“Moral wisdom seems to be as little connected to knowledge of ethical theory as playing good tennis is to knowledge of physics” (Emrys Westacott). To what extent should our actions be guided by our theories in ethics and elsewhere?

“Moral wisdom is as little connected to ethical theory as playing good tennis is to knowledge of physics” suggests it is not necessary for an individual to have knowledge of ethical theory (a set of principles relating to ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ conduct) in order to posses moral wisdom (the ability to consistently practice ethical conduct), just as it seems unnecessary for an athlete to have knowledge of physics in order to successfully perform. Ostensibly it seems that knowledge of theories, substantiated beliefs that guide behaviour, is key to practical success. In reality, however, whilst it is undeniable that in some contexts theories serve to positively enhance or facilitate our actions, they can equally prove to be unnecessary or hinder the development of ability in our actions. This holds true in different areas of knowledge, primarily in ethics but also in sports, mathematics, the sciences and the arts.

It is arguably unnecessary for performance in sport to be guided by theory, as this by no means determines success. Young children, with limited knowledge of physics and physiology are still able to run fast or swim well. Mature athletes, such as professional footballers, are no different. Moreover, the fact that not everyone can be athletically successful despite rigorous training, application of technique and appreciation of theory further justifies this claim. For instance, as a tennis player I understand that to prevent wide forearm shots the racket face should be ‘closed’ after contact, but when attempting to actualise this, my arm often refuses to move accordingly. This suggests theory in sports is guided more significantly by individual ability than can be by theory, thus theory in this case should not significantly guide actions.

Similarly, evolutionary biologists argue that it is unnecessary for humans to follow ethical theory in order to exhibit moral wisdom. According to scientists such as Harvard professor Marc Hauser, humans are born with “moral machinery”, an innate ability to judge right from wrong. Hauser hypothesises that the process of natural selection over centuries has resulted in morality arising as a human quality, because it “bolsters motivation” to make individuals better cooperators and thus socially advantageous. This is supported by results from a global experiment, conducted through an online questionnaire, which questioned the moral permissibility of moral dilemmas. The experiment provided evidence that the moral faculty in humans is universal, despite differences in culture, nationality, age and knowledge of ethical theory. Critics of Hauser’s position could argue, however, that if there were a shared moral faculty, there would be a lack of criminals. As this is not the case, the conjecture that humans share an innate moral sense is questionable. To counter this, it can be theorized that the moral faculty provides “tools” to build moral systems, rather than a moral system itself which is primarily determined by local culture and teachings. This suggests that whilst the foundation of an individual’s moral wisdom is innately obtained, culture determines their reactions to these moral instincts. Consequently, it seems that although knowledge of ethical theory is not necessary to exhibit moral wisdom, it may be a contributory factor, thus arguably should be used to guide actions.

Likewise, whilst theory may not be necessary in the arena of sports, it appears scientific knowledge can enhance performance. My cousin for instance, with an ability to apply physics (using theories of angles and force) during billiards, is a better player than myself. Thus perhaps, application of theory can enhance, and so possibly should guide, sports-related actions. With aforementioned arguments taken into consideration, however, this theory should not be applied with the misconceptions that it is either the sole method to obtain successful actions, or a guarantee of success.

In some circumstances utilizing theory to guide actions is not merely preferable, but necessary; a primary example is Mathematics. For instance, as we have studied in class, an understanding of calculus is required to calculate the rate of change in surface area of a deflating balloon. The importance of theory to guide actions in Mathematics is sometimes downplayed due to the ability to master Mathematics by rote-learning. For instance, as a young child, despite having no understanding of the meaning of the "equivalence sign" in algebra, I was able to skillfully manipulate a variety of algebraic functions. This argument however, does not take into account that even the most basic employment of mathematical methods requires the guidance of mathematical theory. Although I had little knowledge of the larger concepts, application of basic theory was required: substitution, subtraction, division and multiplication. The importance of theory is only further heightened in advanced mathematics, especially when considering mathematical real-world problems. Hence, it seems Mathematics *requires* theory, thus it should be used to guide our actions.

