

The philosophy of utilitarianism philosophy essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This paper will critically analyze Utilitarianism. The philosophy of Utilitarianism focuses on the overall outcome or result of an action. It is believed that this will manifest a greater happiness and moral benefit for society. However, Utilitarianism denies credibility to the intent behind the action but rather the end result or overall outcome. This principle was argued by philosopher John Stuart Mill. In direct opposition to the principles of Utilitarianism, lies the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant argues that there must be honorable intentions within an individual to manifest a greater outcome or action within society. I intend to argue that Utilitarianism is the most beneficial and influential of the two perspectives.

To summarize Immanuel Kant's perspective, he argues that the individual plays a highly important role in the overall happiness or virtue of society. Yet in order to reach the ultimate result or outcome, there are certain characteristics necessary to accomplish this task. In *The Good Will and the Categorical Imperative*, Kant refers to the materialistic pleasures of society as "gifts of fortune." He stresses the importance of "good will" as a means to balance out our societal mistakes or immorality. Kant states that good will, "corrects the influence of these on the mind and, in so doing, also corrects the whole principle of action and brings it into conformity with universal ends," (Kant, Immanuel. "The Good Will and the Categorical Imperative". *The Good Will*. (1998). 591). He further stresses that duty plays a role in furthering the overall outcome of an action. However, the morality behind an action is the manifestation of the initial principle behind the action. He states, "the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it and so too does not lie in any principle of action that needs

to borrow its motive from the expected effect” (Kant, Immanuel. “ The Good Will and the Categorical Imperative”. The Good Will. (1998). 592).

To summarize John Stuart Mill’s Utilitarian perspective, he argues that there is no validity or pertinence in the inclusion of intent. The most important component is the overall outcome. To obtain true happiness or virtue, there must exist a collective amount of virtuous acts. This would benefit society as a whole. In Utilitarianism, Mill argues that honorable or desirable intentions have little bearing or influence on the ultimate action. There are instances when an individual knows that the ultimate outcome will be significant and morally beneficial, but still choose the opposite path. Kant states that men, “ pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good” (Mill, John S. “ Utilitarianism” Chapter 2. What Utilitarianism Is. (1863). 602). He further stresses what society might experience if the “ Greatest happiness Principle” was in effect. Mill exclaims that this “ is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality,” (Mill, John S. “ Utilitarianism” Chapter 2. What Utilitarianism Is. (1863). 603). Mill went on to argue that in order to have a primary moral principle, there should also be an important set of principles to use it towards. Mill states, “ Whatever we adopt as the fundamental principle of morality, we require subordinate principles to apply it by,” (Mill, John S. “ Utilitarianism” Chapter 2. What Utilitarianism Is. (1863). 609). He concludes his argument by acknowledging that it is difficult to prove morality, and rejects Kant’s position that morality entirely rests with intention. Mill states, “ to consider the rules of morality as improvable is one thing; to pass over the intermediate generalizations

entirely, and endeavor to test each individual action directly by the first principle is another," (Mill, John S. "Utilitarianism" Chapter 2. What Utilitarianism Is. (1863). 609).

In the article called, "The Ends of the Means? Kantian Ethics Vs. Utilitarianism," Erin Terrall summarizes both perspectives. Terrall makes a valuable point when stating, "A Utilitarian aspect could be more appropriate for one situation; while a Kantian perspective might be better for another. If one keeps a working knowledge of both philosophies, one can look at life with a broader view, and not get too firmly entrenched in one set of beliefs," (Terrall, Erin. "The Ends of the Means? Kantian Ethics Vs. Utilitarianism." (2007). It is evident that both perspectives are highly influential. There are those that spend their lives trying to improve their moral character, in order to insure a greater amount of happiness for themselves and others. Then there are those that ultimately focus on making the most profound impact possible, to pacify the need of a virtuous society. However, when both are in balance, the results can be profound for society as a whole. For example, despite the infestation of racism in the United States of America during the 1950's and 60's, Martin Luther King intended to change the tide of erroneous beliefs. He intended to and set out to educate all men on equality. Very few people could deny that he was a man driven by honorable characteristics and good will. He was compelled by his duty to mankind. His efforts to unite this nation ultimately served a greater purpose for all mankind. His outcome was irrefutably in harmony with his intent. It would be absurd to deny his influence on the virtue of society. His individual efforts made ripples in the

pond of society and realigned the moral compass. So it is indeed possible that the two perspectives can be profound when they coincide.

Although they are both pertinent to the overall virtue of society, I would have to give greater credibility to Utilitarianism. If Martin Luther King Jr. lacked the courage to take a stand for what was right, would African Americans have been given the right to vote in 1965? As painful as it is to say, I highly doubt it. If Martin Luther King Jr. was merely a man of many honorable intentions, would we give him a national holiday? More than likely, not. There were a multitude of people that had the most honorable of intentions, but none as great of an impact as he. This is not to discredit those who also fought for equal rights. However, no one can deny that Martin Luther King Jr. was in the forefront of this battle. The manifestation of this outcome evolved into a greater respect and understanding of all mankind, regardless of the color of their skin. This propelled and influenced even more significant outcomes of equality and civil rights in the United States. Our virtue is still a work in progress, but it is indeed progressing. The outcome will ultimately influence a greater degree of intent and actions. If John Stuart Mill's Utilitarian perspective is as pertinent as I and he argues that it is, then idealistically, we are well on our way to living a life that is overflowing with virtue and widespread happiness.

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