

Exploring Utilitarianism: A Comparative Study of Western Civilization and Islam



^{1*} Muhammad Tahir, ² Sadia Kiran

¹ Lecturer, Department of Islamic Studies, Riphah International University, Faisalabad

² M.Phil. Scholar, Riphah International University, Faisalabad

*Email: muhammad.tahir@riphahfsd.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36755/iqan.v6i2.451>

ABSTRACT

This study explores the contrasting conceptions of virtue in Western philosophy and Islam. Western philosophers predominantly advocate a utilitarian perspective, emphasizing individual and societal utility as the ultimate moral criterion. Happiness and maximum benefit are prioritized, with little consideration for the broader welfare of others. In contrast, Islamic thought diverges, incorporating notions of sacrifice and communal welfare alongside material pursuits. Professionalism and materialism, central to Western ideals, are critiqued within an Islamic framework for their emphasis on acquisition at the expense of altruism.

Received:

01-June-24

Accepted:

24-Aug-24

Online:

27-Aug-24

KEYWORDS

Virtue,
Utilitarianism,
Islamic thought,
Materialism,
Altruism

Introduction

The concept of virtue is quite different both in West and in Islam. Western philosophers provide completely materialistic approach through their utilitarian theory. They perceive that only utility of one person or a society is based on their utility. Pain is not good and only good thing in their understanding that is happiness and maximum benefit and utility. The benefit of others in broader perspective is not available in their theories. Sacrifice is against the role of professionalism and materialism which based on to acquire more and more (Arshad, 2021).

Contrary to this concept Islamic concept of utilitarianism is to provide services to others and to dedicate all the potentials for the betterment of the benefit of people and society even for the universe. Islam even emphasizes to sacrifice life for the sake of the betterment of the people. Utility produces through the help and sacrifice for others (Baujard, 2013).

Everything, every thought, every action must be useful on worldly scale, and that matter or ideology which does not produce worldly usefulness must be removed from the essential elements that shape human life. This was the first universal rift in the relationship between God and man fell from here, due to which the doctrinal structure of religion had disappeared and its moral principles were also found to be useless. That is now, matter is ultimate reality and keeping happy to others is the highest morality. The utilitarian ideology was so strongly regarded that almost all scientific, political, and economic traditions of the West were born to support this ideology. It is perhaps not too difficult to see now that the most popular alternative to theism is in fact utilitarianism. In this social theory, utility means not only material benefits, but also a psychological version, and that Happiness is the pursuit of happiness, that is, man needs only a happiness that is in both his circumstances and conditions. Just as the possibilities of material usefulness are infinite, so are the sources of psychological happiness. That is in front of us today in the form of a big tree, and from here the foundation of detachment from God and the Hereafter was laid on which the whole modern West has built today. By making the pursuit of an immediate interest the goal of life, it is clear that there is no need for the Hereafter and for God (Arshad, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Utilitarianism in Western Philosophy

Utilitarianism, as a consequentialist theory, posits that the moral value of an action is determined by its outcome, specifically its ability to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) introduced the idea of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number, emphasizing a quantitative approach to measuring pleasure and pain. Bentham's utilitarianism is often criticized for its potential to justify morally questionable actions if they result in greater overall happiness.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) expanded on Bentham's ideas by introducing a qualitative distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Mill argued that intellectual

and moral pleasures are superior to physical pleasures, and thus, they should be given greater weight in ethical decision-making. Mill's utilitarianism has been influential in various fields, including law, economics, and public policy, where the goal is to maximize societal welfare.

Islamic Ethical Framework

Islamic ethics is rooted in the belief that moral guidance comes from divine revelation, primarily through the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadith). The ethical system in Islam is holistic, encompassing all aspects of life, including personal conduct, social justice, and governance. Central to Islamic ethics is the concept of justice (*ad*), which is closely tied to the notion of welfare (*maslaha*) and the protection of essential human rights.

