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THE PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF UTILITARIANISM IN THE CONTEXT OF CRISIS AND ETHICS IN THE WORLD

Abstract:

The concept of the following paper is to show the essence and message of philosophical aspects of utilitarianism in the context of crisis and ethics in the world. The main concept is to pay attention to the influence of the ethics of utilitarianism on the human beings' behaviour and activities within not only political, but also social life. The major issue connected with the above mentioned topic is whether the ethics is the key to solve and to overcome the crisis which has been present everywhere since time immemorial. The basic questions which ought to be taken into a further consideration are as follows: what is crisis? what is utilitarianism and ethics? how do they react with each other?

The article is divided into a few parts: the first one refers to the aims of people's actions in the context of ethics of utilitarianism which in fact was described by Mill as the greatest happiness principle. What should be emphasized is the meaning of ethical values which show the opportunity to change the world order. It strongly pays attention to the utilitarianism as a philosophy not only in economical aspects, but also the social ones. It is a well-known fact that the process of changes is affected by Good Common Sense which will be shortly discussed in the further part of the article. The second part refers to the axiology, the philosophical study of value in life and the

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comprehensive world in the point of view of Sir Thomas More and his own philosophy of life influenced by spiritual experience and some reflection on the economic situation. It is significant to mention about the times of new insight at Renaissance as the concept of a new man and new approach, and finally ethics.

1. Utilitarianism as a philosophy, crisis as a tendency

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, utilitarianism, on which I would like to pay my attention, is, in fact, in normative ethics some kind of tradition stemming from the late 18th- and 19th-century by the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. It is the process where an action is right if it tends to promote happiness and wrong if it tends to produce the reverse of happiness not just the happiness of the performer of the action but also that of everyone affected by it. This theory is in opposition to egoism, the view that a person should pursue his own self-interest, even at the expense of others, and to any ethical theory that regards some acts or types of acts as right or wrong independently of their consequences.¹

Furthermore, utilitarianism also differs from ethical theories that make rightness or wrongness of an act dependent upon the motive of the agent; for, according to the Utilitarian, it is possible for the right thing to be done from a bad motive. It is an effort to provide an answer to the practical question: what ought a man to do? Its answer is that he ought to act so that he is able to create the best consequences possible. One of the leading utilitarians of the late 19th century, a Cambridge philosopher, Henry Sidgwick, sought to support utilitarianism by showing that it follows from systematic reflection on the morality of *common sense*.²

¹ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/46184/axiology>, dated on 15th May 2012.

² <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/whatisethics.html>, dated on 15th May 2012.

As the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way. What about the definition taken from the Longmann dictionary? This source let us believe that utilitarianism is a belief that the more people a course of action helps, the better it is.³ However, common sense remains a perennial topic in epistemology and many philosophers take advantage of this concept as well. In general, some related ideas include intuitions, pre-theoretic beliefs, ordinary language, the trolley problem, foundational beliefs, good sense, wisdom, folk wisdom, folklore, and public opinion. It is a fact that common-sense ideas seem to be connected with events within human experience, for instance good will.

Let's look into a moral theory according to which an action is right if and only if it conforms to the principle of utility. Bentham formulated the scheme of utility being a part of such a theory gathered in *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* in 1789. In this sense, an action conforms to the principle of utility only if its performance will be more productive of pleasure or happiness, or more preventive of pain or unhappiness, than any other opportunity. Instead of *pleasure* and *happiness* the word *welfare* is also apt: the value of the consequences of an action is determined solely by the welfare of individuals.

