



Mains Practice Question

Q. What do you understand by the theory of utilitarianism? Critically analyse the usefulness of the theory. (150 words)

03 Sep, 2020 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach

- In the introduction explain the concept of utilitarianism.
- Discuss the significance of the concept.
- Discuss some of the challenges/issues with usefulness of theory.
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

- Utilitarianism is an ethical doctrine pioneered by Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill.
- It is defined as the doctrine of ethics which advocates that actions are right if they are useful for the benefit of the majority and that an action is right so far as it promotes happiness.
- Utilitarian ideas are fundamental to modern ethical theory and remain firmly ensconced in contemporary intellectual life.

Body

Utilitarianism has three essential elements

- Whether an action is right or wrong is determined solely by its consequences.
- The value of the consequences of an action is **assessed in terms of the amount** of happiness or well-being caused.
- In assessing the total happiness caused to a number of people, equal amounts of happiness are to have equal value, no one person's happiness having greater value than that of another's.

Significance of Utilitarianism in governance

- The theory of utilitarianism is a simple theory which helps in formulating policies for welfare of maximum number of people with quick implementation.
- The principle of utilitarianism can be employed to formulate better **policies** and make **informed decisions** as the priority of the government is to **maximize benefits** from programs and policies and at the same time minimise the losses and damages.
 - Here, lies a direct connect between theory and practice. An officer can employ the utilitarian ethics to maximise the utility of the resources at his/her disposal and impact maximum lives.
- One advantage of utilitarianism is that it shows how moral questions can have objectively true answers. Often, people believe that morality is subjective and depends only on people's desires or sincere beliefs.
 - Utilitarianism, however, provides a method for showing which moral beliefs are true and

which are false.

Criticism

- Governance is not a zero-sum-game and one must be cautious to not overlook those who are outside the purview of the utilitarian policies.
 - Utilitarian policies benefit the majority, thus repeated emphasis on utility may lead to alienation of the deprived section. "The greatest amount of good for the greatest number" is a good approach to governance but **inclusivity is equally important.**
- The doctrine has been criticised by many for its failure to acknowledge that people can have **different notions of pleasure** in different socioeconomic contexts.
- As we can not predict the future, it is difficult to know with certainty whether the **consequences of our actions** will be good or bad.
- Primacy to the outcomes and not the means can promote **unethical practices** among administrators and people in general.
- **Some examples critical to the consequential theory of Utilitarianism**
 - If a judge can prevent riots that will cause many deaths only by convicting an innocent person of a crime and imposing a severe punishment on that person, act utilitarianism implies that the judge should convict and punish the innocent person.
 - If a doctor can save five people from death by killing one healthy person and using that person's organs for life-saving transplants, then act utilitarianism implies that the doctor should kill the one person to save five.
 - If a person makes a promise but breaking the promise will allow that person to perform an action that creates just slightly more well-being than keeping the promise will, then act utilitarianism implies that the promise should be broken.

Conclusion

- "Means are as important as ends" -Mahatma Gandhi
- Therefore, theory of utilitarianism though useful in formulation of certain policies for welfare of a large number of people but can not be treated as the end as a civil servant should be cautious of both- means and ends using the highest amount of intelligence.