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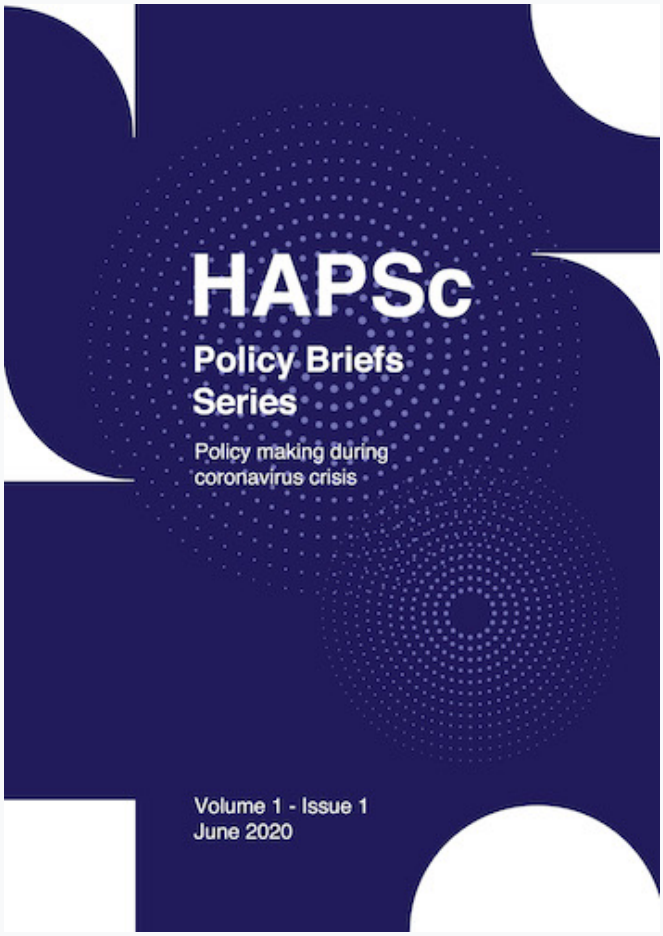
HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 1, No 1 (2020)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



The view of the coronavirus pandemic response through the lens of political philosophy: Utilitarianism and the Rawlsian approach

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doi: 10.12681/hapscpbs.24967

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To cite this article:

Fusiek, D. A. (2020). The view of the coronavirus pandemic response through the lens of political philosophy: Utilitarianism and the Rawlsian approach. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, *1*(1), 202–208. https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.24967

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 20/06/2025 06:47:02

 ISSN: 2732-6578 (print version) 2732-6586 (online)

The view of the coronavirus pandemic response through the lens of political philosophy: Utilitarianism and the Rawlsian approach[1]

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Abstract

The paper discusses the moral justification of the adoption of the restriction measures during the coronavirus pandemic, and attempts to connect it with the notion of human rights and freedom. The popular Western response falls in the line of the work of John Rawls and his perception of justice and fairness. The premise of Rawlsian approach is that the state has a duty to protect everyone as they themselves would wish to be protected. However, as the time has progressed, the outcomes of the lockdown has begun to become visible, hence challenging the initial Rawlsian view of the issue at stake. Under the new circumstances, the political theory of utilitarianism seems to be gaining ground, but in its most brutal form. Dismissing the roots of the utilitarian theory, the utilitarian calculus has been used as a sophism by politicians for the introduction of the notion of "sacrifice" for the greater good. By the presentation and application of the two approaches, in the face of a future reemergence of similar problem, this paper argues for the adoption of a combining approach that covers the concerns of both and answers the moral dilemmas that have emerged from this period of quarantine.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is not an unprecedented phenomenon. While cases of a similar pandemic can be traced in ancient history, for instance, the famous Athenian pandemic in 430.B.C. (that was responsible for the death of Pericles), or even in more recent examples such as the Spanish Flu of 1918, the contemporary world was "caught off guard". Everything started on 12 March 2020, when the WHO announced the unknown then, coronavirus as a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Soon after that, the states began implementing stricter measures. However, instead of tranquillizing people, the measures led them to a Hobbesian "state of nature", where the possession of primary goods expressed power.