A typical feature of Bentham's theory is the concept that the rightness of an action *entirely* depends on the value of its consequences. This is why the theory is also described as consequentialist. Bentham's theory differs from certain other varieties of utilitarianism by its distinctive assumption that the standard of value is pleasure and

³ *Cambridge Dictionary of English Language*, England: Cambridge, 2004, p. 1365, *Longmann Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, *Gets to the heart of the language*, England: Longmann, 2003, p. 1473.

the absence of pain at the same time; by being an act-utilitarian; and by its maximizing assumption that an action is not right unless it tends towards the optimal outcome. The view that utilitarianism is unable to accommodate any values except the crass, gross or materialistic ones is mistaken. Since the 1960s, many writers have used *consequentialism* instead of *utilitarianism* for the view that the rightness of an action completely depends on the value of its consequences. Many writers now restrict the word utilitarianism to denote certain kinds of consequentialism, especially Bentham's and Mill's. There is terminological diversity, and the varieties of utilitarianism mentioned elsewhere are varieties of consequentialism nowadays.⁴

Now it is the time to join into discussion some aspects of crisis. According to the American 35th US President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the word *crisis* is composed of two characters, one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity. The first thing which should be pointed out is the one connected with the possible meaning of the word *crisis*. It is true to say that in general it can have more than one definition, such as:

- A crucial or decisive point or situation; a turning point.
- An unstable condition, as in political, social, or economic affairs, involving an impending abrupt or decisive change.
- A sudden change in the course of a disease or fever, toward either improvement or deterioration.
- An emotionally stressful event or traumatic change in a person's life.
- A point in a story or drama when a conflict reaches its highest tension and must be resolved.⁵

⁴ <http://www.utilitarianism.com/utilitarian.html>: The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy ed. Thomas Mautner, dated on 5 th May 2012.

⁵ *Oxford Paperback Thesaurus*, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 183.

At this stage of our reflections it is the high time to look through some examples of quotations which refer to the phrase *crisis*. Chinese proverb says that the crisis of today is the joke of tomorrow, however, in everyday life, there are things which cannot be treated as a joke, no matter how long they last. American motivational author, Robert Collier, has suggested that “sooner or later comes a crisis in our affairs, and how we meet it determines our future happiness and success. Since the beginning of time, every form of life has been called upon to meet such crisis”, whereas H.G. Well, English novelist, journalist, sociologist and historian, was the opinion that “a crisis is an opportunity riding the dangerous wind.”⁶

What is the most interesting is that Richard M. Nixon, American 37th US President had his own vision and reflection on crisis: “The easiest period in a crisis situation is actually the battle itself. The most difficult is the period of indecision whether to fight or run away. And the most dangerous period is the aftermath. It is then, with all his resources spent and his guard down, that an individual must watch out for dulled reactions and faulty judgment.”⁷

2. Thomas More – philosophy of life and principles of ethics

John Guy as one of the greatest authors concentrated on Thomas More always pointed out that his character was a leading historian and biographer, a man for all aims and for all purposes for whom education and life was one of the most important values. It is true to admit that More’s talent and intelligence were exceptional as he paid a strong attention to the knowledge and the problems of society such as crisis. It is true to say that More was a special type of scholar. He was not only an explorer with experience of the worlds of politics, law and

⁶ http://www.thinkexist.com/quotes/robert_collier; <http://www.thinkexist.com/quotes/h.g.well>, dated on 25th April 2012.

⁷ [http://www.thinkexist.com/quotes/richard m. nixon](http://www.thinkexist.com/quotes/richard_m._nixon), dated on 25th April 2012.

business but above all a member of an informal fraternity of Christian humanists.⁸

The major question which should be now taken into consideration is what was the philosophy of life of Thomas More and at the same time what was his point of view on the economic situation of society. There are different statements about Thomas More as he appears to be a man with a complex personality who in fact led a double life: spiritual and professional. Among the society he was seen as hero or villain, charlatan or true prophet or finally as sinner or saint. All in all, he was like a guide of the society or maybe a person who from the bottom of his heart and soul tried to face up to the issues which to some extent could not have been solved. As it was mentioned earlier his whole life became an example of a person for all seasons and all purposes. He is celebrated as holy martyr by the Catholic Church and is also a Marxist hero. Education was one of the most important value in his family circle. His intellect was keen, his memory extraordinary. Thomas More can be described as a good citizen and a learned man.

