

Mary Dominique Patchin

Econ 4999

Feb 24, 2008


4999 Patchin Essay 1




Dexter and Ethical Theories

This paper will discuss a character from the TV show Dexter and how his actions are perceived in different ethical philosophies. The character Dexter Morgan's actions are perceived very differently in each of these ethical theories. Dexter's actions will be discussed in context with many different moral philosophies including: Economical Ethical Theory Consequentialist Theory, Utilitarianism, Processists, Rights Theory, and Divine Command Theory.

The TV show 'Dexter' is the story of a man named Dexter Morgan. Dexter works as a blood spatter expert for the Florida Police, he has a girlfriend, a good relationship with his foster sister, and he likes to kill murderers. Dexter had a traumatic childhood and came to live with a foster family and was eventually adopted by them. His foster father Harry taught Dexter how to kill without being caught, and taught him rules for killing. Harry told him that killing must serve a purpose and taught him to only kill other murderers. Dexter throughout the show lives by Harry's rules. Different ethical philosophies such as Divine Command Theory and Economic Ethical Theory would have contradicting views on Dexter's actions. This paper will discuss Dexter's actions and how they are perceived in different ethical theories.

Economic Ethical Theory is based on Consequentialist Theory. "Economists are ethical consequentialists: we judge actions and policies solely on the basis of their

consequences/outcomes.” (Morey 4). To determine whether something is good or right in Economical Ethics you have to look at a few things such as: utility, cost benefit analysis, efficiency and externalities. Dexter has a preference for killing people. He works with his constraints such as the law to maximize his utility and not get caught. Because Dexter is maximizing his utility he is acting right in the world of economics. 

Dexter is murdering people which raises his utility, but his victim’s utility is lowered. Does Dexter’s benefit outweigh his victims cost? What about the costs and benefits to society? Dexter is murdering murderers. These murderers harm productive members of society. Dexter is targeting people who kill other people. Society benefits from getting these murderers off the street. By getting these murderers off the street  society is running more efficiently. “If the gain to the gainers, in terms of the units of exchange, is greater than the loss to the losers, one might define allocation A as more efficient than allocation B.2 We will use this as a simple definition of efficiency increasing.” (Morey 3). The killing of these people also creates an externality. The victims have friends  and family. Because the police never find the bodies they will always wonder what happened to their loved ones. “There is an externality if an economic agent(s) does something that directly influences (not indirectly through market prices) some other economic agent(s),” (Morey 2). Dexter’s utility increases and society benefits from his actions. While there are some externalities, society as a whole is better off and efficiency is increasing. Dexter is acting right in the eyes of economics. 


One type of consequentialist theory is Utilitarianism. “Utilitarianism is a moral theory that treats pleasure or happiness as the only absolute moral good. According to Utilitarian thinkers, the morality of your actions depends on the results. Acts that bring

about an overall increase in happiness or pleasure are morally good; those that result in suffering or pain are morally bad.” (Ingram, Parks 149). Dexter kills murderers. By doing this action it results in an increase in pleasure for him. However Dexter’s victim experiences pain and suffering. Whose happiness or suffering is greater? “Whose pain and pleasure? Who counts- Who has moral standing?” (Morey 15). Dexter’s actions also affect his victim’s friends and family. Losing someone will always cause suffering. Do we add their suffering in to the equation? What about people who were harmed by the victim and their pleasure that he is now dead, do we add in their pleasure? “Utilitarians believe that the net pleasure (total pleasure minus total suffering) should be maximized. That is maximizing net benefits is good and failing to do so is bad.” (Morey 15). In Utilitarianism the pleasure that the act caused is the most important thing. But how do we quantify pleasure? How can we tell if these people’s and Dexter’s pleasure is higher than the pain and suffering felt by the victim and his friends and family? Because Utilitarianism does not quantify pleasure and pain we can not tell if Dexter is morally right to kill this person.

Contrasting to Consequentialists are Processists. Processists do not look at the consequences of the action instead they look at the process. “Contrast consequentialists with those who judge a decision not on the basis of the consequences of that decision but rather on the process that was used to reach the decision.” (Morey 4). Processists would look at the fact that Dexter kills people, and wonder what would happen if everyone killed people. If anyone could kill anyone that they want to this would be a disaster in society. The Processists view of Dexter is that he is wrong and should not kill people.

