 + 0.001.h_1) - (1,000.d_2 + 1.b_2 + 0.001.h_2) \]

\[ M = (1,000*0 + 1*0 + 0.001*1,000,000) - (1,000*0 + 1*10,000 + 0.001*0) \]

\[ M = 1,000 - 10,000 = -9000 \text{ morals} \]

4 Discussion

Directly measuring the moral value of an action in any scenario is a challenge, due to the incalculable variables affecting any action, to the differences in societal and individual needs and norms, and to the unforeseeable consequences produced by the action. However, it is both plausible and possible to argue for a moral direction for action by emphasizing the importance of specific human needs. This article exposes the moral value of action by arguing that the unqualified societal and global norms for justice and basic human rights are a baseline for all action and are of the highest moral importance. Enabling sustainable happiness follows with regard to ranking levels of moral importance. Satisfying hedonistic pleasure becomes the lowest-ranking level of moral importance considered. The expression outlined in this article uses deontology to establish the argument for the unassailable significance of basic human rights when making moral considerations. In addition, it uses consequentialism, positive psychology and humanistic psychology to establish the argument for considering higher and lower happiness. Though the expression cannot produce the best results in every circumstance, it does a fair job in helping determine the course of moral action in terms of evaluating possible scenarios.

Furthermore, the decision-making process always includes bias based on what is perceived or known to be true, on what is valued by an individual or society, and on how a particular action will benefit specific individuals and groups. While
moral certainty can be unreliable, the expression presented in this article could be a guide for individuals and policy makers throughout the moral decision making process and leading to individual and societal flourishing, using human rights as a baseline for moral action.

In addition, policy makers and legislatures could use this model as a guide in their decision making processes when creating laws and policies, as well as when developing internal and external economic policy. These policies become public incarnations of the highest values extant in society. Economists quantify utility based on an individual’s willingness to pay for tangible goods or services, but moral value and economic utility do not necessarily have a strong positive correlation. Goods or services of high economic utility simply showcase a strong desire within society. In many cases, this desire can be purely hedonistic and does not automatically mean that the good or service in question is of high moral value. For society to flourish, policy makers must try to strengthen the correlation between economic utility and moral utility.

The formula expressed in this article does not directly account for issues concerning animal rights, ecology, or environmental controversies. However, the moral value of an action performed in such cases can be measured using the expression, based on the direct effects the action has on moral agents. The formula does not attempt to measure the morality or virtue of the actor. In addition, the article does not directly address current controversial topics in moral thinking such as abortion or euthanasia. Modifications to the expression to include such topics are suggested as areas for future research. Used as a guideline in the moral decision-making process, the expression enjoins individuals to consider consequences of action beyond the self, ruminate on more than the immediacy of an act under consideration, consider which definition of happiness is under consideration, and regard unqualified societal and global norms for justice and human rights as a baseline for all moral action.

References