The *maqasid al-shariah* (objectives of Islamic law) provides a framework for evaluating actions based on their ability to preserve key aspects of human life, including faith, intellect, lineage, and property. Unlike utilitarianism, which focuses on outcomes, Islamic ethics places significant emphasis on intentions (*niyyah*). A good intention is seen as essential for an action to be morally praiseworthy, regardless of its outcome. Islamic thought diverges, incorporating notions of sacrifice and communal welfare alongside material pursuits.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative approach to analyze the principles of utilitarianism and Islamic ethics. The research draws on primary sources, including Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Mill's *Utilitarianism*, the Quran, and Hadith. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, commentaries and books on both Western and Islamic ethical thought. The analysis focuses on three key themes: the concept of the greater good, the role of intentions, and approaches to social justice.

Results and Discussions

What is Utilitarianism?

Everything, every thought, every action must be useful on a worldly scale, and that matter or ideology which does not produce worldly usefulness must be removed from the

essential elements that shape human life (Liu, *The Contemporary Evolution and Reform of Utilitarianism*, 2023).

Utilitarianism is a moral philosophy that asserts the most ethical choice is the one that increases overall happiness or utility. This concept is often linked to the well-being of all sentient creatures. Jeremy Bentham, who introduced this theory, defined utility as the sum of happiness produced by an action, as long as it minimizes suffering for everyone involved. Being a form of consequentialism, utilitarianism evaluates actions based only on their results, using these outcomes as the ultimate criterion for determining right from wrong. Unlike other consequentialist theories like egoism or fatalism, utilitarianism treats the interests of all individuals with equal importance (Liu, *The Theoretical Evolution of Utilitarianism*, 2024).

Advocates of utilitarianism have different opinions on several issues. One debate is whether decisions should be made based on the predicted results of individual actions (act utilitarianism) or if individuals should follow rules that generally lead to the greatest overall good. Another point of contention is whether the goal should be to maximize the overall sum of happiness and well-being (total utility) or to maximize the average level of happiness and well-being across all individuals (average utility) (CHUNG, 2022).

Concept of Utilitarianism

Parameter of good or bad of any act is that it produces utility or not. If some act is producing utility or benefit that is good or if that is not producing good that is not virtuous act. According to the proponents of utilitarianism there are two forces in this world those are good and second are bad. The things or acts provide you maximum utility or maximum pleasure is virtuous for you. Any act causes pain is not an act of good. According to Bentham only instinctual pleasure is good but J.S Mill include acts provide maximum benefits for society is also an act of good (Rosen, 1990).

History of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism stands as a key and impactful moral theory in contemporary times. While the theory can be traced back to Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) and his mid-18th-century works, it was English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who clearly articulated and named the theory. Mill's 1861 essay, "On Utilitarianism," remains one of the most frequently studied expositions of this theory to this day (*The History of Utilitarianism* by J. Driver, 2009).

The seeds of utilitarianism can be found in the hedonism. These were Aristotle and Epicurus, who considered happiness to be just a good thing; the tradition of usefulness began right from Bentham, and includes James Mill, John Stuart Mill, R.M. Harry, David Bray brook, and others.

Utilitarianism is translated as Ethical ideology, political / social thought that became influential in Britain in the 19th century. Utilitarianism (the human tendency to avoid suffering) is seen as a principle of value. Bentham sought to harmonize the happiness of individuals and the happiness of society with the principle of "maximum number of happiness". JS Mill is more concerned with quality than happiness, and has moved towards a more ideal direction. It is also presented by Spencer. It is also linked accusations of representative democracy, economic liberalism, and European influence (Driver, 2009).

J. S. Mill and Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill was an English eminent politician, economist and philosopher. Mill is remembered in the history of philosophy for his efforts to reconcile with these historical socialist currents, known as classical English economics, which flourished in the nineteenth century. Moreover, his way of thinking was particularly influenced by liberal and progressive ideologies John Stuart Mill has also been instrumental in solving the problem of independence. For example, with regard to freedom in the work he is entitled to, the author maintains that every individual has the undeniable right to act according to his own will and principles, as long as the other does not harm the development of that person (Mazlish, 1988).

