Research Paper

An Expository Analysis of the Ethical Principle of Utilitarianism

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ABSTRACT

There has been consistently encouraging tradition in the history of Philosophy that centres on the somewhat 'periodic' reappraisal of the highly revered philosophical postulation and ideas of great minds and philosophers. This practice testifies to the fact that the discipline of philosophy is an 'endless mental enterprise' that seeks to solve problems confronting humanity in the world in the light of changing situations and new circumstances that are punctuated human life in the physical empirical world. Like many other philosophical systems before it, utilitarianism arose as part of the same human endeavour to unravel the ceaseless mysteries and perplexing aspects of every day occurring problems that await man's necessary attention. Hence, in this work, the researcher primarily intends to make a reflective exposition of the concept of utilitarianism as well as examining different forms of utilitarianism as to have more information in understanding the concept. Then after, juxtaposition of the concept with other schools of thought will be made in order to have more clues about the theory of utilitarianism. As a way of achieving the goal of the work, the researcher, therefore, employs the methodological approach of expository analysis to identify what the concept is all about.

KEYWORDS: *Rightness of an action, Wrongness of an action, Pleasure, Happiness, Pain.*

I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Utilitarianism as a concept is from the word utility. The word utility is derived from a Latin word "*utilis*" meaning "useful". Literally, it denotes the quality of being useful, having value or worth. The term is equally used in the discipline such as economics. The term utility enjoys a household usage in economics. Under this, therefore, it is associated with commodities and implies the amount of satisfaction that is derived from the commodities.

Obviously, in the field of philosophic discipline, utility denotes the property of those things that have value, not in themselves, but as means to some ends (Reese; 1980).

In ethics, however, this property shows itself in the rightness of the actions of men, which is an element that is very expedient in the achievement of the good life. Utility is, of course, an ethical term that is of much greater antiquity and of much wider and less specific use. Invariably, the utility the utilitarians intend by the word is the initiation of an action or omission of an action as to give rise to a state of experience known as satisfaction, pleasure or happiness (Honderich;1995).

However, before Bentham, who was regarded as the founder of utilitarianism came to be associated with the term, there have been traces and vestiges of this concept as can be discoverable in the history of thought. For instance, a pleasure theory of value of life is found in the ethics of Aristippus of Cyrene, around 5th century B. C. It was Aristippus, an ardent disciple of Socrates that initiated the Cyreanic school of thought. Thus, he propounded the ethics of pleasure. For him, therefore:

The good life rest upon the belief that among human values, pleasure is the highest and pain lowest, (and one that should be avoided) (Encyclopedia Britannica).

He went even to the extent of warning his disciples to eschew inflicting as well as suffering pain. Another ancient philosopher is Epicurus, who was the initiator of the school of thought called Epicureanism. Epicurus regarded pleasure as the final end of man.

In the chronicles of English philosophy, a number of historians pointed a 17th century moral philosopher known as BishopRichardCumberland as number one person to have propounded utilitarian philosophy. When eventually utilitarianism took the nature of a theological ethics, therefore, John Gay, who was a philosopher and a biblical scholar was highly esteemed by some philosophers. His dissertation on the *fundamental principle of virtue of morality* which contains elements of utilitarianism was what influenced David Hartley. He held that God's will is the yardstick for measuring a virtue. However, as regards the goodness of God, he maintains that it is always the will of God that men should promote human happiness (H.R.H; 1974).

The first person known for the application or usage of the principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Fuller; 2013) is the English born professor of moral philosophy, Francis Hutchinson. In his work, "A System of Moral Philosophy", published posthumously by his son, Hutchinson opined that:

Man's moral sense induces him by strong affection to seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Urmston; 1960)

DavidHumewasthefirsttointroducethistermintoethicsasthebasiccriterionofethicalvalues. He made an effort to explicates the origin of virtue by way of considering their contribution to utility. For him, our approval or disapproval of course of action is dependent on our past experiences of pleasant and unpleasant consequences. Nevertheless,Spinoza,onhisownpartmeaningfullyrelatestheusefulnesstothatwhichhelpsanindividualtoconservehis being.OnthesideofJeremyBentham,heseesutilityasthepropertythatisinobjectthataimstofacilitatebenefit,advantage, pleasure,goodorhappiness;somethingthatassistinpreventingoccurrenceofmischief,pain,evilorunhappiness(Pojman & Vaughn; 2017).

