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Article

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AN EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT OF ASYMMETRY IN RELATION TO THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLE OF DISUTILITY

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Abstract

The concept of asymmetry is related to the principle of disutility. Both have their roots in the rejection of positive utility as the criterion for determining the morality of an action. What unites the two is the view that there is an imbalance between pain or suffering and happiness or pleasure. Based on this imbalance or inequality, supporters argue that the morality of an action should be based on evaluating the negative consequences which accrue from an action and not on the positive consequences. The major problem of both asymmetry and disutility is that they both suffer from the same defect of positive utilitarianism which is that it is difficult to measure consequences – whether good or bad ends. The aim of this paper is therefore to evaluate the benefits and limitations of asymmetry and disutility. This paper concludes that the choice between good ends and bad ends may differ from one society to another.

Keywords: Asymmetry, Disutility, Antinatalism, Utilitarianism, Negative utilitarianism, Morality.

Introduction

The notion of value asymmetry is a fallout of the utilitarian ethical theory. Jan Naverson highlighted the implications of utilitarianism with respect to population. He argued that there is an asymmetry involved in the future existence of human beings in relation to whether they will have good or bad ends. In the domain of philosophy, Naverson's views have become part of procreation ethics. In his article published in 1967, "Utilitarianism and New Generations," Naverson discussed this asymmetry which Karl Popper had earlier raised in his ethical theory and which R.N. Smart labelled as negative utilitarianism. With respect to the history of the concept of asymmetry in procreation ethics, Jeff McManahan is credited with coining the term in his article published in 1981. McManahan's article, "Problems of Population Theory" helped to elaborate the link between concept of asymmetry and ethical consequences of future populations. McManahan stated that he considered the principle of utility on which utilitarianism is based to have a certain air of sophistry. Based on the principle of utility, we are morally obliged to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. The

implication, as Naverson pointed out, is that: "if utilitarianism is correct, then we must be obliged to produce as many children as possible, so long as their happiness would exceed their misery" (62).

Naverson's evaluation of utilitarianism in relation to procreation raised moral issues which question the validity of the theory. Fundamentally, it raised the moral question of rights or existing human beings and non-existing or future human beings. In addition, it highlighted one of the key objections against utilitarianism which is whether emphasis should be on the promotion or pursuit of happiness for the greatest number of people rather than the reduction of misery or pain. This brings to the fore the distinction between positive value or utility and negative value or disutility. Basically, the utilitarian principle of utility is based on the calculation or measurement of positive utilities accruable to the greatest number of people; the assumption being that an action is morally good if the quantum of positive instances exceeds the negative utilities. Critics have pointed out that it is difficult to measure happiness or pleasure. Thus, the emergence of the concept of asymmetry could be linked to some of the objections against utilitarianism. McManahan stated the notion of asymmetry in the following way:

Consider the view that while the fact that a person's life would be worse than no life at all (or be worth living) constitutes a strong moral reason for not bringing him into existence, the fact that a person's life would be worth living provides no (or only relatively weak) moral reason for bringing him into existence (100).

McManahan's notion of asymmetry challenges the utilitarian view that there is symmetry between pleasure or happiness and pain or suffering. There are other formulations of the notion in different fields, including international relations, economics, politics, etc. Essentially, asymmetry value entails that there is an unequal relation between two things or sides. This inequality or imbalance raises moral issues with potential possibilities of future events. However, since our concern is with respect to ethics and based on the relationship with procreation or population ethics, this paper shall be concerned with the status of disvalue as opposed to the utilitarian focus on positive value. Although there are now several literatures on the notion of asymmetry, it is necessary not to lose sight of the fact that this concept is squarely an ethical issue. Indeed, this can be demonstrated by quoting Naverson who provided clarification on the notion of asymmetry. For Naverson, when a miserable child is brought into existence such a child has moral grounds to complain whereas if that were not the case such a child would not come into existence and therefore has no moral grounds to complain.

There are several formulations of this view which will be highlighted in this paper. However, the objective of this paper is to show that there is a link between the concept of asymmetry and negative utilitarianism. Indeed, both theories aim to overcome the objections raised against classical utilitarianism. Somehow, both asymmetry value and negative utilitarianism have their own conceptual problems. The implication is that the notion of disvalue which is part of both value asymmetry and negative utilitarianism, present conceptual and practical problems. In order to overcome these problems, it is necessary to determine whether disvalue or disutility is preferable to positive utility.

