



Iranian Muslim Reformists and Contemporary Ethics; Revival of “Utilitarianism”

Hossein Dabbagh & Soroush Dabbagh

Abstract: This paper raises a moral issue for contemporary post-revolutionary Muslim intellectuals in Iran. According to traditional Islamic teachings, ethics enables people to transcend from this mundane world and offers guidance on ways to improve virtues. Most contemporary Iranian Muslim intellectuals have attempted to pave the way for accomplishing this goal. After clarifying the ways in which Iranian Muslim intellectuals have faith in virtue ethics as a best possible moral normative theory, we claim that virtue ethics fails to support some of our modern problems in the realm of politics such as human rights and democracy. Also, we argue that virtue ethics is not a good theory for ordinary average people who have weakness of will. A preliminary conclusion of the paper will be that utilitarianism, generally, and principle of utility, specifically, is a better solution to the modern problems. This, we believe, has been overlooked from the eyes of post-revolutionary Muslim intellectuals. Yet, we suggest that among different versions of utilitarianism, rule-utilitarianism is more justified to do this job.

Keywords: Secular ethics, virtue ethics, utilitarianism, rule-utilitarianism, post-revolutionary Iran, Muslim reformists.

Öz: Bu yazıda, İran'daki çağdaş devrim sonrası Müslüman entelektüellerin ahlaki bir sorunu ele alınmaktadır. Geleneksel İslami öğretilere göre, ahlak, insanların bu dünyevi dünyayı aşmalarını sağlar ve erdemlerini geliştirme yollarını gösterir. Çağdaş İranlı Müslüman entelektüellerin çoğu bu amaca ulaşmanın yolunu açmaya çalıştı. Öncelikle İranlı Müslüman entelektüellerin, erdem ahlakını mümkün olan en iyi ahlaki normatif teori olarak ele aldıklarını ifade ettikten sonra, erdem ahlakının insan hakları ve demokrasi gibi politik alandaki modern sorunlarımızı çözmede başarısız olduğunu iddia ediyoruz. Ayrıca, erdem ahlakının, zayıf iradeli ortalama insanlar için iyi bir teori olmadığını savunuyoruz. Makalenin en önemli sonuçlarından biri, genel olarak faydacılığın ve özel olarak fayda prensibinin, modern sorunlara daha iyi bir çözüm olacağıdır. Biz şuna inanıyoruz ki bu mesele devrim sonrası Müslüman entelektüellerin gözünden kaçmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, bu amaca ulaşmak için faydacılığın farklı versiyonları arasında kural-faydacılığının daha uygun olduğunu ileri sürmekteyiz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Seküler etik, erdem ahlakı, faydacılık, kural-faydacılık, devrim sonrası İran, Müslüman reformcular.

@ Dr., Doha Institute for Graduate Studies & Institute for Cognitive Science Studies. hdabbagh@dohainstitute.edu.qa
Dr., University of Toronto. soroush.dabbagh@gmail.com

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In framing the general laws of nature, it is granted we must be entirely guided by the public good of mankind, but not in the ordinary moral actions of our lives... The rule is framed with respect to the good of mankind; but our practice must be always shaped immediately by the rule.

George Berkeley (1712, Sec. 31)

Introduction

The occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), followed by a broad “Islamisation” of society, led to some unique consequences with regards to intellectual and religious life in Iran and provoked new theoretical, yet not abstract, problems in the face of Iranian Intellectuals. Throughout the past thirty years, post-revolutionary Iran has witnessed a sequence of discursive formations on Islam and its socio-political role. The revolution of 1979 signalled transformation of traditional Islam into an effective political ideology, conducive to mass mobilisation and instrumental in the “Islamisation” of the new regime. The end of the Iraq-Iran war in 1988, and the following decade of economic reconstruction and political pragmatism, facilitated a gradual disaffection with political Islam and indicated the birth of an individualistic religiosity centred on the individuality of religious experience. In its turn, the emerging individualistic Islam contributed to further secularisation of the mass psyche and called upon the Iranian intelligentsia to formulate a new philosophy of religion and moral philosophy that could legitimize the birth—and also the growth—of the de-politicized Islam. Among others, Abdulkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari and Mostafa Malekian are key participants in the formation of a new liberalist and ethical understanding of Islam in Iran, called “Religious Intellectualism”.

