

Utilitarian Theory Throughout the Ages: Aquinas, Locke and Mill

Utilitarian theory is the moral premise that frames modern democracy. The primary role of government as it exists today is to serve the public good to the greatest degree. The seeds of Utilitarianism however, were planted long before what has flourished into our current democratic model of government. Over the course of nearly 500 years, philosophers like St. Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill, pointed either implicitly or explicitly to a Utilitarian government as the best medium to carry out the greatest good for the greatest number. Whether by rule of a King according to Aquinas, Natural Law Democracy, according to Locke or proportionate representation within Democratic government according to Mill, all believed that the role of the government was to serve the common good. The word “common” signifies that which is consistent throughout the majority of society; hence the greatest good. In this paper, I will briefly outline the political philosophy of Aquinas, Locke and Mill and make the case that their philosophy relates to Utilitarian principles and finally conclude with a discussion on Utilitarian theory as it is practiced or not practiced in American government.

A Utilitarian government operates on the central premise that the role of government is to serve the greatest possible good for the greatest number of people. The assumption in this theory is that the greatest good is what is beneficial and acceptable for the majority of society. The greatest number stems from the first idea, that what is commonly accepted as beneficial will be implemented through government and will thus affect the majority of society whose needs are being considered. St. Thomas Aquinas,

the first philosopher I will explore in this paper, believed strongly that a king would best carry out the “common good.” Aquinas asserted: “If the group of free men is directed by a ruler to the common good of the group, his government will be right and just...but if the government is directed not at common good of the group but at the private good of the ruler it will be unjust and a perversion...”(Zihalia, 88). Aquinas clearly states that good government is one in which the common good of the people is served. Common again, being what is consistent amongst most people. In addition, because Aquinas scorned private interest as the sole motivation of a public leader, it is even clearer that Aquinas believed that the will of the King should be consistent with the will of the people, the common good.

Similarly, Locke asserts that the greatest good is also to be served through government, more specifically, through a joint confidence in the sovereignty of laws which protect in particular rights of physical protection and ownership. With regards to “Natural Law Democracy” Locke asserts: “the first and fundamental positive law of all commonwealths is establishing of the legislative power...itself is the preservation of the society (as far as will consist with the public good) of every person in it...”(Zihalia, 28). He continues in a later paragraph: “Their power [legislative power]...is limited to the public good of society” (Zihalia, 29). Although Locke’s model of government differs from Aquinas’ in that people come together to adopt their own laws and create a Legislative power, their theories are similar in that the underlying goal of the Legislature is to preserve and protect the public good.

In addition, J.S. Mill, a professed Utilitarian, believed that the best model of government embodying the “greatest amount of good with the least evil” was a

democratic government (Zihalia, 102). This Democracy, “of the whole people, by the whole people equally represented,” would serve to meet the needs and/or public good of the majority of citizens through a proportionally representative government (Zihalia, 110). Mill asserted: “[i]n a representative body actually deliberating, the minority must of course be overruled; and in an equal democracy (since the opinions of the constituents, when they insist on them, determine those of the representative body... the majority of people ... will outvote and prevail over the minority” (Zihalia, 111). Similar to Locke, Mill believed that a government arises out of the will of the people, but more explicitly claims that this same government through voting and public participation will adhere to the professed good of the majority of the citizens. The rest of the citizens, or the minority equally pursuing the will of the people and expressing an alternate voice, will be overpowered by the majority. This government thereby serves the greatest good for the greatest number tying Mill’s philosophy to that of Aquinas and Locke.

Although each philosopher differed in their conclusions regarding the best form of government, the function of government for all three philosophers was to pursue the greatest and common good of the people. Aquinas put his faith in the moral superiority of the King, Locke asserted that the people would come together and establish laws and preserve the common good of the “*commonwealth*”, and Mill put forth a model of representative government, pioneered by the majority of citizens, with the minority not entirely overlooked.

Though each philosopher’s ideas spanned over the course of several hundred years, their commonality united by utilitarian principles, transgressed the times and can clearly, be seen at the heart of American Democracy. Through the voting process upon which

decisions concerning the laws are made based on majority support amongst citizens and within the government, the public's general will in theory will prevail. However, in recent years, I have observed a shift away from the utilitarian ideal with the privatization of certain goods and services, particularly healthcare. With the proposal of new policies coupled with existing programs that allow healthcare to be regulated either by individuals or private companies, people have greater room to serve their self-interests. This new trend appears to fall more closely in line with Adam Smith's model of "enlightened self-interest", in its attempt to meet the general will of the whole people through the self-interested pursuits of individuals.

One example of the shift towards "enlightened self-interest" is the creation of Health Savings Accounts (HAS's). Companies and employers under this policy have the option to save money to pay for healthcare out of pocket. This exchange occurs between the healthcare provider, doctor and consumer. The only involvement that the government has in this transaction is a tax-break for families that opt into this system. In addition, with the exception of Medicare and Medicaid, most health care providers are privately run medical practices or institutions like Kaiser, which operates as its own HMO. The concern here is that the majority of citizens feel that healthcare is necessary and a public good, but the current healthcare delivery system does not achieve that end. I justify the labeling of health-care as a public good because the federal and local governments subsidize health care costs particularly for low-income citizens and seniors and that the Health and Human Services Department receives a portion of the federal budget every fiscal year.

I believe that the structure of the healthcare system caters to individuals not to the public good. If healthcare were geared toward the public good, I believe it would be federally regulated at all levels and would be available to everyone. Since individuals can pick and chose what they want, when they want and how they want their benefits, it can be deduced that healthcare is more of a commodity than a public good.

It appears to me that the only logical conclusion to be drawn is that our public values have shifted. According to Aquinas, Locke and Mill, the will and needs of the people influence the action of the governing body. In America, whether or not the aforementioned theory is applicable is ambiguous. It is possible that either Americans do not value healthcare as a public good or they have relinquished their will particularly in the area of health-care and allowed a form of tyranny: dominance of the healthcare system by a minority of citizens including doctors, insurance companies, prescription drug companies, and government leaders. If the later is the case, we are clearly shifting away from our Utilitarian roots and ideals.

It is interesting to see political philosophy throughout the ages and its application to modern issues of governance. It is even more interesting to see the continual tug-of-war between the will of the majority and the will of a few. These battles have not changed since Aquinas' days and most likely never will. I do think it a valuable exercise however, to observe the roots and fundamental goals of government, and to finally evaluate if we are meeting those goals. In regards healthcare, perhaps this exercise needs to take place, and the position of government, revisited.