What do people have the right to do? Does Dexter really have the right to go around killing people? Rights Theory answers this question. “Rights Theory says that your actions are good if you have the “right” to do them and are bad if they violate someone else’s rights” (Morey 13). What rights do we have and who has these rights? “Human rights refer to the basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled. Examples of rights and freedoms which are often thought of as human rights include civil and political rights, such as the right to life.” (Human Rights 1). If all humans have the right to life then Dexter is violating this right by killing them. His victims are also killers so they are violating the rights of other people. In this country we have a court system. Dexter’s victims have the right to a fair trial; Dexter is depriving them of that right. However suppose this situation. A person walks in on a murderer in the commission of a crime. This person kills the murderer, and goes to the police and tells them the situation. If Fox news or some other TV station did a survey and asked, “Was this the right thing to do?” How many people would say no this was wrong? Dexter is killing murderers just like this person killed a murderer. Do we not care about the rights of these people? Do they not count in society? Just looking at the simplest definition Dexter is wrong in his actions. Dexter violated his victims’ right to live and the right to due process.

How does a person determine right from wrong? In Divine Command Theory right and wrong are determined by God. In this theory God decides what is morally right and wrong for every person. “According to one theory called the Divine Command Theory, ethical principles are simply the command of God. They derive validity from the fact that God commanded them.” (Pojman 575). Dexter murders people. These people are murderers themselves but, Dexter still violates the Ten Commandments. One of the

Ten Commandments is, “you shall not murder”. (Holy bible Exodus 20:13). Dexter is in violation of this decree of God. Everyone who believed in this theory would agree that Dexter is a bad person and will be sent to hell because he is a murderer. However, “Does God have a good reason for designating a certain act as moral and others as immoral?” (Pinter 12). In the bible there is a story about Abraham and his son Isaac. In this story God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. At the last minute God sent an angel down to stop Abraham from killing Isaac. God has commanded murder. “If God hadn’t sent the angel down to stop the killing, Abraham’s murdering Isaac would have been the ethically right thing to do because God said so.” (Ingram, Parks 40). God has commanded killing and murder before in the bible. Does that mean it is ok? Or is the killing ok in those instances because God commanded it? In this instance Dexter is wrong in killing those other people because God did not command it of him. 

Through the different lenses of different moral theories we can see that none of them really agree on whether Dexter is acting morally or not. According to Divine Command theory, Rights theory, and Process theory, Dexter is acting morally wrong. Economically Dexter is acting correctly. And with Utilitarianism we can not tell whether he is acting good or bad. Dexter’s action of killing people is perceived differently by all these different view points.

Works Cited

“Divine Command Theory” Wikipedia 22 Feb 2008, Wikimedia foundation 17 Feb 2008
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_command_theory>

“Human Rights” Wikipedia 23 Feb 2008, Wikimedia Foundation 22 Feb 2008
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rights>

Ingram, David Bruce PH.D, Jennifer A. Parks PH.D. The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Ethics. New York: Penguin, 2002.

Morey, Edward. Ax murdering and wash your hands after using the toilet: a contrite/confused economist.
<<http://www.colorado.edu/economics/morey/papers/axmurdering.pdf>>

Morey, Edward. “Good” Sex is like Efficiency: more is better, except when its not.
<<http://www.colorado.edu/economics/morey/4999Ethics/Efficiency/Good%20Sex%20is%20like%20Efficiency.pdf>>

Morey, Edward. Moral Philosophy aka Theories of Ethics: the foundations of “good” and “bad”, and the foundation of economic policy?
<<http://www.colorado.edu/economics/morey/4999Ethics/ethicsandmoralphilosophy/Moral%20Philosophy%20aka%20Theories%20of%20Ethics.pdf>>

Pinker, Steven. “The Moral Instinct.” New York Times 13 Jan 2008:
<<http://www.colorado.edu/economics/morey/4999Ethics/ethicsandmoralphilosophy/PinkerNYT01132008.pdf>>

Pojman, Louis P. Ethical Theory. 5th edition Belmont CA. Thomson Learning, 2007.