

ESSAY

A Tale of the Tension between Social Justice and Utilitarianism

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Philosophers over the centuries have regarded justice as the foundation of a civilized society. Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) believed that justice is a virtue that exists when everyone in society fulfils their designated role and thereby contributes to the overall order, equilibrium, and harmony within society. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) believed that justice involves giving people what they deserve, a concept he described through the lens of distributive justice. He argued that justice includes both equality and equity, ensuring individuals receive what they are due based on their contributions and needs. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) merged Christian theology with Aristotelian ideas, proposing that justice is rooted in divine law, and that human laws should reflect moral truths, thereby uniting secular governance with spiritual ethics. Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) introduced ideas about natural rights and social contracts, emphasizing the protection of individual rights and the role of collective will in governance. Among secular thinkers today, John Rawls (1921-2002) revived the concept of justice as fairness in the distribution of goods, influencing many subsequent moral philosophers.

Social Justice

While justice is a broad view encompassing fairness, equality, and upholding moral principles, social justice is a specific application that focuses on the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within a society, ensuring everyone has equal rights and treatment. Robert Kraynak (2018) believes that one of the first to use the term social justice was Antonio Rosmini (1797–1855), author of *The Constitution under Social Justice* (1848) and other works of moral philosophy. Rosmini arrived at his idea of social justice by developing Thomistic natural law theory into a novel view of the common good that balances two principles: (1) the equal rights and dignity of people as ends-in-themselves, a version of “personalism” influenced by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Christianity; and (2) unequal rewards for those who contribute most to society, a version of Aristotelian “proportionalism” based on the social nature of persons.

Social justice is a concept that resonates deeply within the fabric of society, advocating for equitable treatment and opportunities for all individuals regardless of their background. It emphasizes the importance of fairness and the need to address systemic inequalities. While social justice involves the distribution of resources, which significantly impacts how individuals experience life in society, at its core, it ensures everyone has access to the same rights and

opportunities. This means dismantling barriers that prevent disadvantaged groups from achieving their full potential. By addressing these disparities, we can foster a more just society where everyone has a chance to thrive.

Utilitarianism

In the 19th and 20th centuries, discussions about social justice continued to evolve. The compelling aspect of utilitarianism, that actions should aim for the greatest good for the greatest number, was deemed logical and appealing and appeared to compete with the ideology of social justice. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist approach to justice, meaning it judges the rightness or wrongness of actions based on their outcomes. Specifically, utilitarianism suggests that the most just action is the one that maximizes overall happiness or well-being for the greatest number of people.

However, the challenge lies in how the greatest good is defined. Is it merely the sum of happiness, or does it encompass deeper values like dignity and rights? This complexity often leads to a tension between utilitarian ideals and the reality of human experience. Utilitarianism's strengths are evident in its application to policy-making and social issues. For instance, when governments consider healthcare reforms, they often weigh the potential benefits against the costs, aiming to maximize overall well-being.

Tension between Social Justice and Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism and social justice, while both striving for a better world, share a complex and occasionally conflicting relationship. Utilitarianism, which focuses on maximizing overall happiness or well-being, may not always align with the emphasis on fairness and equality that is central to social justice, particularly for minority groups or individuals. The utilitarian approach might justify actions that benefit the majority but harm or disadvantage a minority if it increases overall happiness. For instance, sacrificing the rights of a few individuals for the greater good of the majority, or punishing an innocent person to prevent riots, might be deemed justifiable under utilitarianism if it averts widespread chaos and suffering, despite violating principles of justice. Conversely, social justice explores fairness and equity in distributing resources, opportunities, and rights within society. Its emphasis is on ensuring that all individuals and groups have equal access to resources, opportunities, and a voice in society. The moot question is whether, in the process of achieving the greater good for the greatest number, some can be denied what they perceive as their due, leaving them feeling deprived of social justice and thus disgruntled.

A potential conflict with utilitarianism is that social justice may require prioritizing the needs of marginalized or vulnerable groups, even if it means sacrificing some overall happiness. For example, providing affirmative action policies to address historical inequalities may disadvantage some individuals from the majority group. While utilitarianism prioritizes the

greatest good for the greatest number by focusing on actions that benefit the majority, it encounters difficulties with Kantian ethics, which asserts that justice must be grounded in universal moral duties. For instance, if lying could lead to a better outcome for many, Kant would argue that it is still wrong because it violates the moral law that one should never lie. This unwavering commitment to truth and duty highlights the distinctive nature of Kant's ethical framework.

A more nuanced utilitarian approach that incorporates considerations of social justice in discussions of justice, which seem unjust to some individuals in the pursuit of the greater good, can be derived from referencing the parable in Matthew 20:1-16, where Jesus tells the story of a Landowner who began hiring laborers from the marketplace to work in his vineyard at dawn.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a Householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. ⁵ Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ And when evening came, the Owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the Householder, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."

