

UTILITARIAN ETHICAL THEORY VIS-À-VIS THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: AN EVALUATION

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Abstract

Utilitarianism is a moral theoretical movement that advocates for actions that foster happiness and stands against actions that cause unhappiness. It encourages greater amount of good for the greater number of people. In sociopolitical construct, utilitarianism stands for the betterment of society as a whole. More so, the theory is a reason-based principle that determines wrongness or rightness of an action with limitation. It has been observed that when taking action based on this theory, there must be one or two who may be affected negatively, but utilitarianism does not seem to consider such people at all, leaving them wounded. Our problem with the theory is that it does not make plan for such people, whom such decision that will arrive at majority happiness will affect negatively. Therefore, employing the philosophical method of critical analysis, this paper suggests that as we appeal for actions that will bring greater happiness and pleasure, we should also work on the effect of that action on whoever it will affect because when ignored, it can turn to be a great danger to the society. This paper recommends utilitarianism because its principle stands as a better tool for moral actions, but it would make more meaning if there were to be a plan for those who will be affected while making moral decision using utilitarian theory. This is because an action which causes harm to any creature, either one person or two, should be called to order

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Introduction

In the words of Austin Fagothey, “One who performs immoral deeds must stand the responsibility for them, which falls on man and woman alike” Utilitarianism is a theory which was developed to clarify the question of what we really ought to do and why we ought to do it. It holds that: “one morally ought to promote just the sum total of well-being. Most times philosophers discuss about “welfare” or utility “rather” than “wellbeing”¹. It has three generally accepted axioms: first, that pleasure or happiness is the only thing that has intrinsic value. Thus,

John Stuart Mill admits that we seem to value some things other than pleasure and happiness for their own sake. We value health, beauty and knowledge in this way. But he argues that we never value anything unless we associate it in some way with pleasure or happiness. Thus, we value beauty because it is pleasurable to behold. We value knowledge because, usually, it is useful to us in coping with the world, and hence is linked to happiness. We value love and friendship because they are sources of pleasure and happiness²

Second, that actions are right if they promote happiness and wrong if they promote unhappiness, thus, the more happiness an action produces, the better the action is. Third, it states that everyone's happiness counts equally.

Even though utilitarianism can be traced to Aristotle in the ancient era, the present study is a contemporary attempt to evaluate this theoretical perspective. Ethical theories are obviously attempts to provide clear and unified accounts of what our ethical responsibilities are or what we are obliged to do in order to create the fundamentals of obligation suitable and applicable to conduct in everyday life.³ It is within this context that this paper re-reads utilitarianism to weigh its capacity to understand moral dilemmas in terms of making moral decisions at certain points. Such a re-evaluation has become important, given that Utilitarianism is one of the most important and influential moral theories of modern times with an outlook of a prominent modern thinker David Hume (1711-1776), and later developed into its clearest forms through the writings of the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). It is not only an important and influential moral theory; it is one of the most widely taught ethical theories.

¹ Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Retrieved from: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/utilitarianism-history/>>.

² Emrys Westacott, Three Basic principles of utilitarianism. <https://www.thoughtco.com/basic-principles-of-utilitarianism-3862064>, 2019.

³ Ikechukwu Anthony, “Theories of Ethics” Lecture delivered at Veritas University Abuja. 7th February 2022, 1

Types of Utilitarianism

There are two major types of utilitarianism, which include rule utilitarianism and act utilitarianism. Let us discuss them briefly:

Act Utilitarianism: Act utilitarianism states that a particular action is right if it is able to produce the higher level of good for the greater number of people in a given situation⁴. It makes the most ethical actions possible for the benefits of the people. For instance "... when a pharmaceutical company releases drugs that have been governmentally approved but with known minor side effects, because the drug is able to help more people than are bothered by the side effects."⁵ Act Utilitarianism demonstrates the concept that the end justifies the means because it focuses more on the good that is done rather than on the way the good is achieved.

