

Philosophers in Review

UTILITARIANISM: *Utilitarianism focuses on the effects of an action. The moral action is that which produces the greatest good for the greatest number. In other words, the happiness and general well-being of the majority should take priority over the individual. Utilitarianism is a theory which attempts to define the scope and freedom of individual liberty under state authority. Because it draws a line between the rights of the individual and the rights of others, utilitarianism is a form of justice.*

Jeremy Bentham

Bentham's basic assumption is that humans by nature avoid pain and seek pleasure. He argues that individual happiness is the supreme good. A person should act in a manner that provides happiness for the greatest number. In other words, happiness would be measure by a quantitative scale (measure happiness by amount or quantity). Those who commit crimes, then, should be punished by the quantity of unhappiness they create. Punishment must produce more in pain than pleasure gained by committing the crime.

Bentham is an "act utilitarian." Act utilitarians uphold two ideals: one, that the worth of an act should be judged according to its pleasant and unpleasant consequences; two, that a person should act in such a way that his act will promote the greatest good for the greatest number.

Critics argue that Bentham's philosophy has two major short comings. First, it ignores the distribution of happiness. Second, it ignores other important values that a state ought to consider.

John Stuart Mill

Mill believes that happiness is determined by the individual. In addition, he argues that no one individual can determine what will produce happiness for every individual. Thus, he believes that a democracy (which provides for maximum individual participation and creates an environment for the pursuit of happiness) is the best way to secure liberty (man's quest for his own good) and promote happiness. Thus, democracy is an avenue to provide individual happiness to the greatest number.

Unlike Bentham, Mill argues that happiness should be measured on a qualitative scale (consider the overall quality of life and happiness...not just the quantity of happiness). He is hoping, then, to produce a high quality of happiness for the greatest number of individuals.

To define the extent that an individual should be allowed to exercise his liberty, Mill refers to the "harm principle" which says that the only good reason for restricting a person's liberty is to prevent harm to others. Mill argues that punishment should only be used if it would lead to better consequences than non-punishment.

Mill is a "rule utilitarian." Rule utilitarians support three main ideas: one, that the moral worth of an act is judged according to the good or bad consequences that result from following a moral rule of conduct; two, that a person should follow a moral rule that brings more good consequences than another rule would; and three, that all moral rules which produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number should be obeyed.

Critics argue that every individual action has potential negative effects. Also, one could argue that by measuring happiness on a qualitative measure, Mill is no longer a true utilitarian promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE: Civil disobedience is the theory that one should break a law or rule in order to make society better. The person who practices civil disobedience believes that the society should be respect overall, but that some specific parts of it need to be changed. He respects the idea of the law or rule in general, but believes that a specific law or rule is unjust.

Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau believes that if a law or rule is unjust, civil disobedience is automatically justified. According to Thoreau, there are three components used to determine whether or not a law or rule is unjust: common sense, individualism, and supremacy of conscience. First, common sense is the belief that ideas should be examined and re-examined. Time honored ideas shouldn't be viewed as sacred. Second, individualism is important because morality is a matter of individual conscience. The state does not have a moral worth of its own—only what the people give it. It is the individual's obligation, then, to resist unjust laws and rules. Finally, supremacy of conscience is what individuals use to determine right from wrong.

Another important belief held by Thoreau is that if an individual decides to practice civil disobedience, he or she must be willing to accept the consequences of that decision. It does not matter whether the consequences are positive or negative, the individual must be willing to live with them.

Critics attack Thoreau by suggesting that individuals lack the courage needed to disobey when they should, that there is no clear standard of morality, that the individual is less important than the states, and that conscience is not the most important value.

John Rawls

Rawls uses civil disobedience to test his theory of justice. He argues that civil disobedience should be used when there is a conflict between having to comply with laws and defending liberties. Rawls believes that when this conflict arises one of two principles (which compose his theory of justice) has been broken: equal liberty or fairness. Equal liberty is the belief that everyone should be granted the same freedoms and rights to begin with. Fairness is the idea that these freedoms should be equally distributed to all persons. If a person had on a "veil of ignorance" and had to make a decision not knowing what social class he would be in, he would make a fair decision.

Unlike Thoreau, Rawls does not assume that civil disobedience is automatically justified. Rawls lists three conditions under which civil disobedience is permissible: one, it is limited to instances of substantial and clear injustice; two, it must be used as a last resort after all normal appeals within the system have been made (except in extreme cases); and three, the intent of civil disobedience must be balanced with the possible ill effects so that it won't endanger society.