Equal Pay for Unequal Work

An anecdotal example of how equal pay for ostensibly unequal work is justified in the parable from Matthew 20:1-16 may help reconcile some of the criticisms of utilitarianism. Arvind's parents in Mumbai were too poor to support his high school education, as he was one of five children for whom they provided care. Consequently, Arvind was forced to take up labor jobs when he was just 15 years old. Most of the time, he found casual work in various factories. His employment was never guaranteed; he was only called into the factory when needed, and

the duration of the work varied depending on the tasks at hand. It was common for Arvind to wait outside the factory gates with others in similar situations, anxiously hoping to be hired. There were days when he wasn't called at all, leaving him to return home late in the evening, disappointed and without any wages. This disappointment not only affected him, but also impacted his family, who had to make do with whatever little they could manage.

In the parable from Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus tells the story of a Householder who hired laborers from the marketplace to work in his vineyard at dawn. As the day progressed, he continued bringing in more workers looking for jobs, promising to compensate them fairly. There was no indication that any selection criteria were applied when hiring these workers. The Owner repeatedly returned to the marketplace to bring in more workers, possibly because the initial workers were overwhelmed by the workload, or perhaps because additional work needed to be done as the day wore on; it is unclear.

At the end of the day, the Vineyard Owner instructed his manager to pay all the workers, starting with those hired last and moving to those hired first, with each receiving a full day's pay. The workers who had started first expected to be compensated more, but each of them received the same standard wage as the last hires. These early recruits were upset and complained that it was unfair to be paid the same amount as those who had worked for only an hour. The Owner replied that he had not short-changed anyone, as each worker received the amount that had been promised. He then asked the disgruntled workers why they were envious because he was generous with what belonged to him.

Reconciling the Tension

The parable clearly illustrates that the Owner honored his agreement with the first appointed workers by paying them as promised. Therefore, there was no reason for them to feel short-changed or unhappy on that account. Furthermore, the wages were provided by their employer, who had the authority to distribute them as he wished. Importantly, the Owner recognized the stress that the later appointed workers would have experienced due to the fear of not finding work during the day and the embarrassment of returning home without money for their families. He understood that the anxiety of being unemployed and waiting for a job offer could be more draining than the labor required by those who started working earlier. The Owner acknowledged that the later recruits were brought into the vineyard under difficult circumstances and provided them with a wage they hoped to earn at the beginning of the day.

The Owner, true to his word, ensured that all workers were fairly compensated according to the principle of equity. Equity is based on the idea that not all workers start from the same place, and the system must recognize and adjust for imbalances. The Owner recognized that late recruits, who had not had the opportunity to work for as long, should be treated justly and fairly with a different pay rate than the initial recruits, who had the chance to take on more work. The principle of equity acknowledges and addresses systemic barriers that

prevent individuals from achieving equal status with their more fortunate peers. In this case, the limitations of the recruitment system, which can only accommodate a certain number of workers for specific jobs based on available resources, resulted in the rejection of other aspirants through no fault of their own. This situation caused distress for those who missed out. To ensure fairness for everyone and to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number, the Owner decided to maintain the agreed wage for the first recruits while also opting for an equity approach for the later hires. However, this decision led to disappointment among the initial recruits, who felt that their compensation was unfair. The evidence of the tension between utilitarianism and social justice is palpable in the workers' compensation.

Arithmetic Equality versus Proportional Inequality

Notably, the Owner, through his method of wage disbursement, demonstrated the two different metrics of social justice, namely arithmetic equality and proportional inequality, as described by Kraynak (2018), who attributed these two measures to Rosmini. According to Rosmini, in arithmetic equality, rewards are distributed in proportion to work done, considering humans in their abstract or universal essence, where they are all the same in their common humanity (though this never exists in social reality). Proportional inequality, on the other hand, recognizes and compensates people in their concrete or particular social existence, where everyone varies in talents and rank (their natural condition as social animals). Arithmetic equality relates to Kantian ethical idealism, while proportional inequality aligns with Aristotelian proportionalism.

In the parable, the workers who were hired first and worked longer hours have rights that cannot be determined solely by a simple principle of arithmetic equality, which suggests they should receive a larger share of wages. It was impossible for all the workers employed that day to contribute equally because not all had the same amount of work available to them. Therefore, according to Aristotelian proportionalism, it is reasonable to conclude that wage distribution cannot be directly proportional to the amount of work done.

The Owner recognized that fairness in distributing wages to workers goes beyond simple arithmetic equality. Wage disbursement also involves considering *natural justice*, which must account for accidents and inherent inequalities among workers who have been employed at different times. The tussle between arithmetic justice and natural justice that is compensating for work in unequal measures is evident in the parable. By embracing an equity approach to the latter appointed workers, the Owner addresses the limitations of the abstract equality promoted by Kantian ethical idealism and modern liberalism. These philosophies focus on humanity in the abstract and overlook the fact that natural justice applies to individuals within their specific social roles.

