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The Morale Basis for Affirmative Actions

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December 17, 2005

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Abstract

In this paper I examine ethical issues raised by the application of affirmative action policies in the United States of America. The goal of preferential treatment is to create a level playing field for the members of under-represented groups, which have suffered discrimination in the past. The application of such policies in workplaces and educational institutions has created ethical dilemmas. Arguments in favor of affirmative actions can be viewed into six categories. First, the arguments based on justice will be reviewed. These arguments have a backward looking ethical principle to remedy the past racism and sexism actions. Second, the arguments based on democracy and common good are examined and their rationale to include every citizen in a democratic society. Third, the argument on grounds of social utility will be reviewed. These arguments would promote desirable outcomes such as better business delivery and results to minorities. Fourth, the argument is based on feminist ethics of care. Fifth, the argument on ground of social contract implies that a company or a university agrees to certain social contractual obligation to support diversity. Sixth, the arguments against the game theory are explored to justify preferential treatment. In the opposing corner, the affirmative action is criticized using two ethical arguments. First, the argument based on moral principle refutes affirmative action as a reverse discrimination. Second, the argument on the grounds of social utility will lead to Balkanized society and defeat the primary purpose of such policies to be inclusive. This review of ethical theories and arguments shall enable us to provide a balanced and moderated view of affirmative actions and temporary means toward a more inclusive and democratic society where every individual is valued and included in all aspects of social and economical life.

Introduction

Gunnar (1944) described the issue of historical injustice, the exploitation and abuse of minorities by the White population, and the leaping toward the equality of all citizens regardless of ethnic background in the United States of America: “American Dilemma”. This dilemma is apparent in the American business practices. Data on discrimination in workplace shows that the discrimination still pervasive. Beauchamp (2004) states that “white males continue to receive the highest entry-level salaries when compare to other social group; that women with similar credentials and experience.” As far as job promotions are concerned minorities had less chance of advancement (Jomills & McPartland 1987).

Face with increasing social unrest and historical injustice against women and minorities and the emergence of civil rights movements, in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson issues Executive Order 11246 (1964). The intent of this order was to implement affirmative action programs to overcome the historical effects of discrimination against women and minorities. Affirmative action refers to a set of specific procedures designed to ensure an equal distribution of jobs and salaries to women and minorities. This set of procedures requires that government contractors develop a written plan of affirmative action to remedy areas of underutilization. Affirmative action plans detail specific actions to develop, implement and monitor effective programs designed to attract larger numbers of qualified women and minorities to jobs in which they are underrepresented.

Shaw (1988) defines affirmative actions as a “public or private program designed to equalize hiring and admissions opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups by taking into consideration those very characteristics which have been used to deny them equal treatment” (p.763). Debates continue on the validity of preferential treatment of women and minorities. The

ethical arguments are that the affirmative action policies are just, there are unjust, and there are not just, but still permissible.

Ethical Arguments in favor of affirmative action policies

We examine the ethical justification of affirmative action policies in the light of six major categories of ethical theories. The first argument is based on compensatory justice for past discrimination suffered by women and minorities. The second argument is based on the notion of democratic values of full participation of citizen in all aspect of social and economic life and the ideal of equality. The third argument is presented as a “forward-looking” social utility to create diversity in workplace and higher education institutions for the social good. The fourth is based on feminist ethics of care. The fifth argument is based on social contract theory. The sixth argument is based on the critic of game theory.

Justice

Beauchamp and Bowie (2004) argue in favor of affirmative action. They stated that African Americans have suffered centuries of injustice; therefore they are underrepresented in economic activities and social opportunities. Howard (1978) goes further and argues affirmative actions in employment and university admissions are part of the reparation for historical injustice against African American for slavery and institutionalized discrimination. The premise of compensatory justice is based on morale obligation to remedy an injury caused to an innocent individual by the perpetrator of a wrongdoing. Howard asserts that the descendants of the victim of slavery and prejudice deserve reparation and restitution. In the same vein, Beauchamp and Bowie (2004) argues “those who have inherited wealth accumulated by iniquitous practices

have no more right to their wealth than the sons of slaves, who have some claim to it as a matter of compensation” (p. 327).

There are two opposing viewpoints about compensatory justice. The individuals, who are compensated, are not the victims; and, the individuals, who pay the compensation, didn't do anything discriminatory. The issue at hand is that the existing biases in the workplace and educational institutions against the minorities and women are still current. Ezorsky (1991) suggests that the compensatory justice is required to remedy this situation without really focusing exclusively on the past. Fish (1993) also reiterated the current obstacles to equality of opportunity. Jackson (1999) argues “despite four decades of Civil Rights and Affirmative Action, and modest signs of progress toward creating a society ready, allegedly, to practice democratic values, inequalities persist”. In sum, the compensatory justice constitutes a strong view of affirmative action to remedy the situation through the direct intervention of the government and tide system of regulations, quotas, and taxation.