From the perspective of now, it is difficult to argue that coronavirus pandemic shook our world. The states were confronted with an invisible enemy, a malicious virus that was highly infectious, and also deadly. Not surprisingly, the speeches of many Prime Ministers started to figure out catchy phrases such as "invisible war" in a rather blunt effort to justify the induction of Schmidtian "state of

[1] To cite this paper in APA style: Fusiek, D. A. (2020). The view of the coronavirus pandemic response through the lens of political philosophy: Utilitarianism and the Rawlsian approach. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(1): 202 – 208. DOI: 10.12681/hapscpbs.24967

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emergency"[3]. The extraordinary measures were adopted to alleviate the struggle of national medical sectors that were not only confronted with the harsh reality of the virus but also with the limitation of their operational capabilities. Besides that, the pandemic proved to be not profitable for the global economy as trade, industries and businesses were put on halt. While respectful of the natural right to live, this move has resulted in unpleasant economic consequences for all the world. Despite relying on his logic and superiority over matter, the Cartesian man found himself dependent on the will of a microscopic virus.

The focal point of this pandemic became the human and his interaction with society. As a response to the ongoing problem, governments decided to impose (in some cases, strict and others less) lockdowns to flatten the curve of the expansion of the virus. The outcome of this decision was the isolation of millions of people inside their houses. While many people turned to solipsism and other forms of self-cultivation, others in the act of defiance started to roam the streets protesting (e.g. the current situation of the US). Others began to question the existence and the origins of the virus by blaming either the 5G networks or "the evil Chinese Empire" or even, Bill Gates. Nonetheless, there is no denying that except for the warm example of social cooperation, such as the balcony-singing in Italy, there were also selfish free-riders who did not hesitate to show their disregard about the measures by not abiding by the lockdown measures.

In the meantime, the lockdown forced everyone to confront profound questions of human existence and serious moral question such as: What is right and what is wrong? What is the biggest good? What matters more: freedom or safety? Should we sacrifice ourselves for the vulnerable, and vice versa? In this context, the role of political philosophy is evident. A lot of the serious dilemmas that humanity faced during the last two months have been already analyzed and addressed by this field. In the previous decades, several prominent academics have taken on the undertaking of describing the relationship between citizen and their governments, hence providing much insight regard issues such as freedom, equality and the public good that could also be applied to the current situation. Therefore, this brief paper provides to transfuse the leading ideas of utilitarianism and the Rawlsian approach in

[3] A very good example is the statement of the Greek Prime Minister on 17 March, 2020. To be more specific, he states that "We are at war. With an enemy who is invisible, but not invincible"
""We are at war with an invisible enemy" Greek PM says" (2020) Reuters. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-greece-pm/we-are-at-war-with-an-invisible-enemy-greek-pm-says-idUSA8N28L06W. (Accessed: June 30, 2020).
See also: "Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 4 April 2020" (2020) GOV.UK. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-of-the-duchy-of-lancaster-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-4-april-2020. (Accessed: June 30, 2020).

the modern setting and shows some of their main ideas undergirding competing conception of right and wrong.

Utilitarianism

An excellent way to begin is by studying a deep and well-worked-out ethical theory. Utilitarianism has not only has a long historical tradition but also has reached wide conclusions when tackling the philosophical problems thrown up by our political life. In reality, utilitarianism has been the target of severe criticism or has become a "straw target", thus leading to its diminishing popularity in the modern political philosophy. Nonetheless, as Dudley Knowles highlights, "it has two great virtues which we should not lose sight of" (Knowles, 2001: 23).