The Concept of Asymmetry

There are different formulations of asymmetry but they are all based on the notion of disutility or disvalue. In ordinary terms, asymmetry entails that, in moral terms, there is an imbalance or inequality between positive and negative utilities. Thus, whereas classical utilitarianism

emphasizes that positive outcomes should outweigh negative outcomes, asymmetry stresses that the moral obligation should be on reducing or eliminating negative outcomes or utilities. This means that the emphasis is not on promoting the positive outcomes or utilities of the greatest number of people but on minimizing the pain or suffering of the least advantaged members of the society. In the history of the notion of value asymmetry, it has been pointed out by some scholars that what is called "The Asymmetry" is synonymous with "Procreation Ethics". This is true both of Naverson and McManahan. There are different variants of the asymmetry argument. For instance, there are weak and strong forms of asymmetry. David Benatar, for example, in his book, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming to Existence*, stated the strong form of asymmetry by defending the concept of antinatalism. In Benatar's view, there is harm of some sort in being born. Benatar's argument can be seen in the asymmetry between pleasure and pain. The argument is based on the following theses:

- i. The absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas; _
- ii. The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation (30).

Following from the above theses, it is not surprising that Benatar's view could be said to propose that ethically it is better not to have existed since being born carries the risk of harm or disvalue. In other words, negative consequences are attached to existing. The weak form of asymmetry was stated by Nils Holtug (255) in the following way:

Everything else being equal, it is better to avoid that a person comes into existence and has a life worth not living (at level-n) than to ensure that a person comes into existence and has a life worth living (at level n).

This weak form of asymmetry is not as extreme or strong as that of Benatar's antinatalism. It is however, still based on some form of disvalue meaning that it is better to avoid pain. It should be noted that both weak and strong forms of asymmetry involve the evaluative principle of avoiding pain for future or yet non-existing humans. This raises serious ethical dilemma with respect to procreation issues. However, it falls into some of the same difficulties which are encountered in positive utilitarianism. This dilemma has been highlighted by some scholars such as Matt Rozas who stated that "the dilemma emerges because most people have conflicting intuitions concerning whether the interests of non-existing beings can outweigh the interests of existing beings when those potential beings are expected to have overall net-good or overall net-bad lives" (41). This dilemma has been formulated in other ways by scholars. For instance, Matthew Adelson claims that "the procreation asymmetry is a widely held view in ethics, claiming that one should make existing people happy but has no reason to make happy people" (338).

In yet another form of the asymmetry argument, Jacob M. Nebel framed it as "asymmetric comparativism" which means that "it is worse for a person to exist with miserable life than not to exist, but it is not better for a person to exist with a happy life than not to exist" (126). Although these different forms of procreation asymmetry may be said to be intuitive, there are also counter-intuitive arguments which challenge the validity of the argument that efforts should be made to make existing people happy rather than be concerned with making future happy people. This explains why Christopher Suhler and Craig Callendar (1) argue that "the value asymmetry is the fact that we prefer future rather than past preferences be satisfied".

From the preceding analysis on the notion of value asymmetry, it is obvious that its origin is linked to population or procreation ethics in philosophy. However, the notion has wider implications beyond issues of procreation. Within the realm of philosophy, it is applicable in the

analysis of value-based ethics and also in suffering-based ethics. It is also applicable in international or global politics. In the realm of international affairs, Brantly Womack's (351) states that "asymmetry theory is a new paradigm that addresses the effects of national disparities on international relations". Even though Womack's analysis of the nature of the disparities is subjective, what cannot be ignored is that there are imbalances or disparities in power relations with respect to development, natural resources and spheres of influence among nations. Thus, from the perspectives of normative ethics, value-based ethics and suffering-based ethics, the notion of asymmetry is tied to the notion of disutility in which the emphasis is on reducing disutility and its effects rather than maximizing the happiness or pleasure of the greatest number of people. Indeed, an important argument for the emphasis on disutility is the view that there is no compelling moral reason to make people happy or even to make happy people. However, an assessment of the different forms of asymmetry must take into account the two propositions which Jeff McMahan put forward which generally form the foundation of asymmetry. According to McManahan (49), these two propositions are:

- (1) That a person would have a life that is "worth not living" – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing.
- (2) That a person would have a life worth living does not, on its own, provide a moral reason to cause that person to exist, though there is no general moral reason *not* to cause such a person to exist.

It is interesting that McManahan acknowledged that the notion of asymmetry is difficult to justify and defend. This difficulty is also shared by other ethical theories which are based on the notion of disutility. He did, however, assert that asymmetry is both intuitive and in accord with common sense.

Since the notion of asymmetry was basically derived from utilitarianism, it follows that its major difference is that it was applied to population or procreation. In this case, asymmetry is based on the notion of negative value or disvalue. This is the fundamental difference between classical utilitarianism, in the narrow sense, and the notion of asymmetry. In the wider context the difference is between a consequentialist ethical theory and the theory of negative utilitarianism. Despite the differences, the notion of asymmetry in the broad sense of disvalue is related to negative utilitarianism. While negative utilitarianism is concerned with the asymmetry between happiness or pleasure and pain or suffering, asymmetry in its original form was concerned with the happiness and pain of future non-existing humans. The implication is that asymmetry can be applied in many contexts.

