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**MED 425 Midterm Exam**

**Question 1, sub-section A**

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory which holds that the right action is that which maximizes the happiness of people, in other words, the right act or policy ought to, and should, produce the most good for the most number of people in a society. It is a type of consequentialism that holds the view that only the effects of an act determine whether it is right or wrong. This system of right and wrong is born out of the belief that experiences or sensations that feel good or pleasurable when we have them are intrinsically valuable for human welfare.

My thinking on utilitarianism is that it convinces me in very small, select situations, for example, if two siblings are arguing over a piece of chocolate, then it is sensible for the parent to split the chocolate in half and a give a piece to each child, this would generate the most good for the most number of people. Take as another example, a situation where there is a small village of 15 like minded people, all in the same economic class. The people in this village desire for there to be a mosque located at the village center next to the village hall. In this situation it is sensible to split the expenses of building the mosque equally between all 15 members of the village, in this way, you give all members of the village equal rights to the mosque and net happiness is increased for the most number of people. But as the sample size of people in a society starts to increase(to hundreds, thousands and millions), situations and viewpoints become more nuanced and varied and thus it becomes more difficult to implement the utilitarian ethical model without consequently infringing upon the rights(both negative and positive) of a minority group of people within society.

**Question 1, sub-section B**

Rights are difficult to conceptualize within the utilitarian framework because it treats the problem of acting justly from a holistic point of view instead of giving adequate consideration to the parts this whole. Take for example the trolley problem, here the utilitarian would obviously opt to save the five people laying on the track by switching the path of the train and killing the one person instead, consequently this means this individual’s right to life(or any other right for that matter) is voided under the utilitarian’s judgement. But even more crucial, I think, is that conceptions of good vary from society to society, take for example the Nazi campaign of the 20th century, within the utilitarian model, Hitler was doing the right thing, because the Jewish peoples were a minority in german society at the time(in 1933 the jewish population of Germany was numbered at 525000, less than one percent) and the majority population, the Christian Germans, were convinced that the only way to achieve their conception of the good( a pure Aryan utopia) was to eradicate the jewish population. Utilitarianism may foster some very dangerous ideas given the majority population of a society accepts them as good. For the utilitarian something is right or wrong if society holds it to be so, for more right based ethical theories, right or wrong is independent of the community at large.

**Question 2, sub-section A**

The three Rawlsian principles of justice include firstly;

That each individual will, to the furthest extent possible, be entitled to a set of basic liberties or rights. This first principle is mainly concerned with liberty, it was Rawls’ attempt to, in dismissal of utilitarianism, give consideration to the separateness of people. This principle furnishes all individuals with liberties such as the right to freedom of thought, the right to freedom of association, the right to religious freedom et cetera which aid in creating a situation where each individual is treated as an end and not a means to an end.

The second principle is a manifold of two other principles firstly,

That social and economic inequality should be set up such that the least advantaged are as well off as they can be(Also called the difference principle) , in this Rawls’ attempts to keep the more advantaged in society accountable to the least advantaged , he invokes a kind of welfare society where inequality is only tolerated if it means the an increase in the welfare of the worst-off, this helps to protect the vulnerable class from exploitation by the stronger, more well off class. One could say, it is a way of keeping the peace.

Secondly, that social and economic inequality should be set up such that public offices and/or positions that uphold these Rawlsian principles are accessible to all under fair equality of opportunity. This means that any and all individuals, irrespective of their race, gender , religion and sexuality will be allowed to partake in processes of production which allow for a society to reach a place of unequal distribution, an equity which is only tolerated so long as the Rawlsian difference principle is invoked, actualized and maintained. The actualization of the principle of equal opportunity for all seems to precede the difference principle, indeed Rawls gave more priority to the former over the latter.

It may be important here to say that Rawls gave priority to the liberty principle over the other two, there can be no trade offs of liberty for social or economic gain even if it increases the welfare of the less well-off.

**Question 2, sub-section B**

No, I do not agree with Rawls’ theory of a fair society.

Firstly, I think in his ‘Veil Of Ignorance’ hypothesis, where people are amnesic to their interests and talents, he doesn’t acknowledged that not all people are so risk-averse as to contractually agree to slice equal pieces of a pie of which they will be last to eat. Different people will have different evaluations of their chances and different amounts of tolerance to uncertainty.

Secondly, I don’t think he stays true enough to his break from utilitarianism. In a society where the welfare of the least advantaged is emphasized , a movement of resources from top to bottom is necessary and even inevitable, I think, to give an advantage to the least well off. It seems to me that the redistributive welfare state that Rawls argues for is a re-incarnation of the means to an end model thinking that is at the heart of utilitarianism.