Many philosophers have tried to define this principle called utilitarianism in many different ways. Each individual philosopher defined it as it affects his area of specialization. Bentham, who propounded this ethical theory conceived that man by nature is a pleasure seeking and pain avoiding animal. For him, therefore, pleasure and pain are the guides of all human actions. He thus emphasizes that:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do as well as to determine what we shall do... They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think, every effort we make to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it (Bentham; 1948).

Bentham, therefore, emphasized on what human nature is, is understood to actually rather than potentially constitute the very foundation upon which the whole structure of utilitarian political and social doctrine rest. Hence, he claims that pleasure is the only good desired by all men, and pain the only evil which everyone struggles to avoid. The performance of good and the avoidance of evil, therefore, implies seeking for pleasure and avoiding pain. For Bentham, the theory is so self-evident that it does not need any further proof. It is, in fact, the ultimate basis of all ethical theories for it underlies the reasons why any ethical theory approves or disapproves certain actions. Utilitarianism therefore is really the only standard for right and wrong and the ultimate foundation of all ethical theories (Copleston; 1974).

John Stuart Mill, the man who modernised this ethical principle states that:

The creed which accept as the foundation of moral, utility or the greatest happiness hold that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain, by unhappiness pain and the privation of pleasure (Mill; 1961).

For Mill, the best way to know right action is when it promotes the general happiness, and wrong action, if it does otherwise. This is the grand point of Mill's utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism in all is an ethical theory that pleasure is the sole end of man. Man in every day endeavours has ulterior motive, which propels him. No single individual prefers pain to pleasure, but the other way round. Hence, every man is by nature utilitarian. It has been the concern of utilitarians to lay down an objective principle for determining when a given action is right or wrong

There are many other opinions about this moral theory, utilitarianism. However, some are in support of the theory while others are against the idea. Nevertheless, the adherents of utilitarianism assert or assume the truth of the below propositions:
● Pleasure alone is good or desirable for its own sake or else men call only those things good that are pleasant or a means to what is pleasant.
● The equal pleasures of any two or more men are equally good.
● No action is right unless it appears to the agent to be action most likely under the given circumstances to produce the greatest happiness (Plamenatez; 1966).

II.   FORMS OF UTILITARIANISM
One of the most frequently discussed issue in the whole utilitarian thesis is the distinction made recently between different forms of utilitarianism. There can be as many forms of utilitarianism as there are

criteria for achieving utility or happiness and for ranking kinds of happiness. The Contemporary utilitarianism is better comprehended by analysing it down into its separate elements and attention focused on formal and controversial aspects of it through and by identifying important variations and disagreements within utilitarianism itself (Ekwutosi;1998).

2.1. Act Utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism is known as extreme or direct utilitarianism. It is the most common form of moral theory. This form applies the consequence of an action to indicate if or not the action is right or wrong. It is the most commonest and the most straightforward version of this moral principle. According to this principle, the criterion of the rightness of anaction is that it maximizes utility. A doctrine that postulates that at each occasion, we are to carry on whatever action that will bring about the greatest balance of good over evil in the world as any other act open to the agent. Smart Succinctly writes thus:

According to act of utilitarianism, then, the rational way to decide what to do is to decide to perform that one of those alternative actions open to us (including the null-action, the doing of nothing) which is likely to maximise probable happiness or well-being of humanity as a whole or more accurately, of all sentient beings (Smart; 1973).

Skorupski, concerning this form of moral theory, maintains that an act is right when and only when it would bring about the best results among all the acts that is open to the agent (Skorupski; 1998).

Broadly defined, utilitarianism is a principle that holds that the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be measured or judged by the consequences, good or bad, of the action itself. In line with this theory, therefore, there are no necessary moral rules except one that we should always seek the happiness of the greatest number in all situations (Smart;1973).

