

TELEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ETHICS

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Human beings are called moral because they are subject to judgment of right and wrong; we can pass moral judgment of right and wrong on what they do in and around human society. Non-human beings like animals and insects are called non-moral because moral judgment of right and wrong are irrelevant to them. The same analysis also applies to the term “ethical”. Its antonym may be either “unethical” or “non-ethical” depending upon its use. The terms “moral” and “ethics”, however, are employed interchangeably in the philosophical discourse.

Ethics as a branch of philosophy deals with what is right and good; and other correlated concepts like duty, obligation, ought, value, virtue relating to human conducts. In 20th century philosophy, distinction is made between ethics and meta-ethics. “Ethics” is taken to be normative ethics which aims at presenting a moral system of norms, principles, rules, judgments of values, obligations, duties, virtues and rights by arranging them systematically in hierarchal ordering by assuming certain primitive concepts and fundamental postulates. It prescribes the adoption of a certain way of life as morally the best life. To accept a moral system of thoughts means to commit oneself to leading or adopting the way of life it prescribes and recommends. “Meta-ethics”, on the other hand, is taken to be a philosophical analysis which aims at understanding and explaining what is involved in doing ethics or ethical evaluation. Meta-ethics is a critical reflection on ethics. Meta-ethics in relation to ethics is a second-order of enquiry and ethics in relation to meta-ethics is called a first-order of enquiry because ethics aims at presenting a moral system of values, while meta-ethics is a reflection on it. Ethics is generally characterized as theoretical ethics and the application of theoretical concepts, values and principles to specific context or realm is characterized as applied ethics. Applied ethics is, thus, a contextual ethics. The realms falling within the applied ethics include medical ethics, legal ethics, environmental ethics,

computer ethics, media ethics, business ethics, sportsmanship ethics, nano-ethics and many more. Moral considerations are related to human's motive, intention, attitude and behavior with his fellow beings and with the environment. The question of morality always arises within the context of social reference.

There are different ethical theories or approaches such as teleological, deontological, contractarian and virtue-ethics. Each particular ethical theory deals with various ethical issues in society. The teleological view of morality links the idea of right action with the idea of consequence and the idea of consequence with the idea of good. It considers good as a central concept and defines other correlated concepts such as right, obligation, ought and duty in terms of it. Utilitarianism of all varieties is a teleological theory of ethics. It connects the idea of right action with the idea of general happiness. Ethical egoism is also a teleological theory. It connects the idea of right action with the idea of self-interest. Teleological theories are, thus, value-based theories. The deontological view of morality connects the idea of right action with the idea of duty and considers duty as the supreme concept. Virtue-ethics propounds none of these views of morality. It connects the idea of right action with the idea of the conduct of virtuous person, the one who exercises virtues in practice. The contractarian view of morality defines right action in terms of the rules of contract. This paper is a cursory over Utilitarianism with an intention to identify as to how this theory corroborates with various ethical and social issues.

The Utilitarian approach can be referred to as a consequentiality approach. The term 'Utilitarianism' was coined by Jeremy Bentham which was later refined by John Stuart Mill. Both Bentham and J.S. Mill were famous philosophers whose writings have shown their keen interest in legal and social reforms. They used the utilitarian standard 'greatest happiness of the greatest numbers' in assessing and counteracting the social and political institutions of their time with strong vigor and determination, and consequent

upon which utilitarianism has been associated with social improvement. The roots of the modern version can be traced back to the Epicurean school in the fourth century B.C.