Firstly, it is a theory based on a thought that seeks to have universal appeal: when judging conduct, it is important to analyze the outcomes of the human actions depending on the contribution they have to the welfare of all those the actions affect. Secondly, it focuses on the purpose of the states' government and its inabilities. The last trait is mostly a characteristic of classical utilitarian thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and it deflects the consideration of governments as businesses that are responsible for the promotion of the well-being and reducing of the suffering of all its subjects (Goodin, 1995). The last sentence sounds rather familiar as it resonates the discourses of governments and politicians justifying the adoption of lockdown measures.

Before proceeding further, it is essential to point out that utilitarianism, as mentioned above, has a vast philosophical legacy, which this section is not possible to cover. Thus, the point that this paper focuses mostly, is the core of the utilitarian theory, which is: Right actions maximize well-being (Schneewind, 1968), and how this could be applied in the case of coronavirus pandemic. The aforesaid principle of utility can be elaborated in many ways, such as sticking to Bentham's happiness of the greatest number (Hart, 1982). While it was formulated as a standing that everyone affected by the policies should be considered (Bentham & Parekh, 1973: 309-310), this formulation has been a "bone of contention", as it has been accused of ignoring the right of minorities. After all, what is significant is that utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory as it requires the comparison of the alternative outcomes and their consequences to locate the one, which offers the maximum amount of good (Knowles, 2001).

Actually, this is the current concern of governments internationally. Following the initial phase of the spread of the coronavirus, they are now faced with the scenario of a global recession and the collapse of national economies. Under these circumstances, the utilitarian ideas have resurfaced more brutally.

By dismissing the roots of the utilitarian theory, the utilitarian calculus (the aforesaid act of comparison) has been used as a sophism by politicians for the introduction of the notion of "sacrifice" for the greater good. Considering that the vulnerable groups do not constitute the majority of the national population, there have been many supporting that it would benefit the societies to accept the casualties to minimize the consequences of the virus.

At the beginning of the lockdown period, this argument could not find fertile ground. However, as businesses and people have begun to experience either the psychological or economic consequences of the social distancing, its appeal has started to grow. For instance, while the statement of Dominic Cumming, the former adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, "herd immunity, protect the economy, and if that means some pensioners die, too bad" caused public uproar at the end of the March, the current increasing number of anti-lockdown UK's protests seems to indicate a change in the spirits (Drewett, 2020). On top of that, the lack of academic consensus has also fueled further this dispute regarding what is the best-case scenario for the maximization of national well-being. Some papers such as Harrison's paper in New Zealand prove the lack of a common voice of science (Daalder, 2020), and cause the fiery response from researchers that find themselves arguing in favour of the natural right to live.

As the first signs of the recession have been visible on the horizon, the dominating question is: In case of a downturn that could have long-term outcomes and cause widespread misery, is it possible that attempting to save every last life from the pandemic could lead to the maximization of well-being? The answer seems easy, but it becomes more complicated when viewed from a more objective perspective. Indeed, it is inhumane to put a notional prince on human life when investigating policies, but it is also significant to remember that families and entire sectors are dependent on industries such as tourism. For example, in Greece, despite the country's well-praised response to the coronavirus pandemic, the prolongation of the lockdown measures could have devastating effects on an economy that one in four people work in the sector of tourism (The Economist, 2020).

The view of a moral problem through a utilitarian lens is an unsettling experience as the results are not always the ones that you would expect. However, it is important to remember the roots of utilitarianism and the reason why it came to be. The quest to maximize well- being is not a distasteful one as long it sticks to promoting the no-harm principle, and it is the true expression of the interest of the state and not the government's.

Rawlsian approach

It is impossible to talk about social justice without mentioning John Rawls' work. His published in 1972 book, A Theory of Justice, stirred the world of political philosophy leading to a series of new debates. This section seeks to present only a small amount of his work, which is already a complicated task due to Rawls' systematic way of writing and the brevity in which this must be done.