To notice the true pity and solid virtue of More, the value he placed on what the world most admired should be noticed. He was in the King's Court, he was the man of wide learning, wrote many books and his achievements brought him high praise. More was strong in spirit, so filled with divine grace. None of these things had the power to weaken him or to turn him away ever so little from a true knowledge of God and of himself.⁹ When it comes to Thomas More's family life he was full of warm feelings which the reader may observe in his letters on the education of his children. They strongly show the love of father, the wisdom of a philosopher, and the faith of a Christian. All in all, his philosophy of life was to find the best connection and harmony

⁸ John Guy, *Thomas More*, New York: A Hodder Arnold Publication, 2000, p. 2.

⁹ Thomas Stapleton, *The Life of Sir Thomas More*. London: University Press, 1962, p. 71.

between professional, spiritual and family life as he knew human life consisted of many different elements which had a strong influence on the development of human beings' personality.

His point of view on various aspect such as the condition of society and the problem of crisis was perfectly gathered and discussed in his *Utopia*. More's *Utopia* is a reconnaissance, an exploration orientated to a new future. It is true to say that speaking about Thomas More, the first thing that it should be noticed is the one connected with his well-known *Utopia* being one of the most influential and controversial literary works of Thomas More which was completed and published in 1516. All in all, Thomas More (1478-1535) was a British humanist scholar who coined the name "utopia" [from "ou-topos" - "no place"; and "eu-topos" - "good place"]. The utopian horizon renews everything and the utopian expectation opens society to new possibilities of life. The very special other part contains a number of social-utopian essays, so that the author wanted to show his critical reflections on the society.

It is true to say that utopia was an ideal nation whose features stood in contrast to the warring nations of Christendom. What seems to be the most exceptional is the fact that in this above-mentioned literary work More describes the imaginary island's political system. In common with the Dutch humanist and theologian Erasmus, More defended ethical hedonism on the religious background. He even admitted that our desire for happiness motivates us to act morally as God wishes; but if so, then the historical record suggests that the pleasures of vice are much stronger.

Utopia is often called an important Renaissance work because of the fact that it imagines we could redesign human culture to improve it, rather than suggesting that most human innovations were imper-

flect.. More is starting from a very old-fashioned point of view in his attack on the nobles and their followers. It is a truth that many Utopian attitudes toward work and community could be found in Chaucer's General Prologue portraits of the Parson and his brother, the Plowman. The real innovations, *the Renaissance in the eyes of More*, are related to economics, religion, and marriage.¹⁰

What should be pointed out is the money less economy which has to appear on a national level, however, utopian communes sometimes handle to simulate it just on a tiny scale. Furthermore, income disparities might be said to be worse than they were in medieval England in which the poor can only get to a certain level of poverty before they pass away, but rich people of today's world could easily buy and sell the whole English kingdom a couple times over. Religious toleration of the Utopian sort does not arrive in England until the twentieth century. Worshipers of the Roman Church might not be burned at the stake or have their property confiscated much after 1660, but equal rights and opportunities for education and employment were forbidden anyone who did not swear oaths to the English Church and to renounce and oppose the Pope.¹¹

Having known some details about *Utopia* written by Thomas More, it is significant to concentrate our attention on ethics. The aspect of crisis is strongly connected with the ethics as it seems to be the solution for all the problems in the whole world. When it comes to the concept of ethics, the first question which has arisen, is what, in fact, is ethics? Some time ago, Raymond Baumhart, a sociologist, asked business people: "What does ethics mean to you?" Among their replies were the following ones, so let's have a look:

¹⁰ http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/sir_thomas_more__utopia.html, dated on 10th May 2012.

¹¹ Ibidem.

1. "Ethics has to do with what my feelings tell me is right or wrong."
2. "Ethics has to do with my religious beliefs."
3. "Being ethical is doing what the law requires."
4. "Ethics consists of the standards of behavior our society accepts."
5. "I don't know what the word means."¹²

Once again let's try to answer for one of the hardest questions ever: what is ethics? To put it briefly, ethics is treated as a system of moral principles by the most people. It affects how people make decisions and lead their lives. It seems to be concerned with what is good for individuals and society and is also described as moral philosophy. The term is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which can mean *custom, habit, character* or *disposition*. To sum up, ethics covers the following dilemmas: how to live a good life with our rights and responsibilities, how to manage with the language of right and wrong with reference to moral decisions and finally, what is good and bad?