The basic assumption of utilitarianism is that human beings seek happiness and general happiness is the supreme good. Actions are right to the extent they produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Utilitarianism is a teleological approach which solely emphasizes on general happiness as the foundation and objective goal of all human moral action. It maintains that consequences alone determine the rightness and wrongness of our moral action. Utilitarianism is often represented as having two types, namely, act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. Act-utilitarianism is a simpler approach which provides an easy decision procedure, for example, an action is right if and only if it produces the greatest amount of pleasure over pain for greatest number. Act-utilitarianism requires that each action should be examined against the pleasure-pain test. Rule-utilitarianism, on the other hand, gives more emphasize on the rules of morality and to role obligations, e.g., an action is right if and only if it conforms to a set of rules the general acceptance of which would bring the greatest balance of pleasure over pain for greatest number. Rule-utilitarianism requires that moral rules that claim to guide classes of actions should be examined against the pleasure-pain test. Thus, those rules are to be preferred which will lead to the greatest pleasure, all things considered. Although there are many subtleties to these two approaches the basic component that unites them is the requirement that maximum pleasure be produced. The bases of Utilitarianism are grounded on three important tenets.

1. Rightness and wrongness of actions are solely based on their consequences.
2. In calculating the consequences the one that gives greatest happiness of the greatest number is what matters most ethically.

3. In calculating pleasure or happiness, each individual counts for one and no one for more than one. Each individual's happiness is equally importantly counted as anyone else's.

In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*¹ Bentham begins with the claim that "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure."² "It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand, the standard of right and wrong; and on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In other words, many may pretend to abjure their empire, but in reality he will remain subject to all it all the while... the principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law."³ He asserts that pain and pleasure are the only motivators, telling humans what to do in their lives, both personally and morally. Bentham believes that a society in which an individual endeavored to maximize his own happiness would be far better off than in one in which he had to maximize the happiness of others. Bentham was motivated by the idea that "Public Good" ought to be the object of the legislator: General Utility ought to be the foundation of moral reasoning. Good and bad acts can be evaluated according to him in terms of the quantities of pleasure and pain. To him, all the significant differences among pleasures are quantitative only; pleasure and pain is nothing more than the types of sensations which vary only in quantity, intensity and duration.

According to Bentham, the right course of action from an ethical perspective would be to choose the one that produces the greatest amount of happiness because in his view utility alone is the ultimate measure of right and

¹ Bentham, J., (1948) *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Hafner, New York, p.1

² *Ibid.*, p.1

³ *Ibid.*, p.1

wrong and it is that determines which actions/policies/decisions are right. By “the principle of utility” Bentham means “the principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; or what is the same thing in other words, to oppose that happiness.”⁴ What seems important for him is the prospect of utility that can surpass the opposite of happiness because in the ultimate analysis it is the consequent, that is, the amount of happiness that determines the moral worthiness of the action. As is generally well acquainted, an action is right if it produces the maximum amount of happiness over pain because utilitarianism allows individual agents to have moral preferences and to act in the interest of others, when action toward others generates a net utility benefit for the individual.

Although John Stuart Mill departs from Bentham’s conception that all significant differences among pleasures are quantitative; he accepts in principle his doctrines regarding the basic role of pleasures and pains in morality. Mill believes that significant differences among pleasures are qualitative. According to him, human beings are capable of intellectual and moral pleasures which are superior to the sensuous or the physical ones. Based on this postulate, Mill states that happiness is of two types: higher and lower. The higher type, that is, mental pleasure or happiness is more difficult to attain and hence more rewarding. His famous dictum is: “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig is of a different opinion it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party in comparison knows both sides.”⁵ He states that every human action has three aspects, namely, the moral aspect of right and wrong, the aesthetic aspect and the sympathetic aspect of its liveableness. Thus, it clearly indicates that the higher

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2

⁵ Mill, J. S., (1957) *Utilitarianism*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, p. 10

pleasures have a greater degree of utility for him than the lower pleasures, because those who have experienced both will give up the lower for the higher.