In what follows, we will explore post-revolutionary ideas formed by some of the religious intellectuals with regards to ethics, religion and politics. Primarily we will analyse the relationship between religion and ethics from the perspective of post-revolutionary religious intellectuals. Consequently, we examine virtue ethics as a dominant normative theory among intellectuals. In the fourth section, we discuss utilitarianism as an alternative normative ethical theory for politics. Finally, we argue that rule-utilitarianism is more plausible than other forms of utilitarianism. We believe that although utilitarianism has been a formal part of Islamic moral reasoning, rule-utilitarianism has been overlooked from the eyes of post-revolutionary Muslim intellectuals.

Post-Revolutionary Muslim Intellectuals in Iran: The Relationship between Religion and Ethics

The relationship between religion and morality in the Abrahamic religions is a much-discussed subject in moral philosophy and the philosophy of religion. Some theorists believe that morality is primarily based on religion. Others insist that it is not. However, in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the relationship between religion and morality, let us make a distinction between the three different relationships between religion and morality, i.e. semantic relationship, ontological relationship and epistemological relationship (Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach & Basinger, 2012, Ch. 14).

To say that morality is semantically based on religion means that moral notions, such as fairness, unfairness, good, bad, ought, ought not, etc., can only be understood in the light of scripture. This means that moral notions have no independent and inherent definitions. In the opposite camp, theorists who hold that morality is not semantically based on religion are of the view that moral notions can have meanings without reference to scripture.

Moreover, theorists who maintain that morality is ontologically based on religion believe that the materialisation and delineation of moral values in the world around us hinge on the will of God and that the coming into existence of moral values such as good, bad etc., are dependent on God's will. Then, attributing 'goodness' to 'honesty' and 'badness' to 'dishonesty', for instance, will be in keeping with the will of God and we can seek them in the world around us. In the Islamic tradition, for example, the Ash'arites believed that morality was ontologically based on religion and could not exist independently of God's will. If God willed that something was good, it was good and if God willed that something was bad, it was bad. It was the attachment of God's will to something that gave it moral substance. And, without God's will, moral values would not exist in the world; as a result of which, we would be unable to formulate moral judgments. In the opposite camp, the Mu'tazilites were of the view that morality was not ontologically based on religion. They believed that moral notions were intrinsically and rationally good or bad, and that it was possible to make judgments about their existence in the world and to delineate them independently of scripture and based on rational discoveries and teachings.

The epistemological relationship between morality and religion reveals how we can arrive at valid moral knowledge. Theorists who believe that morality is epistemologically based on religion deny the epistemological validity of moral claims that have been derived without recourse to and reliance on scripture. Take, for example, the moral proposition, 'It is a duty to keep a promise.' Anyone who believes that

morality is epistemologically based on religion will only accept this moral proposition if it is justified on the basis of religious teachings. In other words, rational moral precepts and judgments, which have been derived from Reason Alone, have no inherent validity and do not convey any information. On the opposite end, those who believe that morality is not epistemologically based on religion—i.e. theorists such as Bentham, Kant, Moore, Ross, Hare, etc., whose positions can be dubbed as ‘secular morality’—view rational moral precepts favourably and organise their conception of morality around them. These theorists are of the view that the epistemological validity of moral claims is attained using epistemological resources such as practical reason and rational evidence.

The debate on the relationship between religion and morality, and the question of whether morality is or is not based on religion do not seem to have exercised the minds of pre-revolutionary religious intellectuals and thinkers in Iran. In fact, despite the insights on this subject, which can be found in the works of earlier religious intellectuals, in the absence of a conceptual framework for probing the relationship between religion and morality, it would seem that they did not tackle the question of morality’s dependence on or independence from religion at all. Essentially, it would seem that this was not a question that occurred to for example Mahdi Bazargan or Ali Shariati (Bazargan, 1979, 1979a; Shariati, 1993, 2014). Hence, they did not tackle this subject in any of their theoretical and intellectual investigations. And they did not come down in favour of or against any of the different options.

