

A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO THE CONCEPTS OF UTILITARIANISM AND EGOISM:

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ABSTRACT

The issue of human act has been a perennial issue. Since man is a social animal who is by nature destined to dwell in group if not gregarious; it is very expedient, therefore to have man's actions scrutinised and guarded as to facilitate relationship with fellowmen. However, in constructing a moral system necessarily engendered the need to decide on important questions as regards the condition for right and wrong actions; which is to be counted morally and the relevance of the rules to the assessment of actions. In so doing, the tendency is possibly to divide teleological theories into egoistic and utilitarian theories depending on the account of the consequences that is taken. Hence, the researcher primarily focuses on exploring the egoism and utilitarianism as theories and then deciphering what could have informed the formation of such principles. The result finding been that every single person popularly and assiduously desires and seeks for pleasure. To achieve the purpose of the study, the researcher employed simply the methodological approach of philosophical inquiry.

KEYWORDS: Utilitarianism, Egoism, Human action, Consequence, Rule.

General Introduction

In constructing a moral system, there is a necessity to decide on some salient questions concerning the condition for right and wrong actions which is to be counted morally and the relevance of rules to the assessment of actions. Moral principles are what S. Chukwujekwu defined as the "guides of human conduct, indicating certain things or certain ways of behavioral which should be adopted" (Chukwujekwu; 2007). Normative ethical theories are generally distinguished on the basis of their response to these questions. Normative theory implies that the theory is prescriptive, making claims about how people ought to act and preserving argument to justify certain rules about human actions.

This normative theory is classified as either teleological or deontological. The former is sometimes called Consequentialist theories and the latter non-consequentialist theories. Consequentialist theories argued that what counts morally is the consequences of actions or rules. That is what is considered is how much good is brought about by behaviour. Non-consequentialist theories are the other way round.

It is, therefore, common to divide teleological theories into egoistic and utilitarian theories depending on the consequences they take into account. Hence, in this work we are going to examine each of these closely and then compare them to discover their similarities and differences.

Egoism

The term egoism is a derivative of a Latin word "ego" meaning "I". Egoism is, therefore, a theory that maintains that it is only the self interest that matters. The rightness of action in the light of egoistic theory is a function solely of consequences for oneself (Ashmore; 1987). This theory holds that whenever a person does anything, he does it only because he has seen that somehow either directly or indirectly, either immediately or in the future, he will derive some benefits for himself from it. Aristotle was quoted to have rightly observes in contra-distinction that:

... is not only desire to know in order to do or make something with the knowledge we get from it but there is in us a natural desire to know certain kinds of things simply for the sake of knowing or acquiring knowledge (Stumpf & Fieser; 2008)

He is meaningfully aware that man naturally has intrinsic aptitude to knowledge. Hence, many actions of man may not necessarily be for his ulterior motives, but may be primarily performed for their own sake.

For the egoists, therefore, man is made in such a way that he cannot help seeking his interest in all his actions. For egoistic theory, therefore:

My own greatest happiness is the only good thing there is: my actions can only be good as a means in so far as they help to win me this (Moore;1968).

Kant, as quoted by Furrow did fancy this ethical principle as he Kant is determiningly concerned with the moral stability. For him, "if what is right or wrong differs from person to person, culture to culture, or situation to situation, social life will lack the trust and intelligibility necessary for us to flourish" (Furrow; 2005).

It is an ethical principle that is not much cherished by the Contemporary thinkers. It was held mainly in the 17th and 18th centuries by the English hedonists. Egoism was at the bottom of Hobbes' ethics.

Invariably, under egoism, there are two versions. These versions are: the psychological egoism and the ethical egoism.

Psychological Egoism

Psychological egoism is a version that holds that man is by nature selfish and self-serving. Every man is always seeking for his own interest in all his activities. Hobbes, a psychological egoist went as far as saying that when a man gives alms to a beggar, he does so because he wants some personal satisfaction that he derives from it. This implies that behind every human action is always a selfish motive which prompts it and which acts as its force.

Further still, there is within this version two more subdivisions: strong and weak egoism. Strong version is that which states that men always act exclusively from their interest for self since they have been conditioned to do so. This form, thereby argues that people act selfishly because they can not do otherwise. The weak version, on its own side states that people generally act exclusively selfish out of concern about the consequences to themselves.

At a closer examination of strong version of egoism, which asserts that man is by nature selfish and self-serving animal, we may conclude that there is nothing morally wrong with selfishness since man is so by nature and that no man can change his nature. But this is not true since it would be impossible not to be altruistic. Both terms are polar concepts since accepting one implies denying the other. For the mere fact that people do sometimes perform actions entirely for the benefit of the other people is a clear manifestation that the theory of strong version psychological egoism has serious lacuna or is completely unfounded. The obvious reality is that man by nature has the potentialities of both selfishness and altruism. Consequently, man is by nature both individual and as well social. Whether an individual person becomes selfish or altruistic is dependent on which of the potentialities that he develops.

Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoism on its side is a theory that prescribes how people ought to act. It is a normative theory. It entails the idea that each single individual supposed to go after his or her own selfish interest exclusively (Rachels; 1995). It is a very radical view that one's only duty is to promote one's own interest. In this regard, therefore, there is only one ultimate principle that sum up all of one's natural duties and obligations (Rachels; 1995).

One thing that is to be noted about this theory is, that it does not prevent anyone from carrying actions that will be of benefit to others. Instead, in many cases, one's interest coincides with the interest of others. Hence, in benefiting oneself, therefore, one may be aiding others willy-nilly. Putting the other way round, helping other people may be an effective and efficacious means of benefitting oneself (Rachels; 1995). This theory does not in any way forbid these actions. Obviously, they may even be demanded instead. However, the theory opines that in such cases the help rendered to others is not what determines the rightness of an act. What renders an act right is instead the fact that it is to one's own advantage. Some philosophers rejected this theory on the ground that it does not provide solution for conflicting interests. Secondly, the theory leads to logical inconsistency; that is logical contradictions. Finally, the theory assigned to each person a greater importance to their own interests than the common interests of all.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the doctrine that states that an action is right so long as it leads to the production of greater happiness for the greatest number. The essence of this theory as a philosophical theory is that it lays stress upon the effects which actions have. When an action gives an excessive beneficial effect over harmful ones, then the action is right, otherwise it is wrong. The fundamental point here is that the consequences of a particular action determines its rightness or wrongness and not the motive from which it is performed.

One of the ardent proponents of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, maintains that pleasure is the only thing desirable and, hence, the only thing people should hustle to achieve. He, therefore, exerted much effort in identifying and distinguishing four sources from which emanate pleasure and pain. These sources, he called:

the physical, the political, the moral and the religious. Bentham considered these four sources as sanctions since according to him;

... the pleasure and pain belonging to each of them are capable of giving a binding force to any law or rule of conduct (Stumpf;1994).

In this regard, therefore, sanction is understood as something that tends to give a man the audacity to make the conclusion that his own individual greatest happiness necessarily coincides with the greatest happiness of others. Consequently, this is possible through the multiplication of this happiness on the situation of happiness of others. Hence, the happiness of one is bound to decrease when the happiness of others is not intended or attained.

Distinguishing Happiness and Pleasure

We have been using these two terms: happiness and pleasure to mean the same thing. However, a closer look at them will make one to observe that one of the two concepts has deeper meaning than the other. One is regarded as consisting in the other. Hence, the necessity to expose both as to be able to distinguish them. This is because many have mistakenly misplaced happiness with pleasure.

Happiness

The concept of happiness has been a source of puzzlement in philosophy for centuries. Many philosophers have taken it to be the barometer for measuring morality of an action. Others, however, regard it as a means to an end. Nonetheless, all of them agreed that every single person is always in search of happiness either immediately or remotely, directly or indirectly. Without exception, there is only one thing that everyone wants and relentlessly looking for. This is no other thing than happiness. We do apply the word over and beyond its linguistic origin and the use of common speech. In our every day life, we do hear people ask or say to their friends or neighbours: are you happy at all? Or, why are you not happy?

Naturally, man seems to be an insatiable being. The satisfaction of one desire opens or triggers off another. This continues 'ad infinitum' until man's life on earth is completed. Meanwhile, to the great question: what moves desire? John Locke thinks that one answer is happiness. Paschal rightly observed that:

Man wishes to be happy and wishes to be happy and cannot wish not to be so (Hutchins; 1952).

So, all that man toils for under the sun (day in day out) all the days of his life is for the sole achievement of this great happiness. But Foot believes that happiness is a continuum as it is a lifetime process. One swallow, according to him, makes no spring (Foot; 2001).

Dictionary of Philosophy defines happiness as "eudaemonia" a Greek word meaning the final goal, the highest good of man - a good that gives true meaning to man's life (Brugger & Baker; 1972). It is a goal that one must strenuously strive to attain. It is a unique and intrinsic desire of all normal functioning human being. Without this, life is not worth living. Without it, life becomes meaningless, boring and arduous.

Happiness, therefore, is the conscious state of satisfaction or fulfillment accompanying the possession of or being in communion with good (Conslaves; 1972). It is a subjective condition entailing the existence of desire

in oneself, the conscious of the existence of the desire, the actual satisfaction of the desire and the consciousness that desire is being satisfied (Conslaves; 1972). It was Aristotle who opined that happiness is the activity of the soul in accord with perfect virtue. He saw it as the end of life. Epicurus defined it in terms of prudence, the more prudent one is in life, the happier one is.

More so, happiness is what we are all out for though along the line, some find themselves within the wrong track in an attempt to reach the end. But in all, they are still pursuing their own happiness. To this Oesterel confirms that the ultimate end is happiness. He writes thus:

Everybody agrees that is the sense that everyone in fact wills happiness above everything etc.
Every human being desire his complete well being (Oesterel; 1957).