Thirdly, I think to some extent, inequalities are inevitable, some even justified. Let’s say we as a society resort to ground zero and start at the original position, there-after we then agree to begin a new society based on Rawlsian principles, unfortunately for the Rawlsian conception of a fair society, I do not remain amnesic to my talents after our contractual agreement. Let’s say one of my particular talents is singing, if I do this very well and people would like to pay to see me sing, then somewhere down the line even if we start with a completely homogeneous society(fair, equal and just), I would generate more wealth than others, wealth that a re-distributive state cannot take and re- distribute to the people because the people themselves gave it to me. In order to stop this from happening, the state would have to actively restrict people from trading freely, it would have to infringe on people’s rights. This sentiment was also set forth by Robert Nozick in his arguments against coercive welfare states, saying that states like these fail to treat some people as ends and instead treat them as means to ends.

Fourthly and finally, I think it fails to give an accurate diagnosis of any given society all the time. Given that the unjust society is that in which inequality does not increase the welfare of the less well off and does not provide equal opportunity for all, if we were to be faced with a society where exactly the such is happening, is it fair to say that said society is unjust because of this and only this? . It could be that there are other factors in play, it could be that all the necessary infrastructure for the ideal Rawlsian society has been laid down(no discrimination, liberty for all, equal opportunity for all), but those in the less well off strata of society lack the information capital, meaning they might not know how to start and/or run a business, they might not know how to manage their money, it is even entirely possible that they might not know of the existence(and value) of these very important liberties and rights. I think to characterize this society as unjust in the Rawlsian sense is to do away with nuance because there are other factors other than the availability of the primary goods at play(i.e the transmission of valuable information).

**Question 3, sub-section A**

The issue I have chosen to discuss is that of political identity in the digital age. The digital medium is made up of a collection of networks that allow information to be sent and received in multiple directions all at once, this reproducibility and transferability is what allows the digital media to be embedded in the way we communicate in the modern age. Particularly in the case of social media, the ability to, at one click of a button, send information en-masse to large numbers of people is very beneficial for political organizing and the dissemination of valuable information regarding key social issues, but this sudden openness and availability of the world at large has as it’s counter part the peculiar inclination of human beings to be a little tribalistic, we get along better with people that think like us and act like us. This will tend to push us further and further into our own personal echo chambers of information and true-isms, the ethical issue for me here is, is the current state of the political discourse on social media(or any information media for that matter) helping to move our respective political discourses further or is it making us worse off?. In other words, are we right in saying digital media helps us hold fruitful political debate?.

**Question 3, sub-section B**

The utilitarian view of this, I think, is that so far as the consequences of this generate more happiness for people in society, then it is justified. If a society would rather talk *at* each other instead of *to* each other then this current state of affairs is completely acceptable, if the people in a society want it to be so, then it should be so and is therefore just. A more right based theory on the other hand , I think, would emphasize first and foremost one the separateness of persons, this individual-ness of the individual will come with it an allocation of rights and freedoms, the most important of which in this context would be the right to freedom of thought. The singular mind, now free from the pressures of the collective, will then have to come to ask of itself “what is true really?” , this fundamental question, I think, will allow the individual to begin to tear down the filter walls and start to move towards better understand, both of self and of other.

**Bonus Question**

The Encumbered self refers to the embedded-ness of the individual in society, the communitarian in opposition to the liberalist believes the individual or rather the self determinacy of the individual is molded and shaped by the society around it and that each individual ought to work toward some communal role, in communitarianism the needs and wants of the community is higher than that of the individual. This is clearly opposed to the liberalist doctrine because in liberalism the individual is the center piece of the theory not the corner piece, here-in the individual is free to rationally contemplate the value(whether it is worth doing or not) of it’s communal role and even further, to opt out of it. The liberalist takes the view that self determinacy of the individual should not be infringed upon by outside forces, this is of course difficult to see in practicality because of how much communal practices define the identity of the individual, the communitarian promptly points this out, saying that, because the individual understands itself as self-towards-goals and seeing as the community is a significant molding force in the life of the individual, then the community(and the common good) should be held as the authoritative horizon. This(The authority of the community) should never come into question because, as the communitarian argues, the abandonment of the community for the liberalist relentlessly rational search for the good judgement where-in nothing is off the table will eventually come to the conclusion that nothing is worth doing, that all moral-communal positions are arbitrary and thus a nihilism ensues. In short, the point of contrast between communitarianism and liberalism is this:-

The communitarian understands the individual as personhood-towards-ends while the liberalist understands the individual as personhood-before-ends.