

## Utilitarianism May Be the Cure for What Ails Us

Andrea Hyde

A universal code of behavior, built on utilitarian principles, could be the philosophy by which holders of competing belief systems mutually co-exist and/or cooperate for the betterment of humanity. A utilitarian is someone who accepts the principle of utility- and is therefore concerned with maximizing the value (utility) of the universe – which makes utilitarianism a consequentialist (goal-based) theory of ethics, as opposed to a deontological (rule-based) theory (2003). The concept of utilitarianism is simple. The purpose is to maximize the world's happiness, e.g. that which increases happiness is good and that which increases suffering is bad (Mill 1987) . In a postmodern society, we are required to make choices about our realities. When we choose to adopt a belief, we are aware of the fact that we could choose an entirely different one out of an enormous range of possibilities. The postmodern individual is constantly reminded that other people have entirely different concepts of what the world is like. Increasingly, belief in the goodness of happiness and the badness of suffering seems to be the only basic part of the moral discourse that we all share (Wright 1994). So, while beliefs may vary, it is possible that the mutual goal remains the same. By adopting the principles of utilitarianism, the global community could work through conflicting beliefs that might otherwise prevent harmonious international relations.

I do not advocate eliminating the consideration of belief systems in shaping personal moralities and I recognize the absolute necessity of some belief systems in supporting basic psychological and emotional well-being, especially if those beliefs were instilled during critical childhood periods by people to whom we looked for love and protection. In fact, I think that recognizing man's universal spiritual nature should be unifying in and of itself. There seems to be a biological drive towards transcendence. Belief in a supernatural power, or anything that is an absolute certainty, assuages our fears of the unpredictable forces of nature against which we are helpless. It is possible that beliefs that reduce irrational fear (i.e. fear of the unknown), which makes us weaker and thereby threatens our survival, were selected by the process of evolution to survive. It is ironic that people, whose beliefs reject evolution, may have those beliefs *because* of evolution. (Giovannoli 1999)

Religion is defined as an “action or conduct indicating a belief in, reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power; the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989) . Religion –institutionalized beliefs –is functional for groups in the same way that personal beliefs are functional for individuals. Essentially, religions differ only in their interpretations of man's relationship with the divine. This explains the successful efforts of interdenominational organizations. It becomes increasingly more difficult, though, to find agreement between religions when one supports an absolute truth and the other does not. This exoteric-esoteric spectrum of spiritual belief systems is a manifestation of the objectivist-constructivist polarization. Formalized exoteric belief systems, most recognized religions, are doctrinal, institutionalized, reified and deified. They usually have a publicly accessible means for explaining everything, through scripture or ordained instructors. Exoteric belief systems lend themselves nicely to becoming established religions, since this type of belief system works as a shaper of coherent social order (Anderson 1990). Esoteric belief systems, on the other hand, are more philosophy than theology. They are mystical; open to various interpretations; admit the illusory nature of reality and are somewhat secretive or occult. Initiates gradually discover their

own truths as their practice progresses, rather than absorb the established and official dogma. Some doctrinal religions tolerate esoteric schools within the institution, but there are bound to be “certain inherent tension between the two” (Anderson 1990). As the major religions, in the west at least, vie for the attention of consumer-adherents, this tension may disappear in a wave of conciliatory acceptance.

What can be said of the superiority of one type of spiritual belief system over the other? The constructivist means of evaluating stories and reality structures is a test of “fit”, not a test of “match” between cosmic reality and human understanding of it. As long a belief works well in its context, it need not be a precise mirror of ultimate reality (Glaserfeld 1984). The concept of fitness is found in evolutionary biology, where the principle of natural selection is said to insure the survival of the fittest. Genes that serve the adaptation of an organism to its present environment will be selected for transmission to future generations, so too beliefs that sustain a human organism in his or her present environment will be passed along through cultural transmission. Joseph Giovannoli calls beliefs with perceived inheritance value, “psychogenes”. In evaluating belief system, it is incorrect to assume that beliefs that survive must be true. “The evolutionary process selects based on which is better suited to survive, not on which is correct”. (Giovannoli 1999)

There are, however, aspects of esoteric teachings that could be of practical use for emotional/spiritual/psychological survival in the postmodern world, in that they offer an idea of religious life without necessitating a belief in a supreme being; are systems of learning about the illusory nature of our senses and thought processes; and “directly challenge the assumption that if you lose your conviction in the absolute truth of any concept or doctrine, you are automatically headed down the path to meaninglessness and/or immorality” (Anderson 1990).