Pleasure

In the search for something that might make life satisfying, the most obvious candidate is pleasure. This term appears mostly in ethical discussions. The concept pleasure is from the Greek word "hedone" which means delight or enjoyment. This, therefore, justifies why pleasure is sometimes used to refer to a certain hedonic quality or experience and sometimes as a name for experience which causes that quality.

Nobody can deny the fact that naturally man is a pleasure-seeking social being. He is externally guided by the quest for the betterment of his being. That is why he often embarks on actions that will produce pleasure for him. This might be the reason why Sigmund Freud opines that men do and should operate on a 'pleasure principle'. This pleasure has been advanced as man's final value and pain his final disvalue, that we seek one and shun the other (Reese; 1980).

Many philosophers took pleasure as the moral standard. According to them, therefore, pleasure is the only value that is worth seeking for itself. Thus, any action that produces pain is morally wrong. Some of these philosophers are Aristippus, Epicurus and Jeremy Bentham. Epicurus says that:

For we recognise pleasure as the first good innate in us and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance and to pleasure we return again (Stumpf; 1994).

He went further by distinguishing between kinds of pleasure, those that are natural and necessary, some natural but not necessary and some neither natural nor necessary. At this point, one may ask: if pleasure is the moral standard, what can we say about drives that are from immoral act such as adultery and incest. Hence, pleasure cannot be the moral standard since all pleasures are not of equal value.

Comparative analysis

Having seen what these two theories stand for, we now move into their comparative analysis. Looking at both, we can say that utilitarian principle is a well structured theory than egoism. Nevertheless, the question is which one is better? Is it better to produce the greatest happiness to the greatest people or is it better to maximise the happiness of the individual person? If we may say, in a perfect society one can possibly use both doctrines in conjunction. However, if one must decide on one or the other, then the possible option one may decide to choose is definitely utilitarianism. This is the case because utilitarianism is structured to make use of a subjective review rather than objective review as is the case with egoism. In egoism, it is argued that an essential fact about it is its social character. We need to relate to others not only in order to satisfy a compelling psychological inclination, but to create bonds of affection with others. Given this fact, therefore, it is possible

to establish that enlightened self-interest disposes us not to egoism, but to an ethical theory that incorporates the affiliate dimension of the self and that is utilitarianism.

As we have equally seen from the definition pleasure and happiness which the basis for egoistic and utilitarian theories, many thinkers and philosophers are confusing pleasure with happiness. This should not be so in actual case. Mostly the people who are guilty of this are the early utilitarian philosophers. They interchange pleasure and happiness as if they were two names of one and the same thing. But pleasure and happiness are in fact not the same thing. The differences are as follows:

Pleasure can be derived from one single activity but happiness comes from series of activities.

There are some activities that can give us pleasure and at the same time will make us very unhappy. Take the case of sexual intercourse between unmarried people; it is a momentary pleasure or satisfaction that is often accompanied with an everlasting shame and unforgettable disgrace. From this we can conclude that pleasure is transitory. It is of a very short time or duration. Happiness on the other hand lasts longer duration and have a more permanent state of mind.

People can sought and obtain pleasure directly and immediately by performing certain activities that give pleasure, but it is not so in terms of happiness. Such activities that yield pleasure include drinking, smoking, eating, sporting and a host of other related activities. The performance of such action does not necessarily make one happy. A person may enjoy many pleasures and yet be unhappy.

Having considered the above instances, we can then say that pleasure and happiness are not the same thing and can never be the same. To equate the two concepts is erroneous. Omoregbe, therefore, rightly points out that:

A lot of people also erroneously equate happiness with pleasure. They think that more pleasure one enjoys the happier he becomes and therefore seek happiness through excessive pleasure. But pleasure is not happiness (Omoregbe,; 1991).

Finally, happiness could be said to be closely linked with peace of mind and moral rectitude. These two things are necessary for happiness. Hence, any person that has no peace of mind, who experiences remorse of conscience and has no moral rectitude, cannot be happy even if he indulges in many pleasures. Pleasure and happiness should not be equated. This is because pleasure is at the superficial level while happiness is at the root of man's life. Little wonder many philosophers regard happiness as consisting in one or combination of the three goods: wisdom, virtue and pleasure.

Conclusion

Both the concept of utilitarianism and egoism are basically focused on the actions that will produce the greatest happiness. However, utilitarianism is interested in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Egoism on the contrary is concentrated on the pleasure or happiness of the individual person. The two concepts seemingly contradict one another. Nevertheless, on a closer examination, one may come to appreciate that the two concepts are nothing but two sides of one and the same coin. Seeking a common happiness does not necessarily contradict or hinders the pursuit of the happiness of the individual person. Instead, in the pursuit of what will benefit the majority of people, an individual is as well benefited. Putting it in the other way round, by helping other people, one might be equally benefiting oneself.

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