These answers are not so obvious for every human being as it is hard to define and in fact the views and opinions of people on this issue are various. It is true to admit that there are many of them who tend to equate ethics with their emotions. A man whose follows his or her emotions may recoil from doing what is right as feeling can deviate from what is, in fact, ethical. At the same time some people can identify ethics with religion as religion should always show high ethical standards and provide intense motivations for ethical behavior. To compare with the religion aspects how does it look like with the law which often incorporates ethical standards to which most citizens subscribe? However, law, just like feelings, can deviate from what is ethical. All in all, being ethical is not the same as doing whatever the

¹² http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/intro_1.shtml, dated on 1st May 2012.

society accepts. Most people accept standards that are, in fact, ethical, however, standards of behavior in society can deviate from what is ethical. In this context the entire society can become ethically destroyed.¹³

In general, the ethics symbolize two things. Firstly, ethics strongly refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. Ethical standards include standards relating to rights, such as the right to life, the right to freedom from injury, and the right to privacy. Such standards are adequate standards of ethics because they are supported by consistent and well-founded reasons.

Secondly, ethics refers to the study and development of one's ethical standards. As mentioned above, feelings, laws, and social norms can deviate from what is ethical. So it is necessary to constantly examine one's standards to ensure that they are reasonable and well-founded. Ethics also means, then, the continuous effort of studying our own moral beliefs and our moral conduct, and striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and solidly-based.

The issue which should be mentioned, however in a short way, is the aspect of Axiology which strongly and closely refers to the ethical point of view. It is the philosophical study of value. It is either the collective term for ethics and philosophical fields. The term was first used in the early 20th century by Paul Lapie, in 1902, and Eduard von Hartmann, in 1908. Axiology studies mainly two kinds of values: ethics and aesthetics. Ethics investigates the concepts of *right* and *good* in individual and social conduct. Aesthetics studies the concepts of *beauty* and *harmony*. The main question which is often asked nowadays is:

¹³ Ibidem.

what is intrinsically good? Hedonists say it is pleasure; Pragmatists answer it is satisfaction, growth, or adjustment; Kantians tell it is a good will; Humanists admit that it is harmonious self-realization; whereas Christians pay attention to the love of God.¹⁴

3. Short review on renaissance – the new environment and the new man

The Renaissance is treated as a cultural movement that is dated from the 14th to the 17th century, beginning in Italy in the Late Middle Ages and then spreading through the rest of Europe. There are some people who have called into question whether the Renaissance was a cultural advance from the Middle Ages, whereas seeing it as a period of pessimism and nostalgia for the classical age. A lot of historians point out the most negative social factors popularly connected with the medieval period, such as: religious and political persecution, poverty and warfare. Many people who lived during the Renaissance did not view it as the *golden age* imagined by certain 19th-century authors.

It is worth to mention that the artists, writers, and patrons involved in the cultural movements believed they were living in a new era among the new society and environment that was a clean break from the Middle Ages. Some Marxist historians prefer to describe the Renaissance in material terms, holding the view that the changes in art, literature, and philosophy were part of a general economic trend from feudalism towards capitalism, resulting in a bourgeois class with leisure time to devote to the arts. Robert S. Lopez has contended that it was a period of deep economic recession. Meanwhile George Sarton, a Belgian chemist and historian and Lynn Thorndike, an American historian of medieval science and alchemy, have both argued that scientific progress was perhaps less original than has traditionally been supposed.

¹⁴ Robert S. Hartman . *The Structure of Value*. USA: USI Press, 1967, p. 38.