Rule Utilitarianism: Rule utilitarianism holds that right actions are those required by rules through which a higher level of good can be attained for the greater number of people. For instance:

... in the airline industry, many planes offer first business, and economy class seats. Customers who fly in first or business class pay a much higher rate than those in economy seats, but they also get more amenities. Simultaneously, people who cannot afford upper class seats benefit from the economy rates. This practice produces the highest good for the greater number of people; and the airline benefits too. The more expensive upper class seats help to ease the financial burden that the airline created by making room for economy class seats.⁶

The difference between act and rule utilitarianism is that while act utilitarianism focuses on the action not necessarily connected to any rule, rule utilitarianism speaks of not just any kind of action but one required by the rule. In this case, rule utilitarianism looks like an effort to modify and cut down the weaknesses of act utilitarianism. It also looks more like a synthesis of Kantian or duty-based ethical theory with utilitarianism.

Philosophers' Views on Utilitarianism

It is pertinent to take a closer look at the views of philosophers on Utilitarian theory. This will help us to have a balanced view of the theory under consideration.

⁴ Ikechukwu Anthony, "Theories of Ethics", 5.

⁵ Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/utilitarianism-history/>>.

⁶ Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/utilitarianism-history/>>.

John Stuart Mill's Notion on Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was deeply involved in the political controversies of his age. He defended utilitarianism in publications that the educated class in England read with great attention.

John Stuart Mill's *Defense Of The Greatest Happiness Principles* is one of his written works. In this book Utilitarianism is depicted as famous quasi-proof of the greatest happiness principles. The core of his argument is this

Everyone desires happiness.

The only proof that something is desirable is that people do actually desire it.

So, each person's happiness is a good to that person.⁷

Therefore, the general happiness is a good to the aggregate of all persons.

Mill's emphasis is that the action we ought to perform in a given situation is the one that promotes the greatest happiness. More so, he attempted to prove that the greatest happiness principle is correct. He illustrated this with an analogy between desirability and visibility as follows:

Just as the only proof that something is visible is that someone sees it, so the only proof that something is desirable is that someone desires it" ... Mill claims that what people want is their own happiness, therefore he states that the most desirable action is the one that produces the most happiness.⁸

Jeremy Bentham's view on Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was a British Philosopher and an economist who is viewed as an ardent proponent of the doctrine of utilitarianism. He was the first to develop a systematic account of utilitarianism. Bentham's utilitarianism principle states:

[H]appiness was the ultimate good and that happiness was pleasure and the absence of pain" ... He acknowledges the egoistic and hedonistic nature of people's motivation but argues that the maximization of collective happiness is the correct criterion for moral behavior. Bentham's greatest happiness principle states that "actions are immoral if they are not the actions that appear to maximize the happiness of all the people likely to be affected; only the action that appears to maximize the happiness of all the people likely to be affected is the morally right action."⁹

⁷ John Stuart Mill. *Utilitarianism*, (London: Parker, Son and Bourn, West Strand), 50

⁸ Elliott Sober, *Core Questions in Philosophy* (London: Prentice Hall, Inc. 2001), 431

⁹ Morrow John. *History of Western political thought*. Third Edition. (London: Macmillan, 2019), 45

John Gay's view of utilitarianism

John Gay (1685-1732) was an English poet and dramatist, and a member of the Scriblerus club. He was born on 30th June 1685, died 4th December 1732 in London England. He was well known for his famous work “The Beggar's Opera” where in he argued that promoting human happiness was incumbent on us since it was approved by God. After enumerating the ways in which humans come under obligations (by perceiving the natural consequences of things, the obligation to be virtuous, our civil obligations that arise from the authority of God), John Gay writes: “from the consideration of these sorts of obligation...it is evident that a full and complete obligation which will extend to all cases, can only be that arising from the authority of God”.¹⁰ So, for him, whatever is commanded by God is good and ethically permissible.

Henry Sidgwick's view on Utilitarianism

Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) was an English utilitarian philosopher and economist. He was the knight bridge professor of moral philosophy at the university of Cambridge from 1883 until his death and is best known in philosophy for his utilitarian treatise on method of ethics. Sidgwick offers a defense of utilitarianism. Sidgwick's view, utilitarianism is the more basic ethical theory. By simply relying on intuition, he argued:

...we require some higher principle to decide the issue... that will be utilitarianism. Further, the rules which seem to be a fundamental part of common sense morality are often vague and under-described, and applying them will actually require appeal to something theoretically more basic again, “utilitarianism”.¹¹

More so, Henry Sidgwick belongs to the “act utilitarianism” school in his methods of ethics, as he stated it on a framework of a cognitivist meta ethics which holds that act utilitarianism principles could be known to be true by mere intellectual intuition.