It has to be noted that in this principle, the emphasis is on the judgement of the individual act and on calculating the effects solely of that act in deciding whether it is right or. Hence, for act utilitarianism, telling the truth may be good as general rule, but one should tell a lie if in this particular case the general good would certainly be advanced more thereby.

2.2. Rule Utilitarianism

Rule utilitarianism is another form of utilitarianism. In this type of moral principle, the right action is that which is in accordance with that set rules, which if generally or universally accepted, would maximize utility. Hence, it is a formulation of utilitarianism, which maintains that a behavioral code or rule is morally right if the consequences of adopting the rules are more favorable than unfavourable to everyone (Foot; 1967).

Rule utilitarianism, otherwise called indirect is more concerned with the performance of an action according to an accepted rule. Any action that is performed in accordance with accepted rule is right, otherwise it is wrong. Smart, hence, defines rule utilitarianism as:

The view that the right or wrongness of an action is to be judged by the goodness and badness of the consequence of a rule that everyone should perform the action in the like circumstances (Smart; 1973).

Hence, only those rules which when observed by everyone would give rise to the best possible consequences for the most number of persons should be adopted. To be precise, rule utilitarianism firmly believes that:

An action is right if it accords with a set of rules whose being accepted or followed would have consequences as good as those that would result from any other set of rules being accepted or followed (Honderich; 1995).

It believes, therefore, that rules of morality are more than the rules of thumb. The actions are to be tested by rules and rules are to be tested by consequences. It prefers conformity with a rule to the prevention of unhappiness. The only situation in which we must test an individual act directly by its results are the following: (a) where the action is derived from two varied rules, one of which allows it and the other forbids it and (b) where the rule that governs the case does not exist. Rule utilitarianism states that our duty should be to follow general moral rules.

More so, rule utilitarianism insists that if on a given situation, following the rule would not lead to the best results, that we have to still follow the rule. The point that should be kept in mind here is that these rules must be justified by utility. The utilitarians argue that consequences are not necessarily relevant at all when deciding what to do in a given situation. In all, they are important only to determine rules (Foot; 1967).

Rule utilitarianism has certain merits which include that it conforms more than act utilitarianism to the morality of common sense (intuitionism). Nevertheless, the rule utilitarianism has been criticised for internal inconsistency. It prescribes that one should obey a rule in those circumstances in which it is known that it would not be beneficial. For Peter Railton, this form of utilitarianism is untenable. He, therefore, emphasizes:

For it could recommend acts that accord with the best set rule even when these rules are not in fact generally accepted and which as a result these acts would have devastatingly bad consequences (Scheffer; 1998).

In fact, philosophers and thinkers seem to suggest that rule utilitarians are only pseudo utilitarians (Scheffer; 1998).

This distinction between these forms of utilitarianism is deemed necessary because different acts can result from the application of one or the other. Act utilitarians emphasis the fact that often the observance of a rule does not necessarily increase happiness. In contrast, rule utilitarians are fearful on the consequences when general guidelines for actions are not inculcated and scrupulously observed. Where these two viewpoints are reconciled becomes a matter of dispute. Hence, in reality, we are not likely to get a pure act or a rule utilitarian.

2.3. Negative Utilitarianism

Negative utilitarianism is a theory that makes the minimization of miseries the sole ethical principle. According to this doctrine, we have to mainly concern ourselves with the minimization of miseries rather than the maximization of happiness. Instead of asking how many people will be made happy by an action, we should ask how many persons would be relieved of their miseries by an action (Popper; 1966). This implies that an action is considered good over all when no one is made worse off, regardless of whether someone is made better off or not (Ekwutosi;1998).

If one looks closely at this form of utilitarianism, it seems to overlap with other forms of this moral theory. It does not offer anything new or different from what we have so far seen from other forms. We can say that in the process of maximizing happiness, what we are doing is minimizing unhappiness or miseries or sufferings. Some people may be attracted to this moral theory to the extent of accepting it in spite of its consequences. A negative utilitarian would have to be in favour of exterminating the human race, if he thinks that it would minimize suffering or relieve majority of people of their misery.

