

# Utilitarianism case

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Utilitarianism is the most well-known consequentiality theory of ethics. The most prominent advocates of utilitarianism are John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832). The guiding principle of utilitarianism is the assumption that eventual goal of all human activity is happiness. Experience is the determinant of concept of right and wrong in utilitarianism.

**Two types of Utilitarian ethics are**

- 1) Act Utilitarianism and
- 2) Rule Utilitarianism.

A Utilitarian's definition of 'good' is 'whatever provides the greatest total happiness'. By this definition, the right action in any case can be calculated by determining the probable consequences of each course of action. The action most likely to bring about the most happiness, or cause the least unhappiness, is the right action in each case. Utilitarianism deals with probable consequences because it is usually complex, if not impossible, to establish the accurate results of any particular action.

Rule Utilitarianism questions the assumption of act utilitarianism that all good is equal. The common practice of throwing Christians to lions for entertainment of crowds of thousands in Ancient Rome is cited as an example. Act Utilitarianism would assign higher weight to pleasure of thousands over suffering of few Christians, thus declaring that practice moral. Since momentary pleasure of the Romans cannot possibly equal the pain of loss of life, Rule utilitarianism concludes that all good or values cannot be equal.

The difficulties arising from putting Utilitarianism into practice include the measurement of happiness. Who is to decide whether or not the pleasure experienced by a sadist outweighs the victim's suffering? Also, act utilitarianism can justify many actions that are usually thought immoral. For example, publicly hanging someone would deter crime and thus provide happiness, but one must question the morality of such an action. Also read utilitarianism and business ethics essay

### Virtue Theory

Virtue Theory is based on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and is therefore also referred to as neo-Aristotelianism. Unlike utilitarians who focus on rightness and wrongness of each action, virtue theorists concentrate on character and are concerned about individual's life as a whole. Their fundamental question is, 'How should I live?' they answer this question as, 'cultivate the virtues' in order to flourish as a human being.

Aristotle believed that everyone wants to flourish, or accomplish eudaimonia. Eudaimonia has application in whole life, not just in particular states one might find himself in from time to time. According to Aristotle, certain ways of living facilitate human flourishing, just as certain ways of tending a tree will lead it to blossom.

A virtue for Aristotle is an inclination to act desire and feel in particular ways in appropriate situations. It is a quality of an exemplary person, worthy of imitation. One can gain virtuous characteristics with knowledge and experience. As per virtue theorists, virtues such as generosity and courage are needed by any human being to live well. For Aristotle, the virtuous

individual is someone who has harmonized all the virtues and can be a role model. The source of virtue is rationality, the ability to reason, which is uniquely human.

A difficulty with this theory is to decide which behavior, desire and feelings are to count as virtues. On which ground something gets a designation of virtue, is unclear. If a virtue theorist decides to accept only those ways of behaving, which are commonly considered virtuous in a particular society, as virtues, then there is little chance of changing that society on moral grounds<sup>1</sup>.

### **Analysis of case ‘ Poverty and Pollution’ using Utilitarian Approach**

Brazil’s “ valley of death” is believed to be the most polluted place on earth. The primary and most important stakeholders in the state of environment of that valley are undoubtedly the inhabitants of the area. All other stakeholders, including the government, industrialists, economists and environmentalists have secondary importance and therefore must have lesser influence in the fate of the valley. Utilitarian approach ignores this distinction and bases its calculation solely on the principle of greatest happiness. So we must give equal importance to all primary and secondary stakeholders in this analysis.

The situation offers these alternative courses of action.

- 1) Ignore the disastrous environmental damage and thus health hazards of inhabitants in the area and continue polluting or
- 2) arrange for removal of inhabitants from the area and continue to operate factories thus ignoring the pollution and environmental damage or

3) Invest in greener technologies to reduce pollution, requiring huge capital injection without much return to industrialists in tangible, cash terms.

The second alternative will cause betterment of inhabitants, but will not cause them to be happy. Although a rational alternative, utilitarianism fails to choose this option solely because it has no appeal in terms of happiness. Inhabitants will have job concerns; industrialists will lose easily accessible labor, and environmentalists will continue to criticize pollution. In the first scenario, we know that the inhabitants are not concerned by their health vulnerability and actually advocate the presence of polluting industry for the sake of sustaining income.

This may be due to lack of awareness about the conditions they are surviving under. So, their happiness will be caused by the continuation of industry, although this happiness is not synonymous to actual betterment. This scenario satisfies the need of industrialists and economists too, leaving only the environmentalists and to a lesser degree government in an unhappy state.

The third alternative will only cause happiness to environmentalists, with industrialists being very unhappy at investing in technologies that have no tangible return to them. Inhabitants will be better off, but their happiness is questionable.

A utilitarian will therefore advocate letting the state of affairs stay as they are. Generalizing this assessment, we must conclude that in a utilitarian perspective, through moving the polluting industries to third world countries in areas where inhabitants are only concerned about wages and

employment, we can cause most happiness. This approach only leaves environmentalists unhappy, developed populations will get their cleaner environment, with pollution moving to populations that prefer other basic needs.

### **Analysis of case 'Poverty and Pollution' using Virtue Theory**

Virtue theorist will not place his argument based on right or wrong course of action in this situation. Neither will he consider the consequences of alternative courses of actions on the stakeholders. A virtue theorist will base his argument on the values of human society and determine the value appearing to be the most virtuous will be preferred. In this case, which human virtues and goals are colliding? Here the virtues of pursuit of progress, development, a healthy and rewarding human body, and the clean environment we live in are at stake.

Progress is the fundamental goal of all human endeavors. It requires compromises and sometimes sacrifices of other desires. These sacrifices include the luxury of spending time doing things we enjoy rather than working regularly to make our lives better. Progress also demands utilization of natural resources to convert them into useful products, thus taking from Mother Nature. The cost of giving back to Mother Nature in order to sustain development and progress must be evaluated against the cost of depleting resources. Similarly, finding alternatives to polluting industries has the potential to slow down our pace of progress, and sometimes the alternatives to pollution that we find do not justify the sheer costs of implementing them.

The argument is further compounded by the fact that the developed nations have polluted the environment for decades without much consideration to the harmful affects. Now that we understand the damage we have caused, is it fair to ask still developing nations to sacrifice their progress pace so that the world can address the damages to the environment that are mainly theresponsibilityof developed, not developing nations?

The virtue theorist must therefore find a balance between progress and the value of human health. To him, it is immoral to let poor populations suffer damages caused by pollution. If alternatives exist, they must be explored. A virtue theorist cannot place different values on different human lives as the economist Lawrence Summers so crudely does.

We are informed in the update to the case that due to aroused population and government support, pollution was successfully brought down to acceptable levels. This is more in line with the standpoint of a virtue theorist who will advocate rational steps to be taken for the most virtuous scenario to prevail. Therefore, in this case, a harmonious balance between the virtues of progress, environmental care, and healthy life was successfully achieved in the end.

### References

Warburton, Nigel. *Philosophy- The Basics* . 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2003. 48-57. Print.