G. E Moore's Notion on Utilitarianism

G.E Moore (1873-1958) is well known for his work on *Principia Ethica*. He disagreed with the hedonistic value theory adopted by classical utilitarianism. Moore agreed that we ought to promote the good, but believed that the good included far more than what could be reduced to pleasure. He was a pluralist, rather than a monist. Moore further criticized the view that pleasure itself was an intrinsic good, since it failed a kind of isolation test that he proposed for intrinsic value. Hence:

¹⁰ Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism"

¹¹ Julia Driver, "The History of Utilitarianism"

Moore's account of intrinsic value is limited to object; it does not include actions. Actions for Moore possess value only instrumentally, insofar as they are productive of good consequences. Thus “right,” “duty” and “virtue” are different ways of labeling actions that are useful as means to good ends. They differ in meaning only insofar as the secondary details of the causal situation differ: duty makes action as productive of more good than any possible alternative right or permissible marks, an action as productive of no less good than any possible alternative.¹²

William Paley's View on Utilitarianism

William Paley (1743-1805) was an English clergyman, Christian apologist, philosopher and utilitarian. He is best known for his natural theology exposition of the teleological argument for the existence of God in his *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*. He was a theologian who provided a good example of the independence of mathematics and normative ethics. However, his position on the nature of morality was similar to that of Ockham and Luther, as such he held that right and wrong are determined by the will of God. Because he believed that God wills the happiness of his creatures, his normative ethics were utilitarian: whatever increases happiness is right; whatever diminishes it is wrong. Paley defined moral virtue as: ... “Doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God and for the sake of everlasting happiness”¹³

J. J. C. Smart on Utilitarianism

J. J. C. Smart was an Australian Philosopher born in 1920. After distinguishing various types of utilitarianism. He accepted act utilitarianism. He believed that our desires to promote everyone's happiness may lead others to become act utilitarianists. However, act utilitarianism is the view that the rightness of an action depends only on the total goodness or 'badness' of its consequence. Smart was concerned with defending act utilitarianism, thus he stated:¹⁴

Act utilitarianism is to be contrasted with rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism is the view that the rightness of an action is to be judged by the consequences good or bad of the action itself. Rule utilitarianism is the view that the rightness of an action is to be judged by the goodness and the badness of the consequences of a rule that everyone should perform the action in like circumstance... I have argued elsewhere the objections to rule utilitarianism. Briefly they boil down to the accusation of rule worship: the rule

¹² Moore G. E. *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1903), 89

¹³ D. L. Le Mahieu. In Paley's Moral and political philosophy. Online Library of liberty. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/page/paley-s-moral-philosophy>

¹⁴ J. J. C. Smart & Bernard Williams. Utilitarianism: For and against. <https://philpapers.org/rec/SMAUFA-3>

utilitarianism advocates his principle because he is ultimately concerned with human happiness: why then should he advocate abiding by a rule when he knows that it will not in the present case be beneficial to abide by it?

An Evaluation of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism offers more understanding to the question; what actually matters fundamentally? Existentially, everyone knows that suffering brings pain and that happiness is good. More so, if anything matters morally, human well-being surely does.

More so, we cannot deny the fact that human beings are masters of evil and self-deception. Hence when something benefits us personally we convince ourselves that it is okay. It was in the quest to correct such self-serving biases, that the term “veil of ignorance” was introduced. Therefore, when you choose rationally from the veil of ignorance, it will lead to supporting these two key claims of utilitarianism – Everyone matters equally and it is better to do more good than less. The concept indicates what one would choose if one is to be free from self – serving biases.

Furthermore, the golden rule is important in this discourse – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This rule suggests that other peoples' interest matter just as our own do; therefore, we should take others' interest fully into account, just as we would want others to do with our interests. More so, this would support:

- (i) Treating everyone's interests equally
- (ii) Always preferring more good rather than less which is part of the key ideas of utilitarianism.

John R. Burr and Milton Goldinger have this to say: “Do to others as you would have them do unto you. This is the only rule that stands by itself in the light of its own reason, the only rule that can stand by itself in the naked, warring universe, in the face of the contending values of men and groups.”¹⁵

On another note, it is important to observe that there are some criticisms on utilitarianism as an ethical theory. One of them is that argument on distaste. On this argument, distaste is used to suggest that utilitarianism did not provide enough support for individual rights.