In 1971, Charles Darwin wrote in *The Decent of Man*, “As man advances in civilization and, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to men of all nations and races” (Darwin 1981). This was a shockingly progressive idea to the Victorian mind, but it should make perfect (practical) sense to all societies, today. Not long after Darwin’s time, when anthropologists began conducting a new method of qualitative research, called participant observation, the civilized world realized that all people are participating in a unique culture, not simple living in objective reality. Pre-industrial peoples were shedding the label of “savage” as written reports of their belief, language, laws and customs became available to the literate world.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we observe that cultures have stopped spreading apart and are now coming together (Stone Sunstein 2002). A highly visible westernization can be observed throughout the rest of the world, but at the same time a more subtle easternization is noticeable in the West. Cultures are no longer mutually exclusive. We do not have to reject our native cultures to adopt, in whole or in part, another culture. As individuals transmit genes, cultures transmit memes or replicating mental patterns (Dawkins 1989). It then stands to reason that a global culture would transmit global memes. Ideas such as religious tolerance, racial and sexual equality, human rights and the social construction of reality - or the recognition of the relativity of belief systems - are example of some global memes that are noticeable today. (Anderson 1990)

Reciprocity is a universal norm in all societies, but for many, the “circle of concern extends only as far as the boundaries of their own nation.” (Singer 2002) It is possible to argue that we have a special obligation to our fellow citizens, or group members, because we are all engaged in some mutual enterprise. Evidence of this is the outpouring of aid from Americans to the families of the victims of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the (at times reluctant) obligation that we feel to pay taxes that will support social services for ourselves and our community members (Singer 2002).

Evolutionary biologists explain this feeling of obligation as keeping with the principles of kinship selection and reciprocal altruism. In the first case, it makes sense to invest time and resources with those individuals who do, or who are more likely to, carry your genes. In the latter, you can expect to see a higher rate of return for similar investments that are spent on people in your social group or community. Those individuals are more likely to have the opportunity to return kindness for kindness (Wright 1994). It is not possible to eradicate favoritism, as in the case of parents to their own children (Singer 2002).

Support for an effective universal prohibition on genocide and crimes against humanity shows more clearly than any other issue how our conception of the unity of the human race has changed over the past 50 years (Singer 2002). On the issue of race, we clearly still have a long way to go. The DNA inside people with different complexions and hair textures is 99.9% alike, although that is not the same thing as saying that race does not exist, as geneticists agreed just five years ago (Lehrman 2003). Sociologist Troy Duster examines how the results of genetic investigation affect existing beliefs about socially constructed categories, such as race, and how beliefs in turn influence research agendas. “No amount of logic”, he says. “will erase the concept or destroy the disparities that arise from it, because people use race to sort out their social groupings and to define their social and economic interactions.” (Lehrman 2003) Positions such as those advanced in *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein 1994) represent a historically conditioned belief in the scientific grounds for racial inequality and the inability of any social policy to correct for such “natural” disparities. Though Murray and Herrnstein claim that their incendiary book, *The Bell Curve* is about intelligence and class structure, not about intelligence and race, the authors “color their discussion in shade of black and white” (Fraser 1995). The voluminous statistics which appear in the appendices do not support the authors’ finding. Moreover, the text is rife with equivocation, qualification and even contradiction. Still, the book received a warm welcome among the conservative press and due to media sensationalism, enjoyed a respectable amount of public consumption.