Conversely, later religious thinkers and intellectuals—especially in recent decades—have become aware of the importance of the question of whether morality is based on religion and the consequences of their answers to this question. It is true that the dichotomy between “a religion-based morality” and a “religion-independent morality” is not often mentioned in the works of Soroush and Shabestari, but the general tenor and direction of their theoretical and intellectual musings reveal that they believe in the independence of morality from religion. In fact, on this question, we can take it that they believe that morality is not based on religion; for, within their theoretical work as a whole, they subject various matters to moral assessment on the basis of the assumption that moral claims are epistemologically valid independently of religion. Soroush’s *Adab-e Ghodrat, Adab-e Edalat* (The Etiquette of Power and the Etiquette of Justice), Shabestari’s *Ta’molati dar Ghara’t Ensan az Din* (Reflections on a Human Reading of Religion), Kadivar’s *Hagh’ Al-Nas* (the Right of People) and Malekian’s *Rāhi beh Rahāei* (A Way to Freedom) can be cited in this connection as examples of works in which they use this conceptual framework, without referring to it explicitly (Soroush, 2006; Shabestari, 2004; Kadivar, 2007; Malekian, 2003).

It also has to be said that, independently of post-revolutionary religious intellectuals and thinkers, the late Seyyed Mohammad Hossein Tabātabā'i, author of the *Al-Mizan fi Tafsiṣ al-Qur'an* book of exegesis (Tabātabā'i, 1996), wrote an exhaustive exposition on the subject of moral notions in the sixth article in *Osul Falsafeh va Ravesh Re'alism* (The Principles of Philosophy and the Realist Method), called "Eḍrākat E'tebāri" (Conventional Understanding), in which he classified them as normative concepts and propositions, which, more than anything, reveal the norms of rational thinkers and have no relationship to the external world (Tabātabā'i, 1989). This approach which can be regarded as non-cognitivist does believe that there is no such thing as moral properties, such as: goodness, badness, rightness, wrongness, etc. in the real world. In contrast, they are conventional and entirely socially-constructed. This stance assumes that morality is independent of religion and that it is possible to investigate its ontological and epistemological origins and bases rationally and independently of religion, for morality, unlike religion, does not tell us anything about what's happening out there in reality. In fact, we can regard Tabātabā'i as the pioneer of secular ethics amongst religious scholars and thinkers in contemporary Iran, though, most probably, this label is not something that he himself would have endorsed.

Virtue Ethics as a Dominant Theory Among Post-Revolutionary Iranian Intellectuals

Having discussed the meta-ethical issue of the relationship between morality and religion, let us now turn to normative ethics. In normative ethics, the debates are about right and wrong character and conduct. If meta-ethical debates discuss the concepts of "goodness" and "badness", and "ought" and "ought not" and view them from the perspectives of semantics, ontology and epistemology, normative ethics tackles more concrete matters and explores the criteria that allow us to arrive at moral judgment and moral conduct.

It would seem that, in the realm of religiosity and society, both before and post-revolutionary religious scholars and intellectuals were more sympathetic to the teachings of virtue ethics. In fact, Islamic religious-mystical tradition and Islamic traditional books of ethical guidance are brimming with the instructions of virtue ethics. For example, Abuḥamed al-Ghazali's *Kimia-ye Sa'ādat* (The Alchemy of Happiness), Attār's *Mantiq al-Tayr* (The Speech of Birds), Jalāleddin Rumi's *Mathnawi-i Ma'navi* (Rhyming Couplets of Profound Spiritual Meaning), Sa'di's *Bustān* (The Orchard), Shahab al-Din Umar Sohrevardi's *Al-Awārif al-Ma'ārif* (The Elevated Things of the Gnosis) and many of the writings that fall within the Khorāsani mys-

tical tradition, such as the works of Bāyazid Bastāmi and Abolhassan Kharaqāni, explain the virtues, such as patience, courage, endeavour, clemency, generosity, honesty, etc., that a disciple must acquire along the path to spiritual excellence. Conversely, the disciple must seriously strive to spurn and shun vices, such as envy, bad temper, dishonesty, etc. The discussions, in the mystical tradition, about “the qualities that lead to perdition” and “the qualities that lead to salvation” reveal their devotion to virtue ethics (Al-Ghazali, 2003; Attār, 2001; Rumi, 1999; Sa’di, 2007; Sohrevardi, 1995. See also Majaddedi, 2003; Nasr, 2000, p. 368).