Negative utilitarianism, however, has some advantage over actual or positive utilitarianism. Popper in his book holds that negative utilitarianism is possible and has a lot of good to offer to humankind. He,therefore, maintains that what we should most of all concern ourselves with is the elimination or at least the minimization of suffering (Popper;1966). This suffering involves actual pain and not just unhappiness. In all, what we are meant to understand is that utilitarianism should be expressed in terms of prevention of misery rather than in terms of the promotion of happiness.

2.4. Hedonistic and Non-hedonistic Utilitarianism

This is also another form of utilitarianism. This form depends on judging or not judging the goodness and badness of an action solely by the pleasantness and non-pleasantness of their consequences (Smart; 1973). Hedonistic utilitarianism treats pleasure and pain as the sole good and bad things in human life. Following the teaching of Bentham's hedonistic utilitarianism; quantity and pleasure being equal pushpin is as good as poetry. For him, therefore, unless pleasure is taken to be in itself a good and pain in itself evil, the word good and evil have no meaning (Ayer; 1985). Hence, this form agrees anything that does not bring happiness or at least minimize pain is not worth doing.

On the part of non-hedonistic utilitarianism, pleasure and pain are not and cannot be the sole condition of goodness and badness (Attfield; 1995). G. E. Moore, an ideal of non-hedonistic utilitarian, is of the notion that pleasure is not even a necessary condition of goodness (Perry & Bratman et al; 2012). For him still, goodness or badness of a state of consciousness can depend on the factors other than its pleasure (Moore; 1968). J. S. Mill crowned it all by saying that though pleasure was a necessary condition for goodness, yet the innate goodnes of a state of mind could depend on things other than its pleasure. For him, therefore, there are higher pleasures and lower pleasures (Mill; 1961).

Other Schools of Thought

Utilitarianism is not the only school of thought that dealt on the notion of pleasure. In other words, utilitarianism is not the only concept that treated pleasure. Most of other schools of thought were in existence before utilitarianism as a concept is introduced. These schools of thought that existed before utilitarianism include: Epicureanism and Hedonism. What we have to note before delving into their concepts is that they took pleasure and happiness as one and the same.

Epicureanism

The concept Epicureanism was introduced after a Greek philosopher, Epicurus. He was born in 314 BC. His philosophy was derived mainly from those of Democritus and the Cyreanic. He was a moralist uninterested in anything that has no bearing on human conduct. He was the person who established the epicurean community called "the Garden". According to history, it was the centre of his activity until his death (Whitney; 1940).

For Epicurean, the chief aim of human life is pleasure. Pleasure, according to him is the standard for judging actions as right or wrong and all our decisions regarding what should be done or what should be avoided (Omoregbe;1993). Omoregbe quoting F. Copleston said that:

We affirm that pleasure is the beginning and the end of living happily, for we have recognised this as the first good being connate with us and it is with reference to it that we begin every choice and avoidance (Omoregbe; 1993).

It is not every kind of pleasure that interest Epicurus and that makes him differ from others. It is ironic that today his name is associated with three formula of eat, drink and merry (Stumpf; 1994). He believed that the beginning and root of all the good is the pleasure of the stomach, even wisdom and culture must be referred to this. Epicurus took pain to distinguish between various types of pleasure. In all he said about pleasure, he did not mean short-term pleasure but long-term; spiritual and intellectual pleasure, peace of mind and absence of pain. For him, some of our desires are both natural and necessary as in the case of food while others are natural but not necessary such as pleasure that is derived from sexual activity and more still others are neither natural nor necessary to us such as cheap popularity.

Further more, epicureans turned in the direction of apathy what they called "ataraxia" or serenity of soul. They discouraged amassing of wealth and advocated contentment with little possession. The accumulation of material possession means the multiplication of the sources of mental disturbance, which is inimical to the peace of mind and happiness. Epicurus conceded that the satisfaction of any desire is pleasant and that no pleasure is bad in itself, but he warned that "the means which produce some pleasure bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasure (Scarre; 1996). In accordance with Epicurus, it is better to seek the immunity, which results from a quiet life and the retirement from the world (Scarre; 1996).

Epicurus exemplified this moral doctrine during the time when he was suffering from a protracted illness, which he accepted with equanimity and endured with fortitude. He maintained that he still felt happy in spite of his suffering. When he was dying, he wrote a message to one of his ardent disciples saying:

On this truly happy day of my life as I am at the point of death, I write this to you. The disease in my bladder and stomach are pursuing their course, lacking nothing of their sensual severity...but against all this, is the joy of my heart at the recollection of my conversation with you (Russell; 1976).