Finally, Joan Kelly, a clinic psychologist, argued that the Renaissance led to greater gender dichotomy, lessening the agency women had had during the Middle Ages.¹⁵

Coming back to Thomas More, he was a man of Renaissance, being aware of the important impact of Humanism on society. In some ways Humanism was not a philosophy, however, a method of learning. Humanist education was based on the programme of *Studia Humanitatis*, that being the study of five humanities such as:

- Poetry is a form of literary art which takes advantage of aesthetics and rhythmic qualities of a language;
- Grammar is a set of structural rules;
- History is an umbrella term that refers to the past events;
- Moral philosophy is called ethics, a branch of philosophy that is focused on what is right and what is wrong;
- Rhetoric is the art of discourse.¹⁶

Humanist scholars shaped the intellectual landscape throughout the early modern period. Although historians have sometimes struggled to define humanism precisely, most have settled on a middle of the road definition, the movement to recover, interpret, and assimilate the language, literature, learning and values of ancient Greece and Rome. Apart from that point of view, humanists asserted the genius of human being, the unusual and extraordinary ability of the human mind. Political philosophers, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas More revived the ideas of Greek and Roman thinkers, and applied them in critiques of contemporary government.¹⁷

¹⁵ Lopez R., Robert S., and Miskimin, Harry A. *The Economic Depression of the Renaissance*. [in:] *Economic History Review* (3): 1962, dated on 13th May 2012.

¹⁶ *Oxford Dictionaries*. UK: Oxford University Press, 2012, p.750-1450.

¹⁷ Stephens, J., *Individualism and the cult of creative personality, The Italian Renaissance*, New York, 1990, p. 12.

Taking everything into consideration, the humanists believed that it is important to transcend to the afterlife with a perfect mind and body. This transcending belief can be done with education. The purpose of humanism was to create a universal man whose person combined intellectual and physical excellence and who was capable of functioning honorably in virtually any situation. This ideology was referred to as *il uomo universal, an ancient Greco-Roman ideal*. The education during Renaissance was mainly composed of ancient literature and history. It was thought that the classics provided moral instruction and an intensive understanding of human behavior.¹⁸

To sum up, whenever we consider the time in Western civilization known today as the Renaissance, we are able to discover a period of notable change in virtually every sphere of culture. The so called visual art was departing from the purely symbolic, representative forms of the Middle Ages and exhibiting a more earthly, mundane realism, and while it continued to concentrate on religious depictions, secular themes began to present themselves with more regularity. Within the intellectual life, rhetorical, literary and historical studies gave an alternative to the old scholastic methodology that had dominated the medieval university for so long, and many of the themes of this new prosaic humanism were secular, reflecting the pre-Christian Greco-Roman culture from which they drew inspiration. When it comes to the politics, the period witnessed the emergence of what became the modern secular state: a political order wherein legitimacy was not in any way derived from the Church.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 15-30.

¹⁹ John P. Bequette. *Saint Thomas More: From Renaissance Man to Christian Martyr* [in:] *The Standard Bearers*, dated on 21st June 2012.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to analyze the insight at some philosophical aspects of utilitarianism in the context of crisis and ethics in the world which are essential and significant in life. Every human being has been looking for the sense of security and ethical values since time immemorial. It is true to say that Thomas More was the man with a new way of thinking, for all seasons, paying attention to the real needs of society which are connected with the economical sense of security and the ability of taking advantage of professional together with family life. It is strongly associated with the new era of Renaissance, in which we are able to notice the new man and new environment. The ethics is strongly involved in the way people are educated which the reader is able to notice by the means of Humanism.

It is a well-known fact that the crisis of ethics has always been inseparable part of our human existence as the world consists of not only good, but also bad moments and situations. However, the learning of ethics seems to have a stronger meaning as it may help to face up to some difficult times which have happened every single day. The ethical principles show society the right road in life so that people are able to be more aware of the danger of misunderstandings when the lack of communication happens. In the end, we would like to quote one of the most exceptional phrases of Pope, John Paul II about the issue which was raised in this paper: following his personal philosophy, considered that a danger of utilitarianism is that it tends to make persons, just as much as things, the object of use: "Utilitarianism is a civilization of production and of use, a civilization of things and not of persons, a civilization in which persons are used in the same way as things are used."²⁰

²⁰ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jpii_let_02021994_families_en.html, dated on 2nd May 2012.

All in all, in every human being's life, one of the most significant things is to keep balance in order to find an inner harmony among the society.

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