

Comparison between utilitarianism and idealism essay sample



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Utopia Would Be a Mix of Philosophical Theories?

The two theories that will be compared and contrasted in this essay are Plato's Idealism and Mill & Bentham's Utilitarianism. I chose these two theories because, to me, they are the ones that seem to be the most realistic and interesting. The way to get from the level of the "is" to the level of the "ought" of the Philosophers in these theories are the two bests. In this essay, it will be shown that the two theories are not so different in their relation between the level of the "is" and the level of the "ought"; it will be shown that Idealism would be a better theory for a society with highly intellectual people, and that a combination of these theory would be the best way for our society to evolve from the level of the "is" to the level of the "ought".

Plato's way to go from the "is" to the "ought" is socratic questioning. He says that we should question ourselves on whether the moral views we have are ideal or not. He also says that the way of looking at things we have is wrong because all men are not the same, and so they do not have the same opinion of things. Part of his theory says that to get to true virtue (ideal moral views) we have to trim down all the false moral views we have and get to the basic, timeless, and unchanging patterns of the Good. With those ideal moral views we would be able to mirror the Good. Examples of false ideal moral views for Plato are seeking for selfish pleasures such as food, sex, and power.

For Utilitarians, the way to get from the level of the "is" to the level of the "ought" is to reward or sanction a person for his or her actions. In Utilitarianism people should choose actions that are the most "utile" for them but also for

society. In other words they should choose the most pleasant and less painful actions and consequences for the greatest number of people. The degree of utility (degree of pleasure) is determined by what is called “felicific calculus”. This pleasure calculator is composed of different criteria that characterise the pleasure provided by a certain action. They are intensity, duration, certainty, proximity, fecundity, and purity. These characteristics of pleasure are calculated for one’s self and for the population that his or her action concerns. If an action is said to have a fairly good utility to one but a very big disutility to society, it is said to be an immoral action. In that sense selfish pleasures are immoral.

In these two theories, the socratic questioning and the felicific calculus almost play the same role in the way that the result (chosen action) should be the same if one is calculating the utility or one is referring to socratic questioning to take a decision. The socratic questioning of Idealism brings the person at the door of the right moral views by trimming all the layers of appearances and opinions over a concept. Even if one is not seeking those ideal moral views the felicific calculus should take one to the same ideal moral views if it is well performed. In that sense these two theories are the same because they give the same final result. But one of the theories seems harder to realize because everyone has to go through a long process that not every individual wants to perform or is able to perform. This theory is Idealism. On the other hand, in Utilitarianism a scale can be made out to lead people in the right way (and that scale is in fact present in our society). These theories are different in the sense that Utilitarianism is easier for a society to perform well. To give rewards and punishments, society needs an

authority outside the person who acts; this is why there are governments, theocracies and social opinions to guide people. Utilitarianism is the most realistic because people do not have to think about what is right or wrong, they only have to follow the guides (rewards/sanctions).

The society we live in is clearly Utilitarian. The many rewards (salary, respect, etc.) and sanctions (prison, school failure, etc.) reveal it. Everything works in function of rewards and sanctions. It implies that we only have to follow the rules given and no sanctions should be given to us. If our society was Idealist, it would imply that we would have to think and do the Socratic questioning at each dilemma we have. This is impossible because not everybody is intelligent enough to do so, and most of the people would not be willing to go through that process.

There is a danger in having a Utilitarian society. We just have to think of the United-States with the war they made to Iraq. I believe that the population of that country trusted the felicific calculus scale (which was "written" by the government) too much, because most of the population (of the USA, of course...) believed that war in Iraq was a good thing. In that case the scale of that population was wrong because it did not care enough about what Iraqians really wanted. If that dilemma had been well calculated, I am sure that they would let Iraqians rebuild their country all alone and stop occupying the country. An Idealist society would take the time and think about that situation. They would have come to the conclusion that this war was not fair and they would have wanted to wait for real proofs of the presence of massive destruction arms before bombarding Iraq. Another problem that Utilitarianism has raised is the sexual inequality.

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I believe that the situation we are in is caused by an error in the scale of the felicific calculus. The authority in place decided very long ago that women were inferior, and then nobody really thought about it (or had the courage to change things) until the first feminists movements. With an Idealistic society that problem would never had occurred because Idealists always ask themselves if what they do is right. They would have understood long ago that this situation is completely wrong.

The best way to go from the level of the “ is” to the level of the “ ought” in our society would be to combine these two theories. First, Idealism should be used by a group of intellectuals to create a scale that would be used in felicific calculus. Then, felicific calculus should be used by the population. The scale from the felicific calculus should be adjusted as time goes on so that it evolves well with the new technological, economical and historical facts. But this is only an utopic idea because nobody would be able to create and maintain a “ fair” felicific calculus scale since nobody can totally get to the basic principles of morality.