For much of the past century it has been widely believed that people commit crimes of violence because they are or were at formative period of their psyche, such as childhood, poor, ignorant, oppressed, abused or exploited. It follows from this point of view that trying to prevent these crimes by more effective policing is treating the symptoms and not the causes. “To get at the roots of the problem, we must end injustice and exploitation, and improve and reform education so that it teaches the importance of respecting our fellow human beings, irrespective of race, religion or politics...and insure that no child is brought up in poverty or by abusive parents” (Singer 2002).

But there is some concern in the United States that teaching international studies and global awareness to children undermines certain “American” values and beliefs. And a true and unbiased survey of international studies does call into question absolutist beliefs, such as the

superiority of capitalism and Christianity to other economic and religious models. Moral reasoning and values clarification are also threatening to those who feel that teaching children that values are not based on an absolute truth is tantamount to teaching them that there is no right and wrong. What some fail to realize is that old beliefs and values do not automatically disappear when new beliefs and values are discovered.

Teaching tolerance of other cultures would not be enough to stop violence utterly. War and massacre of one kinship group by another has been a means for humans (and our closest non-human primate relatives, chimpanzees) of securing an advantage in passing their genes on to later generations (Singer 2002). This is not the best, in terms of most successful, means of genetics proliferation. One of them is being particularly good at forming mutually beneficial cooperative relationships. Extending reciprocal altruism to as many people as possible would maximize the benefits of generosity and benevolence, leading to a decrease in suffering and an increase in happiness on an exponentially larger scale. However, “just as, at the domestic level, the last line of defense against murder, rape and assault is law enforcement, so too the last line of defense against genocide and similar crimes must be law enforcement, at a global level, and where other methods of achieving that fail, the method of last resort will be military action” (Singer 2002). This is a practical, utilitarian approach. We should punish (cause suffering to) people only so far as that will raise overall happiness by reducing the total amount of suffering at present. Punishment as a deterrent to crime would also decrease the sum total of future suffering.

Ethics appears to have developed from the behavior and feelings of social animals (Singer 2002). We live in imagined communities, defined in term of national boundaries (Anderson 1991). It is time for us to see ourselves as belonging to an imagined community of the world. The basic global meme that grew out of postmodernism - recognition of the social construction of reality - is the thread that will bind us. “We may not have a global civilization that we can recognize as such, but we clearly have a global theatre” (Anderson 1990). For the first time ever, all people are capable of knowing that they inhabit a world filled with people of differing belief systems. They have access to information about their culture, are able to witness their behavior and perhaps even to speak to them directly. “How well we come through the era of globalization... will depend on how we respond ethically to the idea that we live in one world. For rich nations not to take a global ethical viewpoint has long been seriously morally wrong. Now, it is also, in the long term, a danger to their security”(Singer 2002).

Speculating on the establishment of a unified moral code, by necessity, trudges into issues of power. Power is in most cases, is distributed unequally across and between groups. This is precisely why we should not base our global morality on a rule-based ethical system. The entity which establishes and administers the rules will always have a disproportionate amount of power. A goal-based moral code could satisfy, and be approached from, various belief systems. The philosopher R.M. Hare proposes that we use two levels of utilitarianism to judge the rightness of our action: everyday utilitarianism and critical level utilitarianism (Singer 2002). Because it is too difficult to foresee the consequences of every daily action, and because we are at risk of convolution by personal association or performance pressure, we ought to have a set of principles to guide our daily conduct, an everyday morality. Then, when we have the time to engage in reflection, we can move to a critical level of morality, “that which informs our thinking about what principles we should follow at the everyday level”(Singer 2002).

On the day to day level utilitarianism prescribes eliminating the societal norms that don't make practical (utilitarian) sense, while at the same time recognizing that most norms-having grown out of cultural evolution - do have at minimum, some survival value. Compassion is one such norm which grew out of the self-interested drive to preserve one's kin, and thereby ensure the proliferation of one's genes. But, being reasoning animals, humans can extend compassion to non-kin in expectation that they will be treated in the same manner (Singer 1981). Unimpeded by exclusivist selfish ambitions, human compassion should eventually spread to all the corners of the globe.

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