Within ethics, the guidance of theory may too be imperative. Morally wise decisions made on a global scale, for instance, can be effectively guided by 'theory' of governing bodies. The constitution passed by the UN concerning human rights prevents many atrocities from being committed, ensuring moral wisdom. More specifically, abiding by the human "right to life" allows us to act humanely, and grants the UN the ability to prosecute violators. The international charter is also free of political and cultural bias, thus provides as a good neutral guideline for moral behaviour with all violators "equal before the law". It is interesting to note, however, that some articles of the charter cannot be financially supported by developing countries, such as "education shall be free". This suggests that in some circumstances, whilst actions should be guided by theory, this may not be possible for other reasons.

Arguably, however, outside of established legislations, existing theories concerning ethics are often contradictory, and thus, ethical theories cannot clearly indicate the most 'morally wise' actions. In response, it can be argued that all ethical theories when applied to daily dilemmas, such as what to do when walking past a beggar, map the same route: to spare change. As a utilitarian, this would contribute the greatest benefit, following Kant's theory of rationalism, sparing change would not create a logically contradictory universe, and it abides to Christian ethics that promotes philanthropic behaviour – "love thy neighbour". Thus, knowledge of ethical theory still provides a positive contributory factor to moral wisdom, so should be applied.

However, as “it is theory that decides what can be observed” it seems that an overdependence on theory to guide actions could impede rather than facilitate an individual. Thus, it may be necessary for a thinker to reject theory in order to make progress through their actions. In the sciences, for instance, Harald zur Hausen’s rejection of the orthodox theory, that the cause for cervical cancer would reveal itself by the production of virus particles, facilitated his discovery of the HPVs that cause cervical cancer. Hausen’s discovery of the HPVs by controversially searching for the viral DNA codes inside the tumour cell genomes, ultimately led to the synthesis of the HPV vaccine, 10 years later; actions that could not have been achieved had Hausen conformed to the scientific theories of his time. One could argue, however, that Hausen did not reject established theory, but rather a common perspective that existed during his scientific pursuit. Whilst true to some extent, one could counter that strong perspectives in science tend to be considered theory.

Similarly, movements in art and literature, which resulted from a rejection of conventional theories, created new dimensions in their respective fields. Had Picasso remained loyal to the traditional theories of precisely depicting reality in art, advocated by his own father, he would have never pioneered cubism – an avant-garde movement that revolutionized artistic expression, transcending into related movements in music and literature.

(Left to Right): L’homme au beret is an example of Picasso’s earlier work, where he depicted reality precisely in his paintings; La dame au chapeau noir was completed much later in Picasso’s career, illustrating his use of cubism

Similar can be said of the 17th century metaphysical poets, who did not conform to the empirical conventions of Elizabethan poetry. Unlike their contemporaries who elaborated on science and discovery, the metaphysical poets concerned themselves with abstract concepts, such as love. Moreover, through

bizarre metaphors (such as a flea representing sexual consummation) they initiated a new literary style and approach. Whilst one may argue that these intellectual revolutionaries technically did not abandon theory, but rather created new theory, they did refuse to allow contemporary theories to hinder their perspectives. Thus, these examples further support that as theory, by definition, lacks certainty, we should restrain from strongly believing that current theories, or selected theories, provide the only path to excel in our actions. Very often rejecting accepted theories, or being more accepting of alternate theories, results in more progressive actions.

As the value of theory is different within different contexts, it is difficult to assess the extent to which they should be used to guide actions. Whilst in some cases theory may be considered imperative (e.g. mathematics), it can be unnecessary (e.g. in sports), or even impair an individual's actions (e.g. in the arts). Moreover, theories within a single area of knowledge cannot be granted a common level of importance as its role is highly dependent on circumstance; ethical theory, for instance, can be considered necessary (e.g. UN legislation) as well as merely preferable (e.g. considering our "moral machinery") when it comes to guiding our actions. An individual must also remain aware of the commonly mistaken assumption that theories bring certainty and are universally applicable. The implications of a lack of this awareness could range from scientific setbacks to an inability to fulfill potential. Ultimately, by definition, theories are no more than beliefs, so should be treated as such; theories are no more than human constructs, thus should only be used cautiously as guidelines for optimal human existence.