His views on gender inequality can be seen in both his liberal and progressive views, as Mill advocated the elimination of differences in the roles of men and women in the 19th century (Lillie, 1955).

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism, an ethical theory established by philosopher and economist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century, was further developed by John Stuart Mill. Influenced by his liberal views, Mill sought to advance utilitarian thought, which he detailed in his 1861 book, *On Utilitarianism*. Bentham argued that actions are considered good, valuable, or useful if they promote overall collective happiness, while actions that fail to do so are deemed bad (Read, 2004).

Mill introduced the concept of a competent character, believing that certain sources of happiness are more desirable and valuable than others. He argued that the most valuable attributes are those that fulfill the highest faculties, meaning those that utilize the most advanced human capabilities. Mill expressed these ideas in his 1861 work, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Baujard, 2013).

In other words, the author advocates for elite governance. At the same time, he aimed to address social inequalities through more egalitarian policies. John Stuart Mill argued that achieving collective well-being requires the most educated individuals to lead both the state and society (Lillie, 1955).

Utilitarianism and Western World

With the advent of Descartes, the emergence of a principled and permanent duality in soul and matter, man's classical conception of himself and the world changed dramatically. If the soul and matter or God and the world are divided into completely indifferent types of knowledge and existence, the result can be nothing but that all the laws and purposes of human life are completely cut off from the supernatural or religious principle. Jeremy Bentham In the words of: "Nature has given us into the hands of two sovereign masters: pleasure and pain" (Zhang, 2024).

Everything, every thought, every action must be useful on a worldly scale, and that matter or ideology which does not produce worldly usefulness must be removed from the essential elements that shape human life. This was the first universal rift in the relationship between God and man fell from here, due to which the doctrinal structure of religion had disappeared and its moral principles were also found to be useless. That is now, matter is ultimate reality and keeping happy to others is the highest morality. The utilitarian ideology was so strongly regarded that almost all scientific, political, and economic traditions of the West were born to support this ideology. It is perhaps not too difficult to see now that the most popular alternative to theism is in fact utilitarianism. In this social theory, utility means not only material benefits, but also a psychological version, and that Happiness is the pursuit of happiness, that is, man needs only a happiness that is in both

his circumstances and conditions. Just as the possibilities of material usefulness are infinite, so are the sources of psychological happiness. That is in front of us today in the form of a big tree, and from here the foundation of detachment from God and the Hereafter was laid on which the whole modern West has built today. By making the pursuit of an immediate interest the goal of life, it is clear that there is no need for the Hereafter and for God (Arshad, 2021).

Concept of Utilitarianism in Islam

Islamic does not endorse the concept of utilitarianism. Islamic concept of virtue is quite different than the western concept of utility which is totally based on materialism. Islamic concept of virtue derives from the Holy Quran:

لَيْسَ الْبِرَّ أَنْ تُوَلُّوا وُجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ
الْآخِرِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ وَآتَى الْمَالَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ ذَوِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينِ
وَأَبْنَ السَّبِيلِ وَالسَّائِلِينَ وَفِي الرِّقَابِ وَأَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَى الزَّكَاةَ وَالْمُوفُونَ
بِعَهْدِهِمْ إِذَا عَاهَدُوا وَالصَّابِرِينَ فِي الْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَحِينَ الْبَأْسِ أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا
وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُتَّقُونَ (سوره البقره ۱۷۷)

Righteousness is not simply about facing East or West, rather, it involves believing in Allah, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book, and the Messengers. True righteousness includes giving your resources. Out of love for Allah, to your relatives, orphans, the needy, travelers, those who ask for help, and for freeing slaves. It also means being steadfast in prayer, practicing regular charity, keeping your promises, and being patient and firm in times of pain, suffering, adversity, and panic. These are the qualities of truthful and God-fearing people (Khayati, 2015).