Among more contemporary religious authorities and clerics, too, the late Motahhari and the late Tabātabā’i appealed to the teachings of virtue ethics in their discussions about the path to moral and spiritual excellence. (We have to bear in mind that Tabātabā’i’s treatment of the question of moral notions in *The Principles of Philosophy and the Realist Method* falls within the framework of meta-ethics. In this context, Tabataba’i is the pioneer of secular ethics. However, we are now discussing normative ethics and the question of right and wrong conduct and character). Within these discussions, Motahhari and Tabātabā’i, like many other *Ulema*, drew on the strong tradition of religious-mystical narratives to set out their ideas (Badamchi, 2017, Ch. 3).

Post-revolutionary religious intellectuals display this same commitment to virtue ethics, although this is more prominent in the works of Soroush, Shabestari and Malekian than in the works of pre-revolutionary religious intellectuals. Books such as *Osaf-e Parsayan* (Qualities of the Pious), *Hekmat va Ma’ishat* (Wisdom and Livelihood) and *Ghomar-e ‘Ashghaneh* (Love’s Gamble) by Soroush, and Shabestari’s treatment of subjects such as prayer in his lectures and writings, such as *Faith and Freedom* are clearly inspired by the teachings of virtue ethics. Moreover, Malekian, is fond of virtue ethics and his exposition of his ethical stances clearly owe much to this school of ethics. And his commitment to virtue ethics is plain to see in his “The Lessons of the *Nahj-al-Balaghah*”, *Moshtaghi va Mahjoori* (Abiding Love and Homesickness) and *Hadis-e Arezomnadi* (A Tale of Longing). At the same time, what distinguishes Malekian’s expositions on this subject from those of Soroush and Shabestari is that he both appeals to the views and ideas of mystics and religious figures, such as Ali ibn Abi Tālib, Jalāleddin Rumi, Shams-e Tabrizi and Saint Augustine, and views favourably the teachings and insights of virtue ethicists, such as Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Iris Murdoch and Michael Slote, individuals who do not necessarily have religious commitments and, some of them, are in fact atheist.

So far, we have explored post-revolutionary intellectuals' ideas about the relationship between religion and ethics and virtue ethics. However, the idea of virtue ethics might be problematic. Although virtue ethics can be an appropriate ethical theory for religious intellectuals to base their religious-spiritual teachings on, it seems that it is hard for them to make virtue ethics into a theory in the realm of political philosophy. In fact, virtue ethicists hardly can use their theory in politics and more generally they have had little to say about political philosophy (Hursthouse, 1999).¹ Instead, utilitarianism, one might argue, is a better theory for politics worth considering. In the next section, we will consider whether utilitarianism has any place for post-revolutionary religious intellectuals.

Utilitarianism: A Revival

In comparison to other religious intellectuals, the late Bazargan and Soroush display greater fellowship, in the realm of politics (and not in the realms of religion and society), with utilitarianistic ethics—although they do not use this term explicitly. 'National Interest' was a key concept in Bazargan's political stances and, in his political conduct, he tried to ensure the maximisation of utility and minimisation of harm for the majority of the people (Bazargan, 2000). And this is in keeping and in line with the teachings of utilitarian ethics. Soroush, following Hāfez's principle of toleration, too, in setting out his reflections on the realm of politics, derives more inspiration from utilitarianism than deontology or virtue ethics.

Be that as it may, Bazargan and Soroush do not display much interest in the teachings of utilitarian ethics when it comes to religiosity and social conduct. Instead, they try to explain right and wrong conduct in terms of the ideas of virtue ethics.