The Harvard philosopher views justice as the virtue of a well-ordered state and comprises all aspects of ethical well-being. Considering that nations are natural associations, individuals find themselves being a member of a society that assigns duties and rights without looking at the advantages that stem from this social cooperation. However, in a world that is not so "idealistic" (there are scarcities of resources per se), the goal of achieving a just and morally acceptable society is central. To tackle this issue, Rawls' theory of justice proposes the adoption of two fundamental principles

First Principle: Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all;

Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions:

a. They are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity;

b. They are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle). (Rawls, 2005: 42-43).

A critical problem that emerges is the inquiry of how such principles could potentially be built. For this reason, Rawls introduces a theoretical "veil of ignorance", where all the "players" of the social game are placed in the so-called "original position". Being blinded by this theoretical veil and having only the basic knowledge of notions (such as life and society), each player is forced to use his morality as a guiding compass, hence adopting a more generalized view. In this manner, the reached moral decision are the most reasonable ones, because they are made by people endowed with fundamental moral powers and free from preexisting takes of concepts (due to the veil of ignorance), and in accordance with the aforesaid two principles.

Contrary to utilitarianism, Rawls criticized the maximum of well-being for not being ethical and lacking fairness. There is a need for the existence of social and political justice that establishes an assurance of basic necessities and opportunities while providing people with the ability to assert themselves. What people choose to do after, it is something in the discretion and capability of the

individual. Paradoxically, a perfect good example of a policy related to the coronavirus pandemic following in line with Rawls' thinking is the lockdown measures. In the face of the new threat, societies all over the world chose eventually (some with a further hesitation, e.g. Brazil) to mandate claustrophobic lockdowns to minimize the death and suffering of the vulnerable groups. The acceptance of this approach by the majority of the population seems to indicate that there is a prevailing belief that governments should not only abandon anyone but also do the best to ensure that everyone has the same opportunity of survival.

One could argue that while the lockdown is a solution that accomplishes a degree of fairness, it also hides at the same underlying social inequalities. This is very visible in the US in the case of infection, because the state does not cover the medical costs. Furthermore, the poorer sections of the society cannot sustain the consequences of the isolation or the lockdown. In some countries, the states provided some form of financial aid, e.g. Germany, Greece or France, but sticking strictly to Rawls' view, this is not the state of absolute fairness he had envisioned. Finally, in the case of a pandemic, the individualistic dimension of the theory is problematic when it comes to a commonly shared threat. What is the point where one's right to opportunity becomes someone else's danger?

Conclusion

The choice to analyze the response to the coronavirus pandemic through the perspective of utilitarianism and Rawls' work stems from the realization that the arguments proposed by the two theories are being currently used by many politicians and governments to either prolong the restriction measures or eradicate them. In fact, there are also other theories such as libertarianism (that adhere for minimum limitation imposed by the state on the individual liberty) or communitarianism (that argues that justice is based on the common good), which could explain better policies followed by some countries, such as the Netherlands, or the anti-lockdown protests in the US. Yet, they did not manage to capture better the "essence" of the ongoing debate in the popular West.

After the initial months of the quarantine (in the case of Europe), the winner seems to be the Rawlsian approach. The response adopted by the politicians expressed the view that the state has a duty to protect everyone as they would wish to be protected. This stance was also shared by people that decided that they should self-isolate for the sake of others. However, the current "change" of hearts" attributed to the concerns of economic recession and further seclusion has led to more protests, but also the mitigation of the preexisting measures. The scenario of a second-wave does not seem so scary anymore as people desire a return to the preexisting "normality". After all, as Aristoteles said, the human is a social animal. So, ultimately, the same concerns preceding the first lockdown has started

to reemerge. At least, this time, we have the benefit of the knowledge of how humanity and states respond to such a threat. The realization of human vulnerability and the magnitude of such a phenomenon could serve as a mean for the formulation of a better response. In this quest, the findings of the two theories could prove to be more than helpful.

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