NOTE: Martin Luther King and Ghandi also promoted the concept of civil disobedience. You might read up on their views of this philosophy.

SOCIAL CONTRACT: *The belief that a person enters into society to secure rights and/or protection (depending on the philosopher). The concept of a “social contract” represents the agreement between the individual and society. The “terms” of this contract differ between philosophers.*

John Locke—(Inalienable Rights)

Locke assumes that all men have certain “natural rights” that existed before society was created and that those rights are good in and of themselves. In the natural state (no government), however, men’s rights conflict and this conflict leads to war. As a result, men enter into society and form a social contract. He also assumes that since man senses the need for self-restraint, he is by nature good and rational.

The “natural rights” that are protected under Locke’s social contract are life, liberty, and property. Property, according to Locke, includes both material possessions and personal fulfillment. Property, then, is similar to the pursuit of happiness. To protect these rights, government is created. Government serves three purposes: one, it establishes laws; two, it acts as an authority and settles conflict; and three, it applies consistent justice.

According to Locke, government does not cause minority suppression. Rather, it enlarges liberty since, in the state of nature, freedom is limited by the conflicting rights of individuals. To achieve this end, government should promote justice, operate according to the majority rule, and promote equality.

Critics argue that there are two flaws with Lock’s idea of social contract. One, there is no proven instance where people first got together and gave their consent to the social contract. Second, people who were born under the government are not at liberty to create another one.

Thomas Hobbes—(Self Preservation)

Hobbes’ basic assumption about human nature is that people desire power and are willing to do whatever is necessary (in the absence of government) to get it. People are greedy and can act in destructive ways toward each other when there is no common power to keep them in line.

Hobbes argues that every person possesses the “natural right” (liberty) to act in whatever manner he believes is appropriate in order to preserve his life and the objects which improve his life. Additionally, Hobbes considers all people to be essentially equal.

Hobbes realizes that the state of equality and the freedom to act according to one’s own desires will cause a “natural condition” of living in constant fear. To gain a sense of security, people therefore naturally agree to develop a sovereign or government which Hobbes refers to as the “Leviathan”. Hobbes argues that a rational sovereign would only propose laws to regulated people when it was necessary for the common good. This concept becomes Hobbes’ theory of self-preservation.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau—(General Will)

Rousseau’s basic belief is that humans are good by nature but they become corrupt through social interaction. Specifically, Rousseau contends that “man is originally without sin, that he comes into the world a free being, and that he is equipped with the capacity for decency, public spiritedness, candor, and authentic rationality.”

This natural innocence, however, is corrupted as people interact with one another. Their natural differences in skill and ability give rise to artificial differences, particularly those of wealth and poverty. The artificial differences result in envy and contempt which lead to a breakdown of the community. Therefore, individuals can never return to the original state of goodness.

The answer to this problem, according to Rousseau, is not to remain in a savage state, but to construct a higher civilization. The social contract in Rousseau's world is meant to be a blueprint for this higher civilization. In order to achieve a higher state of civilization, all individuals must dedicate themselves solely to seeking the common good for all. This dedication is known as the "general will." Because the general will is grounded in a concern for the common good, it can never seek particular objects or interests. Likewise, benefits and burdens must be distributed equally to all citizens.

CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE: The belief that the means (the actions a person takes) justify the end (the result or outcome of the action). It is important to note, however, that the end is only justified if and when the means is moral.

Immanuel Kant

Kant believes that good will is the most important criterion to use when determining the morality of an act. An act cannot be considered moral if the original intention was not of a good will. According to Kant, there are two main ingredients that make up good will: reason and duty.

Acting from a sense of duty means that an individual acts the way he thinks he should, regardless of whether or not it makes him happy or produces any benefits. Furthermore, Kant argues that it is not enough to just do the right thing, an individual must also do it for the right reasons. For example, being kind to others just because it makes you feel good is not enough to make the kindness a moral act. You must be kind because it is your duty.

There are three basic elements to Kant's Categorical Imperative which are listed below:

1. Make sure the principle you act from could be applied to anyone, anytime, in any situation. This belief is known as Kant's "universal law".
2. Don't use other people (or yourself) as simply a means to an end. Treat every person as ends in and of themselves. In other words, Kant considers man to be an end in and of himself.
3. Always act as if you are a member of the "realm of ends".

NOTE: Kant's philosophy is somewhat confusing and often misused. If you are going to use him, you must study his philosophy thoroughly. If someone is using him against you, test their knowledge for misuse.