Further precisely it describes as:

خير الناس من ينفع الناس

Best people are those who are beneficial for others (Khayati, 2015).

Utilitarianism is something which emphasis the benefits of some individual or more in broader sense the benefits or utility of a nation. Contrary to this concept Islam build a personality who only thinks the construction of society. It emphasizes sacrifice for the betterment of society and even for the betterment of this universe. Western concept of utilitarianism only emphasis on ‘take’ of get maximum benefits from others on the other side teachings of Islam focuses on the ‘give’. It’s teaching curtain out the power of give which based a prosperous society (Alnemari, 2017).

In Islamic teaching “the hand of giving is far better than the hand of taking.” West considers the best thing is to get more and more. This type of perception brings a person to think only about himself not about others. Muslims consider that Life is given by Allah and one day we have to go to Allah and answer that we want to take care of human rights. Help others, help the weak, and take care of others as much as possible. As long as we are alive, Allah Almighty is ready to accept everything we say. When we repent to Allah, when we sincerely ask forgiveness, Allah will forgive us. Now is the time for us to believe and benefit ourselves, but if the time passes, then we will be ready to believe and Allah will not believe. Will we still have time to understand that life is an interpretation of good for the benefit of the people?

Even in Islam the parameter of Love with God is to spend its most loveable thing in the path of Allah,

لَنْ تَنَالُوا الْبِرَّ حَتَّى تُنْفِقُوا مِمَّا تُحِبُّونَ ۗ (سورة ال عمران: ٩٢)

You will never attain goodness unless you spend what you love in the way of God (Khayati, 2015).

Conclusion

The concept of virtue or good in West and in Islam is quite different. Western philosophers provide completely materialistic approach through their utilitarian theory. They perceive that that only utility of one person or a society is based on their utility. Pain is not good and only good thing in their understanding that is happiness and maximum benefit and utility. The benefit of others in broader perspective is not available in their theories. Sacrifice is against the role of professionalism and materialism which based on to acquire more and more.

Contrary to this concept Islamic concept of utilitarianism is to provide services to others and to dedicate all the potentials for the betterment of the benefit of people and society even for the universe. Islam even emphasizes to sacrifice life for the sake of the betterment of the people. Utility produces through the help and sacrifice for others.

References

- Alnemari, H. H. (2017). Utilitarianism in Classic Islamic Jurisprudence. *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture*, 5(1), 1-8. doi:10.15640/jisc.v5n1a1
- Arshad, R. (2021). The Inevitable Contingency of Ethics on Theistic Foundations. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, 11(1), 159-174. doi:DOI:10.32350/jitc.111.09
- Baujard, A. (2013). Utilitarianism and Anti-Utilitarianism. *GATE Working Paper* , 1-23.
- CHUNG, H. (2022). Prospect Utilitarianism and the Original Position. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 35-47.
- Driver, J. (2009, 27 March 2009). *The History of Utilitarianism*. Retrieved from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/>
- Khayati, I. (2015). *Elements of Utilitarianism in Al-Ghazali'S Thought* . STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY (UIN): WALISONGO SEMARANG.
- Lillie, W. (1955). *An Introduction to Ethics*. London: Routledge.
- Liu, S. (2023). *The Contemporary Evolution and Reform of Utilitarianism*. Beijing, China : Peking University Press 2023 .
- Liu, S. (2024). *The Theoretical Evolution of Utilitarianism*. Beijing, China: Peking University Press.
- Mazlish, B. (1988). *James and John Stuart Mill*. New York: Routledge.
- Read, D. (2004). *Utility theory from Jeremy Bentham to Daniel Kahneman*. London: Department of Operational Research, London School of Economics.
- Rosen, F. (1990). *Victorian Liberalism*. Milton Park, England, UK: Routledge.
- Zhang, Y. (2024). Sidgwick and Bentham's "double aspect" of utilitarianism revisited. *Theoria*, 90(2), 161-174. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/theo.12517>