Apart from Bazargan and Soroush, the views of other contemporary Muslim intellectuals regarding politics, religion and society do not display even this limited amount of interest in the teachings of utilitarianism. It is as if they do not consider it seemly to resort to concepts such as 'pleasure' and 'utility' in the exposition of right and wrong conduct. They do not display much interest in utilitarianism and its constituents and components, and do not make much use of this school of ethics in arriving at their views on right and wrong conduct in the realms of society and politics. Although, in Malekian's works, 'decreasing anguish' and reducing pain and hardship has been presented as one of the main duties of intellectuals, this duty

1 Hursthouse tries to develop a virtue ethic political philosophy, but we are not sure that virtue ethics political philosophy has yet earned the right to a lot of attention.

seems to pale into insignificance in comparison with the duty of 'declaring truth' (Malekian, 2003). Further, Malekian appears to be far less concerned about increasing utility and pleasure among human beings than in reducing their suffering.

However, one might object that utilitarianism, like virtue ethics, is not a good theory for politics. It would be absurd for utilitarians to hold that each and every decision the state makes should be based solely on a direct calculation of the utilities of the alternatives. First of all, such a method would be hugely time-consuming. Secondly, there would be frequent miscalculations. Finally, but equally importantly, people need to be able to predict more specifically and concretely what the state will do. As an example, people would not want to set up businesses unless there was certainty that the state would not subsequently confiscate property, or impose extortionate tax increases without advanced warning, or null the validity of contracts without any basis to do so. Citizens would need some fairly specific and concrete assurances from the state before being able to gain the sufficient confidence to set up businesses, and such assurances from the state would not be possible if the basis of all decisions made by the State was through the calculations of utility. For there might well be occasions when utility would indeed be maximised by the confiscation of property, the imposition of extortionate tax increases without warning, dramatic change to the labour laws and decisions nullify valid contractual agreements, as a few examples.

Thus, the only hope of a plausible utilitarian approach to politics, is one where utility is used to assess laws, economic policies, and the basis on which to assess the enforceability of contracts, however, this would only work on the condition that individual government decisions comply with the laws, policies, and the general framework that have been selected through utilitarian assessment. One of the plausible forms of utilitarianism that might be feasible in the realm of politics is rule-utilitarianism. For rule-utilitarians, an action would be deemed right if it conforms to a rule that leads to the greatest good. In fact, according to rule-utilitarianism, moral rules should be followed at all times. For example, Brad Hooker who has long championed the idea of rule-utilitarianism writes that

Rule-consequentialists [rule-utilitarians] need not have maximizing the good as their ultimate moral goal. They could have a moral psychology as follows. Their fundamental moral motivation is to do what is impartially defensible. They believe acting on impartially justified rules is impartially defensible. They also believe that rule-consequentialism [rule-utilitarianism] is on balance the best account of impartially justified rules.

And:

...the best argument for rule-consequentialism [rule-utilitarianism] is not that it derives from an overarching commitment to maximise the good. The best argument for rule-consequentialism [rule-utilitarianism] is that it does a better job than its rivals of matching and tying together our moral convictions, as well as offering us help with our moral disagreements and uncertainties (2000, p. 101).²

All things considered, it seems that rule-utilitarianism could be a better solution in comparison with (classic) utilitarianism in the realm of politics. One of the reasons for this is that rule-utilitarianism, unlike (classic) utilitarianism, is compatible with deontological pluralism. Although (classic) utilitarianism's main rival, as Rawls suggested in his *A Theory of Justice*, is deontological pluralism, rule-utilitarianism is not against deontological pluralism (Rawls, 1971). We can think of deontological pluralism as being not too distant from Natural Law Theory, if this umbrella is used to refer to theories that take people to have certain moral rights, as a matter of "natural", which in this context means non-conventional, fact (Oderberg & Chappell, 2008). Respecting people's autonomy and trying to bring about economic justice are very close to (if not exactly the same thing as) respecting people's moral rights. Of course, how plausible deontological pluralism will be depending on what plurality of principles the deontologist puts forward. Any plausible list would have to include principles about respecting the people's autonomy, trying to bring about retributive and economic justice, and promoting the welfare of people, especially residents of the country in question.³ However, the (classic) utilitarianism is not plausible unless (a) it includes autonomy as a major component of welfare and (b) it is a multi-level theory, as rule-utilitarianism manifestly is.