OBJECTIVISM: *The basic assumption that, to live a moral life, one should be concerned with his own interests. A person should take actions that will benefit himself first and foremost. As Rand would say, the individual must maintain a sense of “rational selfishness”.*

Ayn Rand

Rand would argue that the ultimate value or concern is survival. Man’s basic means for survival is reason, the process of thinking for one’s self, making one’s own decisions. Thus, that which is good furthers life and reason; that which destroys life and reason is evil.

Rand would argue that there are three basic values that one must live by in order to attain survival: reason (rationality), purpose (productiveness), and self-esteem (pride). Independence, honesty, integrity, and justice are all essential elements of reason. Using these qualities of reason, man becomes productive and accomplishes his goals. The outcome, then, is that man attains a sense of pride and esteem from his accomplishments. At this point, then, the individual’s life is worth sustaining. Throughout this process, man must live for himself, neither sacrificing himself to others or others to himself.

Ultimately, Rand would contend that the achievement of happiness is man’s highest moral purpose. However, a man should not choose his actions according to that emotion. The road to happiness may be filled with bitterness and sorrow.

HEIRARCHY OF HUMAN NEEDS: *The basic assumption that to live a full and happy life, an individual has five basic needs that must be met. Thos needs progress form the most vital and necessary (survival) to the idea (self-actualization).*

Abrahm Maslow

Maslow argues that all individuals, regardless or their culture or background, require the same basic needs and strive for the same ultimate goal: self-actualization (the condition of total happiness, or knowing that one has accomplished one’s goals and attained a sense of fulfillment). In order to reach a state of self-actualization, one must first attain the needs listed below. The needs must be obtained in order starting at the bottom of the pyramid.

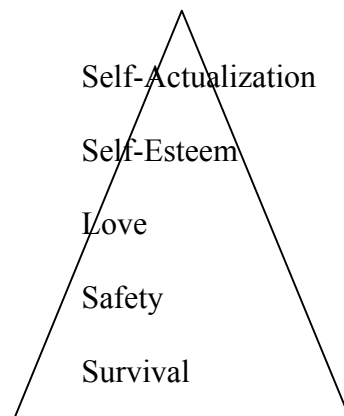
Self-Actualization (see def. above)

Self-Esteem—feeling pride and confidence in one’s self and accomplishments.

Love—feeling accepted and liked by others.

Safety—feeling secure in one’s environment; knowing that one is protected from potential dangers.

Survival—possessing or having access to the vital necessities (food, water, and shelter)



Sample Criterion Case Opening

INTRODUCTION

As voter turnout and other areas of citizen participation in our nation's affairs continue to decline, other nations are experiencing situations and crises that shed light on the fact that many of us are taking our good fortune for granted. As conflict continues in China, Cuba, and Guatemala, illustrating the dangers of oppressive government, chaos in Somalia, Sierra Leone, and the former Yugoslavia demonstrate the problems of anarchy. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once noted, "Seldom are we faced with a decision between right and wrong...more often than not, we must determine the least harmful course of action." Today, we are faced with similar dilemma. **As a result, I stand firmly resolved that an oppressive government is better than no government at all.**

RESOLUTION ANALYSIS

A. Definitions

For clarity in today's debate, I offer the following terms taken from Black's Law Dictionary:

oppressive government: a government that, through its institutions, withholds from the people internationally recognized civil, economic, and/or human rights.

no government: a nation-state existing without formal institutions that provide control and benefits to the citizens.

Thus, today we must prove a government that withholds these rights is better than a state that has no institutions whatsoever.

These definitions are acceptable given they provide a specific, real context in which the round can be debated. Furthermore, they provide ample ground for both the affirmative and the negative.

B. Value Premise

The affirmative will uphold the value of self-actualization. Esteemed philosopher C.J. Meller notes, "Not only is self-actualization the key measurement of Maslow's hierarchy, but western philosophers, while disagreeing on the means to achieve it, have concluded that it is the greatest end toward which human kind can strive." Thus, whichever side best provides opportunity for self-actualization fulfills the terms better in the resolution.

C. Criteria

In order to determine which position in today's round best provides opportunity for self-actualization, the affirmative proposes the criteria of democratic government. Communication school Robb Shewsberry notes, "In order for humankind to think and act freely, protection is guaranteed only in a democracy."

In today's round, the affirmative must prove that oppressive government is better than no government by demonstrating that oppressive government will lead ultimately to democracy more so than no government, and ultimately will lead to greater self-actualization on the part of the populace.

CONTENTIONS

Contention One: Democracy is more readily achieved form oppression than anarchy.

Contention Two: Democracy through these channels leads more readily to self-actualization.