



Mains Practice Question

Q. How does the principle of utilitarianism relate to ethical decision-making in public policy? Discuss with the help of an example. (150 words)

16 Feb, 2023 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach

- Start your answer by briefly introducing utilitarianism.
- Discuss the role of utilitarianism in ethical decision making in public policy.
- Conclude accordingly.

Introduction

- Utilitarianism is a **moral principle that seeks to promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people**. It is a consequentialist theory, which means that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by its consequences.
- Utilitarianism asserts that the most ethical action is the one that produces the greatest amount of happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of people. Conversely, the least ethical action is the one that causes the greatest amount of pain or suffering for the greatest number of people.

Body

- **Utilitarianism and Ethical Decision-Making in Public Policy:**
 - **Welfare as a whole:** Utilitarianism is an important principle in public policy decision-making because it takes into account the welfare of the society as a whole. Policymakers use the principle to evaluate the potential outcomes of their decisions and to determine the best course of action.
 - **Helps in Evaluating Policies:** It is particularly useful in public policy decision-making because it **provides a framework for evaluating the trade-offs between different policy options**.
 - **Helps in Analyzing Long Term Impact:** Utilitarianism also requires policymakers to **consider the long-term impact of their decisions**. This is because the principle advocates for the greatest good for the greatest number of people, not just in the short-term but in the long-term as well. Policymakers would, therefore, consider the potential impact of the policy decision on future generations.
 - **For example,** in the Indian context, one public policy issue that can be analyzed through the lens of utilitarianism is the implementation of the **Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017**.
 - The GST was designed to **create a common market, simplify tax compliance, and reduce the overall tax burden on consumers**. The implementation of GST was expected to increase tax revenue and reduce the cascading effect of multiple taxes on goods and services.
 - From a utilitarian perspective, the implementation of the GST can be considered an ethical decision because it benefits the majority of people in India by creating a more efficient and equitable tax system.
 - The GST benefits businesses by streamlining the tax process and reducing the

overall tax burden, which can stimulate economic growth and create jobs. It also benefits consumers by reducing the cost of goods and services and eliminating hidden taxes.

- However, the **implementation of the GST also created some negative consequences**, such as the initial disruption to businesses and the potential loss of revenue for some states. Some critics argued that the GST disproportionately affected small businesses and low-income individuals.
- From a utilitarian perspective, the ethical decision to implement the GST ultimately depends on the overall balance of benefits and harms. **The policy was designed to benefit the majority of people in India, but some individuals or groups may have experienced negative consequences.**
- The goal of utilitarianism is to promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people, but this principle can sometimes conflict with individual or minority rights.

Conclusion

- The principle of utilitarianism provides a framework for ethical decision-making in public policy by focusing on the consequences of actions. It requires decision-makers to consider the impact of their decisions on the welfare of the public and to choose the option that provides the greatest amount of happiness and the least amount of suffering.
 - While it can be challenging to apply in practice, utilitarianism provides a valuable tool for policymakers to make ethical and moral decisions that promote the well-being of the public.

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