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Utilitarianism In John Galsworthy's Justice

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Abstract

This article explores the theme of utilitarianism in John Galsworthy's play Justice. Written in 1910, Justice critiques the British justice system and its adherence to utilitarian principles. Through an analysis of the play's characters, plot, and themes, this article argues that Galsworthy challenges the morality of utilitarianism, highlighting its limitations and flaws. The article examines the tension between individual rights and the greater good, the consequences of prioritizing utility over justice, and the impact on human dignity.

Keywords: Morality, Utilitarianism, individual rights, greater good, utility, human dignity.

Introduction

John Galsworthy's play Justice, written in 1910, is a scathing critique of the British justice system and its adherence to utilitarian principles. Utilitarianism, a philosophical theory developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, posits that actions are right if they promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. "The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation" Jeremy Bentham (An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, 1789). In Justice, Galsworthy challenges the morality of utilitarianism, arguing that it can lead to unjust consequences and undermine human dignity. As Galsworthy notes in the play's preface, "The greatest happiness of the greatest number is a phrase that has been used to justify every sort of cruelty and injustice" (Galsworthy 1910, Preface).

Objectives

1. To analyze the theme of utilitarianism in John Galsworthy's play Justice.
2. To explore the tension between individual rights and the greater good.
3. To evaluate the limitations and flaws of utilitarianism.
4. To discuss the relevance of Galsworthy's critique of utilitarianism to contemporary debates about justice and morality.

The tension between individual rights and greater good

The play's protagonist, William Falder, is a young clerk who forges a check to help his lover, Ruth Honeywill. When Falder is caught and brought to trial, the judge sentences him to three years' imprisonment. William Falder, notes "I din't think of the consequences; I only thought of her." (Galsworthy 1910, Act 2). The harsh sentence sparks a heated debate among the characters about the nature of justice and morality. "The morality of an action depends entirely upon its consequences." Jeremy Bentham (An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, 1789). Through this debate, Galsworthy critiques the utilitarian ideology that underpins the justice system.

Galsworthy argues that the utilitarian approach is morally bankrupt. Through the character of Falder, he highlights the human cost of a system that prioritizes abstract notions of justice over individual well-being. Falder's imprisonment has devastating consequences, not only for him but also for those around him, including Ruth and his family. Falder's lover Ruth Honeywill notes, "You dont know it's like to be in this place... to be alone, and frightened, and desperate." John Galsworthy (Justice, Act 3).

Moreover, Galsworthy suggests that the utilitarian approach is often used to justify the interests of the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable. The judge's sentence is motivated by a desire to maintain social order and deter others from committing similar crimes, rather than a genuine concern for justice or morality. "The law is not a instrument of justice, but a instrument of power." John Galsworthy (Justice). In contrast, Galsworthy presents an alternative vision of justice, one that prioritizes compassion, empathy, and individual rights.

Through Justice, Galsworthy challenges the dominant utilitarian ideology of his time, arguing that it is morally and ethically flawed. Instead, he advocates for a more nuanced and compassionate approach to justice, one that prioritizes individual rights and freedoms over abstract notions of the greater good. "Justice is the tolerable accommodation of the conflicting interests of society." John Galsworthy (Justice).

Galsworthy's critique of utilitarianism remains relevant today, as we continue to grapple with the complexities of justice and morality. "The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; and that all other things are desirable only as means to that end." - John Stuart Mill (Utilitarianism, 1861). His play serves as a powerful reminder of the need for empathy, compassion, and individual rights in our justice system. Evidently, Justice is a call to action, urging us to rethink our assumptions about justice and morality, and to strive for a more just and compassionate society.

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