The authors are of the view that, in addition to the insights in the realm of meta-ethics that are to be found in the works of post-revolutionary religious thinkers and intellectuals (probing the relationship between morality and religion and underlining morality's independence from religion) which sounds promising and workable for contemporary Iranian society, it would be beneficial if, in their intellectual investigations, they also examine the importance and role of rule-utilitarianism in the realm of normative ethics.

2 For more elaboration on rule-utilitarianistic ethics, see Hooker (1990) and (2000).

3 What John Rawls called "intuitionism" is precisely Rossian deontological pluralism. Rawls suggested that the main alternatives in political philosophy are intuitionism (=deontological pluralism), utilitarianism, and social contract theory. Contractualist political philosophy has been carefully worked out by Rawls and his very many followers. There is a lot to be said for it, though also some forceful criticisms of it. See Scanlon (1998).

The fact of the matter is that utilitarianism is one of the key elements of modernity and liberalism. Utilitarian ethics, which underlines the importance of maximising utility and pleasure and minimising pain and hardship, is suited to average human beings; human beings who are neither saints, nor lacking in moral concerns and sensibilities. These average human beings, who form the majority of moral actors in society, cannot be assigned duties that surpass their capabilities. Instead of explicating right and wrong conduct on the basis of duties and virtue ethics, it would be more appropriate and justified to teach of the consequences of actions and ways of increasing utility and pleasure.⁴

All things considered, it seems that the rule-utilitarian approach, in comparison with other versions of utilitarianism (i.e. the classical versions and act-utilitarianism), is more plausible, workable and applicable in our society; as, we can derive fundamental human rights as well as different intuitive ethical principles from the most fundamental “Utility Principle”. With this in mind, in relation to rule-utilitarianism, one could make room for both human rights and maximising pleasure. Rule-utilitarianism can better systematize and accommodate the average people’s scattered common-sensical moral intuitions.

Average people whose ‘prayer mats are stained with wine’—as Hāfēz phrased it—must have a morality that is suited to average people on a macro scale and not just to the select few. However, virtue ethics is suited to the select few and has never become ingrained in societies in a pervasive way. Societies are not composed of mystics, saints and spiritual individuals; they are composed of average individuals who cannot be expected to display absolute, constant clemency and honesty. True, the ultimate end of morality is to arrive at human beings for whom moral conduct is second nature. But the empirical-historical examination of the realm of morality has taught us that this kind of impeccable moral conduct has never become ingrained in human societies.⁵

One of the components of modernity is the recognition of pluralism and the plurality of lifestyles. It would seem that, in comparison with deontology and

4 Proponents of utilitarianism believe that moral properties such as goodness, badness, ought, etc., can be reduced to natural properties such as pleasure, both ontologically and semantically. Despite G. E. Moore’s efforts to demonstrate that the proponents of utilitarianism are committing the naturalistic fallacy, other readings of utilitarianism have been offered that can withstand Moore’s critique. In other words, it is possible to have readings of utilitarianism that are not subject to the naturalistic fallacy. See e.g. LaFollette (2013, Part I).

5 One might say that this realist viewpoint is close to what Ibn Khaldūn advocates in his *Muqaddimah*. See his (2015).

virtue ethics, rule-utilitarianism can better explain and justify the plurality of lifestyles. Deontology, at least with regard to the classical proponents of it, in the light of Kantian moral philosophy, morally endorses actions that are in line with rational, categorical imperatives and the proponents of virtue ethics endorse actions that issue forth from virtuous individuals; a virtuous person in whom virtues such as courage, patience, honesty, etc., are ingrained.