Producing the greatest good for the greatest number is fine as long as you are not hurting someone you really love in the process. For instance, with the trolley situation, I would rather kill 5 people on the main track than my mother on the spur track. Utilitarianism runs into problems when sentiments are involved.¹⁶

¹⁵ John R. Burr & Milton Goldinger. PHI (New Delhi: Learning Private Limited, 2012), 211

¹⁶ Ethics WWW. Criticism of Utilitarianism. Accessed on 1/2/2022

There is also a position on the “impossibility and impracticality” of utilitarianism. The argument states that it is impossible to apply. It stresses that happiness cannot be quantified or measured, that there is no way of calculating a trade-off between intensity and extent, or intensity and probability, or comparing happiness to suffering. Furthermore, human happiness is impossible to quantify. On the impracticality of utilitarianism, this criticism states that it is difficult to apply – stressing that we cannot calculate all the effects for all the individuals either because of the large number of the individuals involved or because of the uncertainty. “How far does one, under utilitarianism, have to research into the possibility of maximally beneficent action, including prevention?”¹⁷

There is also the criticism on insufficiency, which holds that utilitarianism fails to consider some sources of value and it will lead to production of wrong results when the different sources conflict. The confusion here is – sometimes utilitarianism is used as hedonistic utilitarianism, and sometimes as a class of ethical theory like value-maximizing consequentialism.

Objections to Utilitarianism

According to commonsense morality there are certain moral constraints we should never violate. We can find such orders in moral rules like “do not kill” and “do not lie”. This is a problem for Utilitarianism because sometimes, realizing the best outcome may require violating moral constraints against harming others - that is violating their right(s).

Critics of utilitarianism argue that the theory is too demanding because it requires us to bring the best outcome. More so, it leaves no room for actions that are permissible yet do not bring about the best consequences; and this is the more reason why some critics claim that utilitarianism is a morality only for saints. Very few people, even among utilitarian philosophers, live their life in perfect accordance with utilitarianism. For instance, consider that the money a person spends on dining out could pay for several bed nets, each protecting two children in a low- income country from malaria for about two years.¹⁸ From a utilitarian perceptive, the benefit to the person from dining out is much smaller than the benefit to the children from not having malaria; so it would seem the person has acted wrongly in choosing to have a meal out. Finally, with commonsense morality, while it is good and praiseworthy to donate, it is not obligatory.

¹⁷ Ethics WWW. Criticism of Utilitarianism. Accessed on 3/2/2022

¹⁸ Ethics WWW. Criticism of Utilitarianism. Accessed on 3/2/2022

Concluding Reflections

Utilitarianism is a moral theoretical movement that advocates for actions that foster happiness and stand against actions that cause unhappiness. It encourages greater amount of good for the greater number of people. In sociopolitical construct, utilitarianism stands for the betterment of society as a whole. More so, the theory is a reason-based principle that determines wrong or right of an action with limitation.

When taking action based on this theory, there must be one or two who may be adversely affected but utilitarianism does not seem to consider such people at all, leaving them wounded. Our problem with the theory is that it does not make plan for such people, whom such decision that will arrive at majority happiness will affect negatively, for instance in a state where government gave orders for closure of some schools due to lack of qualified teachers and quality buildings without making plan on how to fit in the good, qualified teachers among them and other teachers as well, to where they belong. Yes, the order is for the wellbeing of mankind, looking at the result it will produce if not closed down at that moment, like students graduating with nothing to show, and building collapse killing students and staff as a result of bad structure; but this theory fails to provide a way to help such people. This action will cause harm which will put the society in danger because the persons involved must look for a way to survive. Therefore, we suggest that as we appeal for actions that will bring greater happiness and pleasure, we should also work on the effect of those actions on whoever they will affect, because when ignored can turn to be a great danger to the society. Also, no matter how good an action that seems to bring greater happiness, there must be one or more people that action must affect negatively.

Finally, we appeal for and recommend utilitarianism theory because its principle stands as a better tool for moral actions, but it would make more meaning if there were to be a plan for those who will be affected while making moral decision using utilitarianism theory. This is because an action which causes harm to any creature either one person or two should be called to order.

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