The Owner, however, upholds an essential aspect of Kantian ethical idealism - respecting the dignity of each person as an end in itself. This principle must not be

compromised, underpinning his commitment to providing the fair wages promised to all recruits. He pays the initial recruits the agreed rate of a fair wage. Simultaneously, recognizing the disadvantages faced by later recruits and their ensuing stress, the Owner takes it upon himself to compensate them disproportionately for the work they perform, thus also adhering to the Aristotelian principle of justice.

Bridging Secular Governance and Spiritual Ethics

Thomas Aquinas adopted an approach that bridges the gap between secular governance and spiritual ethics. He proposed that justice is rooted in divine law, and that human laws should reflect moral truths. By integrating Christian theology with Aristotelian principles, Aquinas illustrates the divine principle in the parable of the owner who hires laborers for work. This parable demonstrates that God is considerate of those with fewer employment opportunities and recognizes the challenges they face due to unemployment.

The divine principle suggests that God will be disproportionately generous in rewarding those who are disadvantaged. Conversely, God also compensates those who put in extra effort, rewarding them appropriately for their faithful service. However, some individuals may feel inadequately compensated for their heightened level of faith and diligence, especially when comparing themselves to others whose engagement with effort and virtue was ostensibly less intense. God often contradicts fondest expectations, and what is soon anticipated may not come to pass. In His time, God will find a way for the faithful to have their reward.

God understands the stress experienced by individuals like Arvind in Mumbai, who are called in at the last minute for their shifts. He recognizes that the anxiety of being unemployed and waiting for job opportunities can be more exhausting than the actual labor required from those who started working earlier. The Lord does not view human law as unjust when it seeks to adequately compensate workers deprived of job opportunities, ensuring that they benefit from their labor on par with those who had the chance and the skill to get a head start. This parable illustrates how divine law (Matthew 20:16: "So the last will be first, and the first last") can bridge spiritual arithmetic equality and proportional inequality characteristics of social justice focused on achieving fairness on one side, and secular utilitarianism aimed at delivering the greatest good for the greatest number on the other.

Sociology Promotes the Symbiosis between Social Justice and Utilitarianism

As a social science, sociology has rightly identified its own place in relation to philosophy, political theory, theology, the history of ideas, and the history and historiography of science. As sociology connects its specific research to central themes and ideas in mainstream philosophy, such as justice, a convergence between utilitarianism and social justice can be achieved by incorporating insights from sociological theories that inform utilitarian calculations aimed at supporting social justice goals. Bradley Campbell (2021) asserts that social justice is

closely connected to sociology. This relationship arises from scientific insights into society and uses these insights to transform social structures. For example, sociological research advocating for policies promoting universal education and healthcare can improve overall well-being and reduce inequalities. Additionally, sociology offers a detailed and contextual understanding of how social norms and values influence power dynamics and systemic inequalities. By systematically analyzing pervasive inequalities, sociology can promote an equity approach that fosters a stable and prosperous society, ultimately increasing overall happiness. Some theoretical sociological approaches could assist societies in achieving possible moral aims, such as fostering understanding, incentivizing virtue, making virtue easier, and strengthening solidarity.

Conclusion

The tension between social justice and utilitarianism is exemplified in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, found in Matthew 20:1-16. In this parable, workers are hired at different times but receive the same pay, creating tension in the wage distribution that leaves some workers unhappy. However, the Owner remains justified, believing he has treated all workers fairly. Utilitarianism concentrates on outcomes and aims to maximize overall happiness, taking everything into account, and prioritizes the greater good for the greater number, even if it leaves some disgruntled. Conversely, social justice stresses the importance of treating all individuals, especially those who are disadvantaged, with dignity and fairness, without considering strict equality. Ultimately, it seems that both utilitarianism and social justice can be reconciled when guided by divine principles.

Although social justice and utilitarianism are separate ethical frameworks, they are not inherently incompatible. Utilitarianism can be a useful tool for attaining social justice goals, and social justice can contribute to creating a more utilitarian society by fostering equality and well-being for all. However, it is important to recognize potential conflicts between these approaches and to assess carefully their implications in specific situations. A mutually beneficial relationship exists when social justice and utilitarianism share the principle of equity, as shown by the vineyard owner who ensured each worker was treated as if they started from the same point. Effectively addressing social injustices and inequalities in a crisis-driven world requires a balance between maximizing overall well-being and fostering a just and equitable society. Tackling this dilemma while adhering to moral truths can often provide valuable options.

The Christian view of sociology requires recognizing the need to reconcile the possible conflict between social justice and utilitarianism and integrate the sociological vocation within the Christian calling. This understanding can motivate Christian sociologists to lead in transforming family, church, and community life where inequality is prevalent. Several factors could support these efforts, such as Christians, including Christian sociologists, studying and interpreting the Bible regarding outlooks, strategies, and policies aimed at promoting social justice, and utilitarianism as an adequate moral theory for acquiring social justice. Christian

sociology related to the Bible should also influence sociological analysis and the development of social policies derived from such analysis, guiding the future path for a Christian discourse and contribution to both social justice and a consequentialist approach to justice.

References

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