Moreover, many of the people who have adopted diverse lifestyles do not act in accordance with moral duties or moral virtues. In some cases, this is because economic hardship has prevented them from benefitting from the kind of moral training that would arouse their moral sensibilities. In other cases, it is because the relevant individuals do not view moral conduct as emanating from duties or moral virtues; for, they believe that this way of looking at the moral realm is for the select few.

One way or the other, it would seem that rule-utilitarianism is better able to explain the validity of the plurality of lifestyles, as it takes into account the capacity of the average individual; in a way it can be said that rule-utilitarianism is formulated on the basis of the average individual's common-sensical moral intuitions. Deontologism and virtue ethics, at least within their classical definitions, are incapable of performing this important task. In other words, rule-utilitarianism is more in tune with this component of modernity and modernization.

Perhaps one of the reasons why most contemporary Iranian religious scholars and intellectuals are somewhat wary of utilitarianism is that pleasure carries a negative connotation within societies in that part of the world. This wariness is possibly compounded by what some people view as the egotistical and profit-oriented tenor of classic utilitarianism. But, in fact, rule-utilitarianism does not have an egotistical tenor, because it promotes the maximisation of utility and the minimisation of pain for the majority of the people and not for the individual merely on a micro level. Some versions of utilitarianism deal with the majority of people and their benefits and pains and not that of the minorities.⁶ As Henry Sidgwick, a prominent utilitarian, puts it:

[T]he good of any individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say) of the universe, than the good of any other (1907, p. 382).

6 There are different versions of utilitarianism such as hedonistic, eudaimonistic, rule and act discussed in the literature. See Hooker (2000).

Moreover, Jeremy Bentham noted that pleasure is confined to the basic pleasures such as eating, sleeping, etc. However, as John Stuart Mill explained, concepts such as love, knowledge, friendship and beauty can also be viewed as higher pleasures, as can every effort made to entrench them amongst the greatest number of people.⁷

Therefore, post-revolutionary religious intellectuals who mostly advocate virtue ethic in their normative ethics do not need to be concerned about embracing utilitarianism. Some forms of utilitarianism, i.e. rule-utilitarianism do not use the concept of “pleasure” very loosely and instead specify that “pleasure” is required to be confided by some principles. Furthermore, rule-utilitarianism is by far one of the best theories for politics that such intellectuals need for the public sphere.

Conclusion

The above discussion allows us to conclude that although religious intellectuals took a step towards secular ethics in their meta-ethics, whilst adopting that ethics is independent of religion, they did not advocate utilitarianism for their religious-spiritual teachings. Despite their great insights and teachings in the realm of meta-ethics, in the realm of normative ethics, post-revolutionary religious intellectuals and thinkers, have given so much prominence to virtue ethics, to the extent that it resulted in the neglect of utilitarianism. Whereas it would seem that utilitarianism is a moral theory that is suited to the average individual; hence, can better explain to our compatriots the moral validity of a plurality of lifestyles; and can help pave the difficult path that we face to modernisation and democracy. Recognizing the plurality of lifestyles has a key role in legitimising democracy and democratic procedure in a society, morally speaking. So, as expanding and legitimizing democracy is the main goal of contemporary religious and secular intellectuals in the realm of politics, they have to take utilitarian ethics, and rule-utilitarianism in particular, more seriously and utilise them in order to give a plausible account of the required political system in Muslim societies, such as Iran, when speaking of the moral point of view.

It is true that the teachings of virtue ethics must linger like a perfume that everyone can get a whiff of in the realm of morality, but we must accept that we cannot invest in it any more than this. In order to arrive at a valid moral justifica-

7 For a more detailed treatment of the difference between Bentham’s utilitarianism and Mill’s utilitarianism see: Mill (1863).

tion of a plurality of lifestyles and democratic procedure in the modern world, it would be better if post-revolutionary Muslim intellectuals turned their attention to rule-utilitarian ethics. Achieving a reading of utilitarianism that respects fundamental human rights and is immune to the classical objections that have been levelled at this school of morality, would serve society far better than merely resorting to virtue ethics. As far as we can see, rule-utilitarianism can reach this objective in a more plausible manner.

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