Negative Utilitarianism

In the literature about asymmetry, the scholars that are famous in main stream philosophy are not mentioned. In the history of the concept of asymmetry, Jan Naverson's article, "Utilitarianism and New Generations" published in 1967 is regarded as the origin of the concept as it applies to populations or procreation. Furthermore, Jeff McMahan's article, "Problems of Population Theory", which was published in 1981 is regarded as the origin of the term itself. What is often ignored is that one of the foremost philosophers of the twenty-first century, Karl Popper, had actually claimed that there is asymmetry between happiness and pain. This was a rejection of classical utilitarianism with its emphasis on positive utility or value. Although, Popper's notion of ethical asymmetry was derived from his theory of falsification which was a carryover from his philosophy of science and theory of evolutionary knowledge, he basically set one of the historical philosophical markers on the notion of asymmetry. It is surprising that

Popper is not mentioned as one of the philosophers who regarded ethical asymmetry as the solution to the moral problem of suffering or pain.

Negative utilitarianism is a variant of utilitarianism in the narrow sense and also a variant of consequentialism in the general sense. Both utilitarianism and negative utilitarianism are evaluative moral principles which recognize that actions should be judged on the basis of whether they produce salutary effects or harmful ends. In the case of negative utilitarianism, the theory states that moral actions depend on the reduction or minimization of pain or suffering for the least advantaged members of the society. Thus, rather than the classical utilitarian view on the promotion or maximization of happiness for the greatest number of people, negative utilitarianism claims that there is a moral urgency concerning reducing suffering or pain rather than maximizing happiness. Popper stated this view in his book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol.1, when he asserted that “human suffering makes a direct and urgent appeal, namely, an appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway” (284). It is noteworthy that Popper’s book was published earlier than the articles of Jan Naverson and Jeff McManahan. Perhaps, Popper’s view did not get wide publicity because most scholars were concerned with his philosophy of science and theory of knowledge. This negligence, however, should not reduce Popper’s contribution to the theory of asymmetry. Indeed, Popper’s ethical notion of asymmetry could be located in *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol.1 where he stated as follows:

I believe that there is, from the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure. Both the greatest happiness principle of the Utilitarians and Kant’s principle “Promote other people’s happiness...” seem to me (at least in their formulations) wrong on this point which, however, is completely decided by rational argument...In my opinion, human suffering makes a direct moral appeal, namely, the appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway (284n).

Although Popper had some reservations about values, he believed that the field of ethics has much to gain by accepting that ethical theories should be formulated in negative terms. In the same book, Popper stated that the negative formulation of ethical theories “add to clarity in the field of ethics, if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e. if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness” (285n). From the foregoing, therefore, there is no doubt that Popper greatly contributed to the emergence of the concept of asymmetry on the field of ethics, even if it was a consequence of the theory of falsification in empirical science and theory of knowledge. In addition, Popper (235, n.6) formulated the following two principles which should be the foundation of humanitarian and egalitarian ethics:

- i. Tolerance toward all who are not intolerant and who do not propagate violence...
- ii. The recognition that all moral urgency has its basis in the urgency of suffering or pain...We should realize that from the moral point of view suffering and happiness must not be treated as symmetrical...

The second principle is what R. N. Smart called “Negative Utilitarianism”. Basically, the theory of negative utilitarianism entails that there is no balance or equality between pain and happiness or pleasure. It is true that Smart was critical of this view but what cannot be ignored is that Popper’s view, even if it is not widely acknowledged has helped to popularize the notion of disutility in various forms. Indeed, some important philosophers such as Peter Singer and Henry Sidgwick have helped to widen the scope of the theory of negative utilitarianism which R. N.

Smart coined in 1958 in response to Karl Popper's view on the asymmetry between happiness or pleasure and suffering and pain. There are now many variants of the theory but they are all based on the notion of disutility, that is, that suffering should be reduced or minimized while there is no moral reason to increase or maximize happiness. Although negative utilitarians tend to appeal to intuition and common sense, its application could lead to disastrous consequences. R. N. Smart claimed that the application of Popper's theory would lead to mass suicide or complete extermination of the human race in the attempt to eliminate pain or suffering. In Smart's opinion,

Suppose that a ruler controls a weapon capable of instantly and painlessly destroying the human race. Now it is empirically certain that there would be some suffering before all those alive on any proposed destruction day were to die in the natural course of events. Consequently, the use of the weapon is bound to diminish suffering and would be the ruler's duty on NU grounds. On the other hand, we would assuredly regard such an action as wicked. On utilitarian grounds we might defend the judgement pointing to the positive enjoyments and happiness likely to be found in a great number of the lives destroyed (in *Mind*, 542).

