

Utilitarianism: dostoevsky's crime and punishment

Literature



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Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment" presents us with a philosophical dilemma concerning the issue of utilitarianism that is caused by empiricism. The story in the book dwells on issues of human suffering. Two themes found in the book and that help to highlight the debate of utilitarianism found in the book are; suffering, itself and the other is alienation. In the book the characters take suffering as part of their lives. The main character, Raskolnikov and other characters in the novel suffer a great deal.

Mamelodov's sick wife; a character in the book, struggles to raise children in poverty. Others become prostitutes, something that increases their sense of suffering e. g. Sonya while Mameladov resorts to heavy drinking that leads to his death. Also the book deeply tackles the theme of alienation from the society of the characters. The alienation the characters undergo is caused by the means they adopt to cope up with their situation of suffering e. g. the abuse of alcohol, prostitution, and contemplation of murder.

The decisions that the characters take are influenced by the philosophical human principle of utilitarianism and also the philosophical thought of empiricism. Utilitarianism holds that an action is said to be right if it brings the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of society members in the society. For a real follower of utilitarian philosophical thought, right actions are those that ultimately promote the pleasure of the people concerned and alleviate suffering amongst them. Crime and Punishment is a book about the calculations Raskolnikov makes concerning the life he suffers.

He is a drop-out university student who lives in an impoverished neighborhood in of St. Petersburg. He schemes and kills an elderly
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pawnbroker in the town. Reason being that the pawn broker was an agent of suffering to the people of the city since she 'cheated' them of their money. In acting this way he thinks that he is taking a problem from the world. He views himself as a savior of the society. He hence operates by the thought that: 'One death and a thousand lives in exchange--its simple arithmetic.' Empiricism in turn is the principle that all knowledge is derived from experience.

It contends that all knowledge starts with sense experience. It states further that the mind is a blank sheet at birth (tabularasa) and that it is experience via the senses that gathers knowledge from the physical world. The sufferings of the characters are cited, at the end of the story, as the basis for the improvement of their situation in an example the role of empiricism in their lives. One has to be a real sufferer to appreciate the need for bringing about social and economic change in the society. However the endeavor for a utilitarian action is rule governed.

Raskonnikov exemplifies how the situations in the society impact on the individual and cause certain reaction. He responds to the poverty he faces by adapting an alienated mindset. He takes himself to be superior in the face of others. He prefers his crooked thought to social norms and ends up being alienated from the society. The empirical view on utilitarianism is best exemplified by Raskonnikov because he takes the empirical experience and formalizes a thought of being a superman and a required savior of his people and puts it in practice in a trial to save the world.

He seems to use the basics of utilitarian theory to justify his actions as utilitarian. However his method of calculating the utilitarian action is <https://assignbuster.com/utilitarianism-dostoevskys-crime-and-punishment/>

inaccurate and hence results in the negative, rather than the positive. The concept of utilitarianism doesn't allow for contradiction of existing rules of conduct but rather is based on the values and right actions. Dostoevsky tackles the issue of progress by portraying the characters struggles and the way the events in their lives culminate in a better society as the book closes. Immediately Raskonnikov commits the murder of the pawn broker guilt assails him.

He becomes haunted of the action which he has committed and though nobody knows of it he thinks all the people he meet know about it. At the end of the book he becomes disillusioned by his own assumed good act and plunges into a moral dilemma. His self image of a superman quickly fades and is replaced by a haunted feeling. The drive he got from utilitarianism is lost as he discovers that the society was not in any way benefiting from his unilateral action but is indeed suffering from his action as they lack money which the pawn broker would have lend them.

Mill claims that desirable things are such because they provide pleasure or lead to pleasure while preventing pain. In the case of Raskonnikov, the amount of pain supersedes that of the pleasure caused. A utilitarian must not be selfish while carrying out utilitarian schemes but must look for the pleasure of the greatest number of the majority members of the society. His mathematical belief that if he killed the pawnbroker things would be better fails. He doesn't get the happiness he had anticipated before committing the murder.

He ends up looking for unification of himself to the society anew as he realizes that he could not exist in isolation. To do this he first has to confess
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the murder and suffer a legal punishment which is to purge him of the guilt. Raskonnikov comes to suffer for his undesirable actions because he goes against the society's blueprint on moral knowledge. The social norm of not killing in cold blood is a practice established on a societal empirical derived from conscience experiences and that constitutes the wisdom of the society (Locke, 1690).

No member of the society has a chance to prevail if they act contrary to good conduct approved of by the society. Dostoevsky presents the moral dilemma in the books end to allow the reader to ponder on what is the authority that should determine what is utilitarian; is it the individual member or is it the society. The themes of alienation and poverty come in handy to support an undercurrent idea in the conclusion that utilitarian action is a result of the empirical experience of the majority members of the society and not the opinion of individual members of the society.

Conclusion The foregoing discussion warrants the conclusion that utilitarianism is a theory that allows for liberal thought. However the action is still socially sanctioned since utilitarian actions are meant to promote the greatest good of the society. In other words utilitarianism is a function of societal good and societal values. What the society deems as violation of norms cannot feature as a utilitarian act. It has been a long held tradition that in the dispensation of justice by the courts, the issue of utilitarianism is called into play.

This current of action has been witnessed in courts of law as well as in the social organizations. In executing their powers, judges are often confronted with difficult situations. Where they have to quantify the utilitarian value of

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an action by the accused. For instance a murder suspect may plead guilty to a case before a court but seek pardon by claiming the murder was done on the best interest of the public (not desiring to get another mother murdered, for instance).

Incidences in this category are those in which the deceased is a known spouse batterer who meets death as the partner defend themselves. In such a case circumstantial evidence may save the accused. On the other side if one batters their spouse to death (not in self defense) they are liable to legal conviction. Any reasons they may give are taken to be mere excuses that can't be admissible as absolving circumstance. In the contemporary society there are many conflicting values existing e. g. etween capitalists and socialists, liberalists and fundamentalists, reformers and conservatists among others, all who need to be harmonized in a universal agreement on respect of the other peoples rights. This arrangement ensures that no one will temper with another's rights without facing censure from the rest of the people of the world. For instance the case of torture in interrogating terrorism suspects has elicited much contempt from the world wide public. No matter how much individual citizens or individual states take to be utilitarian right they are subject to the collective opinion of the others.