

Utilitarian Philosophy

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Utilitarian Philosophy

Utilitarian philosophy (utilitarianism) is a school of moral philosophy based upon the assumption that the results obtained justify the means applied in pursuing them. The proponents of utilitarianism are convinced that the traditional code of moral behavior is futile since it only complicates human existence without adding value to it. Thus, each action of morality should be judged only based on its ability to increase the amount of material amenities (Barrow, 2015). The paper at hand is aimed to analyze the controversial character of utilitarian philosophy, juxtaposing its benefits and drawbacks. It will also try to prove that despite being sufficiently grounded theoretically, the approach still has a considerable flaw as per its practical application since it completely disregards the perspective of the action recipient. In order to provide support of the claim, two approaches exemplified by works of E. Kant and J.S. Mill will be compared. Real-life examples of practical application of the philosophy will conclude the paper.

Advantages of Utilitarianism

The most frequently cited benefits of utilitarian philosophy include (Mulgan, 2014):

- Comprehensive theoretical foundation and clear guidelines for practical conduct.

Basically, the philosophy can be summed up in one sentence: Every action performed by an individual inevitably brings about consequences that are more significant than the action which caused them. Therefore, the value of morality and ethics, according to utilitarianism, consists in the impact that they produce. It is wrong to assume that the application of utilitarian philosophy in real life would lead to excessive egocentrism. In fact, the approach heavily relies on reason (for example, no one would drive being drunk since it may lead to injuries or death).

- Emphasis on the boons obtained. The philosophy claims that no action is good if it fails to bring about benefits for the agent. Therefore, all actions that may cause distress, frustration or unhappiness are automatically discarded (for example, no crime would ever be committed if the primary concern was to avoid human sufferings).
- An attempt to create a perfectly organized society. If people always think of the effects of their conduct, it creates the society, in which no one has to pay for the errors committed by others.
- The potential to become a universal approach. While the majority of philosophies do not treat everyone equally (the rules applied to one social strata are not applicable to all others), utilitarianism states that morality it suggests is universal for all people.

Disadvantages of Utilitarianism

Despite its undeniable advantage, the philosophy also features a number of substantial flaws (Eggleston & Miller, 2014):

- Neglect of possible negative consequences. The agent's perspective is the only one taken into consideration. Utilitarianism totally disregards the evident fact that satisfaction of one individual is often achieved only through sufferings of many others (for example, if your job application has been accepted by the company, it means a lot of others have been rejected).
- Subjectivity and oversimplification. Utilitarianism oversimplifies morality, reducing it to the notions of good (profitable) and bad (non-profitable). In real-life circumstances, it is hard to find an example of the action that would be totally good or bad for all parties.

- Unattainability and excessive time consumption. If every person considers possible effects of his/her actions, it would take him/ her plenty of time and effort to be able to make correct predictions. Even in this case, emergency situations can ruin all forecasts.

Kant vs. Mill: Evaluation of Ethical Views

In order to facilitate understanding of utilitarian philosophy and highlight its flaws, researchers frequently juxtapose it to Kantianism. For these purposes, the ideas of Mill are contrasted with those expressed by Kant.

As a result, the following objections to Mill's views are identified (De Lazari-Radek & Singer, 2017):

- Utilitarianism shifts the focus of attention from positive to negative responsibility. Mill states that every individual bears responsibility for actions that he/she failed to perform, especially if this led to deplorable consequences. Furthermore, we are also accountable for other people's actions we should have prevented.
- The approach is excessively demanding. Mill's utilitarian philosophy presupposes giving up all personal interests and concentrates on performing a moral action serving for the general good.
- It deprives individuals of their personal worldview and autonomy of actions. Morality is beyond evaluation, which implies that the action leading to happiness is prioritized under any conditions. At the same time, there are no standards guiding the choice of this action.
- It does not take into consideration potential errors of judgment. Mill completely neglects the possibility that a person may be uncertain or unaware of what will bring him/her happiness.

- Utilitarian philosophy disregards feelings. Mill excludes situations, in which feelings can win over obligations. According to him, if an action brings about benefits to people, it must be committed regardless of the circumstances.
- The possibility of conflicting or contradictory needs is not considered. In real-life circumstances, there are a lot of situations that involve ethical dilemmas since they demand choosing between moral obligations. This makes utilitarianism far detached from reality as it fails to provide solution to cases where needs are mutually exclusive.

In contrast to utilitarian philosophy, Kantianism possesses the following benefits

(Eggleston & Miller, 2014):

- Kant's philosophy is objective, logical, and impartial. He emphasized that moral choices must be rational and consistent. There are absolutes that cannot be violated, without any exceptions to the rules, which makes people equal as per their obligations.
- Intrinsic value of each individual is the central assumption. Every human is viewed as a unique creation having innate worth and dignity, which makes morality an indispensable feature.
- Kantianism manages to justify the existence of human rights. He claims that rights are justified by responsibilities since having values implies being enabled to enjoy freedoms.
- The philosophy excludes the possibility of relativism. Since all individual have the same rights and moral obligations, there is a universal guidance to ethical conduct.
- Despite being universal, it still leaves space for autonomy of personal frameworks. As long as an individual does not violate the major moral rules, he/she is entitled to use any methods to increase his/her satisfaction.

- It does not exclude wrong choices. Kant believes that no one can be absolutely sure of the consequences of this or that action and even the best intentions can turn out to be detrimental. Thus, as long as a person is guided by morality, he/she should not be blamed for making a mistake.

The comparison reveals that Kantianism is much more realistic than utilitarianism. The latter uses a narrow perspective to address complex problems that cannot be resolved in such a manner since they require multi-level analysis (Herschel & Miori, 2017). This makes it suitable only for theoretical generalizations.

Analysis of Real-Life Cases

Despite the evident oversimplification underlying utilitarian philosophy, it is still widely applied in modern politics. The history also knows a lot of instances of its implementation, especially in situations that sparked public outcry. The following examples are the most demonstrative in this respect (Hayry, 2013):

1. Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These two Japanese cities fell victims to atomic attacks from air, which killed practically all their inhabitants, making those who survived suffer from long-lasting agony. It may seem quite unambiguous from the first sight that all principles of morality were violated in this case since there is no justification for homicide of the civilian population. Most people believe that this was an act of pure violence. The truth is that the Japanese were also developing their atomic weapon, planning to obtain dominion of the whole world. Thus, if the American government refrained from any actions, it could have caused many more life losses. This is a clear example of the ability of utilitarianism to justify even totally inhumane actions.

2. Slavery. The experience of the United States shows that slavery brings about suffering, humiliation, discrimination, and violation of human dignity. However, from the utilitarian viewpoint, it gave a lot of economic advantages being more profitable than paid labor.
3. The system of taxation. The underlying principle of this system is that the more you earn, the more you have to give to the state. This means that no extra benefits are brought into the economy. It would be more reasonable to make people pay the same amount of tax. However, utilitarian philosophy places the good of the nation over individual interests.

Conclusion

Despite being based on formal logic, utilitarianism still contains a lot of inconsistencies and vague aspects, which make it ambiguous and unconvincing. The reason is that it relies on relativistic concepts of happiness and consequences. Furthermore, it places morality outside the agent, which makes it inapplicable to real-life situations. Having numerous flaws, it does not stand comparison to more well-grounded frameworks.

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