This was Smart's response to Popper's theory which led to the emergence of many variants of negative utilitarianism such as lexical negative utilitarianism, preference negative utilitarianism, prioritarianism, etc. In all these variants, the common feature is that the notion of disutility is constant. In other words, from the standard-point of Popper as stated in his book, *Conjectures and Refutations*, "human misery is the most urgent problem of all rational public policy" (361). He stressed the fact that misery, pain or suffering outweighs happiness or pleasure. It is difficult to ignore his argument that the elimination of human misery is a more humane and moral venture than the promotion and maximization of happiness. This may explain why supporters of preference utilitarianism argue that moral actions should be those which produce "best consequences" (Mautner, 522). The problem, however, is that "best consequences" could be interpreted in the forms of positive utility and negative utility. In addition, it is difficult to calculate "best consequences". This difficulty applies to both positive utilitarianism and negative utilitarianism. What cannot be disregarded is that "utilitarianism is an ethical theory with political consequences" (Goodin, 120). These political consequences offer an insight that ethical theories are aimed at solving practical problems - both foreseen and unforeseen problems.

Evaluation

The concept of asymmetry has gained literary significance in recent times with respect to its application to population, procreation or reproductive issues. It is largely a fallout from the critique of the principles of utility as espoused by classical utilitarians. Both Jan Naverson and Jeff McMahan applied the notion of asymmetry with respect to the consequences of producing future human beings who will end up being miserable. It boils down, then, to determining whether we should be concerned with the wellbeing of existing human beings or with the wellbeing of non-existing human beings. There are some differences among scholars who have made contributions to what could be called "the asymmetry" or "procreation asymmetry". However, they all seem to argue that, morally, there is no justification for creating future happy people. This explains why population asymmetry has been linked to antinatalism – the theory which tends to discourage population growth. In general terms, therefore, the asymmetry theory supports reduction in population or the rate of future procreation. From this perspective, the asymmetry argument is related to the ethical theory known as negative utilitarianism.

Indeed, prior to Jan Naverson's article in 1967, Popper had asserted that there is no symmetry between pain or suffering and happiness or pleasure. In 1958, R. N. Smart had called Popper's "Negative Utilitarianism" because it focuses on reducing suffering rather than promoting happiness. In other words, for Popper, there is an imbalance between pain and happiness meaning that pain outweighs happiness.

The focus on the negative consequences of any moral action rather than on the positive consequences is actually what distinguishes the principle of utility from that of disutility. While the principle of utility focuses on calculating or measuring the amount of positive values that accrue from an action, the reverse is the case for the principle of disutility which calculates or measures the amount of disvalue or disutility. The implication is that the notion of asymmetry as it applies to population is merely an aspect of ethical theories which focus on disutility rather than on utility. Scholars have therefore gone ahead to apply the notion of asymmetry and disutility in different fields. The common feature is that there should be a reduction or elimination of pain or misery which equates to a moral responsibility on the part of policy makers but that there is no corresponding moral duty to increase happiness or pleasure. This view seems to be intuitive and appeals to common sense. However, many of the criticisms against positive utility also apply to disutility. One of the problems is that both assume that it is possible to measure utilities or disutilities. Moreover, both seem also to assume that the future consequences of utilities or disutilities could be measured. The point is that if it is difficult to have such measurements now it will be even more difficult to predict what will happen in future. Furthermore, the notion of disutility ignores the fact societies are very complex. It may seem rational in one society to focus on reducing suffering but in another society, people may focus on another aspect of their lives even if they have to continue to experience pain or suffering in their daily lives. This does not diminish the notions of asymmetry and disutility but merely shows that ethical issues provoke disagreements because of their application. As Singer pointed out, what should be noted is "that even the most difficult practical ethical issues are amenable to discussion and argument" (554).

Conclusion

The notion of asymmetry is linked to the principle of disutility. In its more popular form, asymmetry has been applied to population, procreation or reproductive issues. The aim of the application is to reduce or eliminate future miseries of human beings. The reduction or elimination of misery or suffering is a laudable venture but it is also fraught with its own dangerous consequences. When applied to the population, in its extreme form, it could lead to reduction or elimination of future populations. This is also true of the principle of disutility which could also promote the view that it is better to completely destroy all human life in order to avoid pain or suffering. It makes sense then to recognize that in social life there is both symmetry and asymmetry, utility and disutility. This means that sometimes societies might prioritize, prefer or choose what they feel is satisfactory for their citizens. The criteria used in making such choices may not be objective or universal. This shows that human beings, though rational, often base their actions on subjective considerations. In conclusion, asymmetry and disutility highlight the fact that the choice between good ends and bad ends may differ from one society to another.

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