Epicurus, as he desirously wanted to show example, he, therefore, refrained from luxury and comfort and lived on bread and water. He as well withdrawn from sexual intercourse, which according to him has never done a man good. Thus, he was unmarried and had no children (Russell; 1976). Friendship for him is conducive to happiness because of all the things which wisdom provides for happiness of the whole life, by far more important is the acquisition of friendship. If there are people one cannot be friend with, one should avoid them and keep away from them rather than become their enemy, he insisted. He equally believed that anybody who wants to be happy should keep clear from politics as it hinders the peace of mind and by so doing, makes happiness impossible.

In all, his ethical philosophy consists mainly of advice on living moderately but pleasure pleasurably. Sometimes it appears that he equates the situation of painlessness with a state of pleasure, which should not be. We, therefore, conclude by saying that epicureanism entails living moderately and being self-sufficient. Epicurus, thus stated that nothing satisfies the man who is not satisfied with a little; and self-sufficiency is the greatest of all riches (Scarre; 1996). The real Achilles heel of this theory is not its hedonistic conception of value, but its promulgation of a goal of tranquillity in a world to which tranquillity is generally an inappropriate response (Scarre; 2009).

Hedonism

Hedonism is another school of thought related to utilitarianism. The term is derived from a Greek word "hedon" meaning pleasure, enjoyment, delight. It is one of the oldest, simple and most earthly theories. This principle has persisted throughout all ages and many people who have never consciously formulated for themselves any philosophy of life have to accord to its principles (Conslaves; 1976). Aristippus, the leader of Cyreanic school that identifies happiness with pleasure was the first to propose it.

This school theorises that pleasure is the final end of man. It is a belief that pleasure or happiness is the ultimate good that should be pursued. Pleasure, they believed, is intrinsically desirable and that only displeasure (pain) is intrinsically undesirable. Such belief equates the good with pleasure whether in the individual or in a group and recognises that the pursuit of pleasure or happiness is built in man's nature.

Hedonism as philosophical doctrine has two forms. The first we can call psychological hedonism and the other, ethical hedonism. Psychological hedonism is the doctrine that states that men do pursue pleasure and only pleasure in their lives. It maintains that pleasure is the driving force of all human actions (Omoregbe; 1993). Behind every action that is performed by anyone, there is the desire and the search for pleasure.

Ethical hedonism was first taught by Aristippus of Cyrene. Epicurus was also among this group. They held that not only that mem seek pleasure, but, in fact that they supposed to do so as pleasure alone is good. It is a theory that maintains that man ought to act in whatever manner that will give him the most pleasure in the long run. It also postulates that pleasure is the only value worth desiring for its own sake and all human actions should be directed towards procuring pleasure (Omoregbe; 1993). Consequently, those actions that produce

pleasure are good actions while those that produce pain are evil actions. Thus, our actions should aim at procuring pleasure and avoiding pain.

If we are to criticise this two versions, we can say that psychological hedonism does not hold because by experience, not all our actions are motivated by desire for pleasure. People do make sacrifices, undergo pains and some kind of inconveniences just to assist other people without intending to necessarily derive pleasure from such actions. On the side of ethical hedonism, it is based on erroneous premises,namely that pleasure is the only thing that is desirable for its own sake. But not all pleasures are good. Some pleasures are bad. In fact, two of the versions are one-sided exaggeration of the complex nature of man.

III. CONCLUSION

The general focus of utilitarian theory is on the maximization of happiness for the greatest number of people. If the this ethical principle of utilitarianism is unguarded or controlled, it will take the look of an express freedom to commit evil in the name of benefiting the most number of people. Nevertheless, every single person desires happiness and assiduously works towards the achievement of happiness. But, the utilitarian tendency seems to be geared to equating pleasure and happiness. Two of them are not the same and must not be regarded as the same. Pleasure, therefore, is a temporal state of consciousness. Happiness, instead, is a lifetime process and is at the base of human life.

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