Mill states: “Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”⁶ What is significantly taken into account as far as the action is concerned is the amount of happiness that surpasses the proportion of the reverse, that is, the proportion of pain. In other words, pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends. According to the greatest happiness principle, the ultimate end whether we are considering for our own personal good or that of other people is the surplus of happiness both in terms of quantity and quality over pain and suffering. The principle of utility which has been stated above is not confined to only a few individuals but rather it applies to every individual without exception because each individual’s welfare is equally important and therefore the right actions are those actions which produce the greatest happiness of all the concerned. Mill rightly observes: “... the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conducts, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.”⁷

What is required for our action to be ethically right is to see whether the consequent gives maximum happiness on the Mill’s account. The result of the action is what matters in the consequentiality approach. Utilitarian contends that the significant basis of an act is the amount of happiness or evil it produces. From the utilitarian perspective, a good man is the one who strives to maximize the sum total of happiness for the greatest number. The utility of any policies or actions should be evaluated on the basis of the benefits derived from it. In any situation the right policies or actions are the ones that produce

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16

the greatest net profits or the lowest net cost. However, it is to be noted here that by maintaining the principle of greatest happiness for the greatest number Utilitarianism does not mean in any way that the right action is the one that produces the most utility to the person performing the action but rather the action is right if it produces the most utility for all persons effected by the action.

A critical reflection shows that the utilitarian approach is not satisfactory because of these reasons. Though, utilitarianism is widely referred to as one of the best ethical theories, there are some difficulties in subscribing the approach as a sole method for moral decision-making. First, the fiercest criticism is the uncertainty of its domain. It emphasizes on the greatest happiness but the problem here is whose happiness is to count in designing policies to maximize the greatest happiness?⁸ There are different groups of people living in a society with varied diversities. Smart writes: “Perhaps strictly in it and at a particular moment, a contented sheep is as good as a contented philosopher. However it is hard to agree to this. If we did we should have to agree that the human population ought ideally to be reduced by contraceptive methods and the sheep population more than correspondingly increased. Perhaps just so many humans should be left as could keep innumerable millions of placid sheep in contented idleness and immunity from depredations by ferocious animals. Indeed if a contented sheep is as good as a contented idiot, then a contented fish is as good as a contented sheep, and a contented beetle is as good as a contented fish. Where shall we stop?”⁹ Though Smart attempted to address the problem of whose happiness to be counted, he too ended with an interrogative note, which indicates that the issue of whose happiness is to be counted is uncertain. If such is the basis of the utilitarian principle, it cannot be relied upon. Because in business activities,

⁸ Posner, A. R, ‘Some Problems of Utilitarianism’ *Perspectives in Business Ethics* Laura P. Hartman & Abha Chatterjee (edit. , 3rd edition, Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Limited, New Delhi, 2005, p. 16

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16

utilitarian calculation requires that we assign values to the benefits and harms resulting from our actions and compare them with the benefits and harms that might result from other actions. In doing so, what is morally right seems to exclude the duties and autonomy of minorities. By demanding the highest maximization of values, consequentialism appears to impose unlimited moral sacrifices on the part of the minorities which perhaps may lead to a kind of violation of the principle of justice to the minorities and at the same time violate moral integrity of the minorities. Therefore, measuring and comparing the values of certain benefits and costs always involve violation of moral rights of individual.

The second problem is centered on the issues encountered when we try to measure and compare the utility. How can the utilities of different actions of different individuals be measured and compared? There seems to be no measuring rod as far as the utilities of different actions pertaining to different individuals are concerned. There is no accurate criterion for measuring the degree of satisfaction of one individual against the degree of satisfaction of another and hence no objective basis.

The third problem is that utilitarianism fails to take into account the considerations of justice. Mill observes: "The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not... (one's) own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator."¹⁰ Though Mill talks about happiness not only of oneself but that of all concerned, and yet the claim seems to be indefensible because in the ultimate analysis the action is to be evaluated with reference to its consequences. Therefore, while taking moral decisions in consonant with fairness and justice, utilitarianism fails to be relied upon as the sole principle for guiding our decisions in spite of all its positive contribution.

¹⁰ Mill, J. S., (1957) *Utilitarianism*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, p. 16