Democracy

The most common argument in favor of affirmative actions is based on the ideal of a democratic society. Post (1998) uses the promotion of a democratic culture as a basis for affirmative action in colleges' admissions. He argues creating the knowledge capital of all citizens will contribute to bridge the social and economical gap between the under represented minority groups and the majority. Post (1998) argues that the colleges and universities "aspire to cultivate the remarkable and difficult capacity to regard oneself from the perspective of the other, which is the foundation of the critical interaction necessary for active and effective citizenship" (p. 23). Without the affirmative action the colleges and universities will not be diverse enough to

reflect different cultures in the society. Post (1998) continues to argue, “A political culture without such participation would be neither democratic nor healthy, but merely repressive. In the United States racial and ethnic identities mark lines of intense political division. If the racial and ethnic rifts that divide us are to be transcended by a democratic state that is legitimate to all sides, there must be articulate participation in public culture that concomitantly spans the lines of controversies” (p23).

In his part, Issacharoff (1998) argues “There is no escaping the tension between exclusivity to preserve high academic standards and inclusivity to offer advancement and integration into American society. Affirmative action has been the one successful mechanism that allowed elite public institutions to pursue both commitments. Only affirmative action permits a school to admit the very best white students and also the very best black and Mexican-American students in more than token numbers. Achieving the twin aims of public higher education is a compelling state interest that should be allowed to justify the appropriately limited use of racial classifications” (p683). For this reason, the affirmative action policies are the only way to integrate minorities into the society’s elite.

As far as the diversity in workplace is concerned, Estlund (2000) considers the workplace as an extension of civil society. There is a democratic interest to promote social integrity and diversity. Thus, the citizens from different social and ethnic groups could share their viewpoints and life experiences with one another helping to have an open dialogue among all people from all backgrounds.

Social Utility

Previously, we examined arguments in favor of preferential treatment from a compensatory justice perspective often called backward looking compensatory rationales. By opposition, Dworkin (2002) offers a forward-looking argument as a rationale for affirmative action. The aim is to remedy against existing discrimination practices based on the ideal of equality and the principle of utilitarian ethics. In addition, Harwood (1990) provides utilitarian arguments such as role models, diversity in education, increases in the pool of applicants and hence competition, replacement of diminishing marginal utility for richer whites with more utility for poorer African American. As far as the preferential treatment of women is concerned Purdy (1984) argues women will benefit from this to correct a sexist perception bias in the evaluation of female candidates. In the same vein, Anderson (2002) defends that the racial integration of mainstream institutions is necessary to dismantle the current prejudice. He conceives as a forward-looking argument to remedy the racial segregation and discrimination.

Feminist ethics of care

The ethics of care represents a feminist view and focuses on self, connected to others. The ethics of care is challenging the male-biased dominant ethical theories. The ethics of care pay a great deal of attention to the importance of relationships established among people and deemphasize the focus on isolated persons relevant in some of the ethical theories and take into account the effects of emotions. The notion of interconnection, the importance of meaningful relationships with others and the nurturing nature of the ethics of care motivate an individual to take responsibilities to other people around him or her. Therefore, feminist ethics of care

criticize historic and existing culture of dominance and exploitation of women as well as men in the society and appeal to taking care of men and women oppressed and discriminated.

Liedtka (1996) argues, when the ethics of care is applied to an organization, such care ought to be concentrated on individuals and not profits. The care of people is an end in of itself and not a means. Finally, this should enable individuals develop their own skills and capabilities in the context of self defined goals and objectives. He continues to add, “Caring, in its ethical sense, cannot be grafted onto business as usual. Caring is difficult in today's traditional rule-based hierarchies because they are not designed to foster care” (p. 186). This argument alone compels us to consider the affirmation action policies are still an effective way to counterbalance the predominance of command and control biases in today’s organization perpetuating a system of continual discrimination against women and minorities.

Burton & Dunn (1996) expand upon the work of Wicks, Gilbert, and Freeman in regard to Stakeholder Ethics and invoke principles of caring. They portray the traditional ethics like a dichotomous thinking separating individuals as “me” versus “you” rather than considering “us”. The ethics of care is about specific relationships that are voluntary, provisory, and not always equalitarian as it is necessary in the real world among stakeholders having a relationship of convenience. The ethics of care provide a means to satisfy all reasonable stakeholder demands and recognize the relevance of trade-offs and propose guiding principles specially when it comes to most vulnerable and disadvantage stakeholders in the context of an organization. So, the preferential treatment of women and minorities is a trade-off in regard to the white male applicant to lessen the effect of prevailing discriminatory practices against the targeted groups in the society.

Simson (2005) explains the feminine thinking and the ethics of care proposed by Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and others. She argues, women had suffered discrimination and stereotyping by so-called concept of “feminine” thinking is less “rational”! The fact of the matter is that feminine modes of thinking are more personal, attached and sentimental where as the masculine thinking is more unattached, competitive and hierarchical. Simson (2005) explains “Over the past 25 or so years, women in the U.S. have benefited from the removal of most sex-based formal barriers to higher education and to well-paying jobs. Still, even the most privileged American women—that is, those not encumbered by disadvantages linked to race, class, and so on—continue to be underrepresented within the most influential ranks of American society. There are, no doubt, many complex reasons for this, but a good case can be made that one contributing factor is that the traditional predominance of men in powerful positions has resulted in masculine ways of thinking becoming accepted as standard. To be successful, women very often have needed to "think like a man." Although some women find masculine ways of thinking quite natural, many others find them alienating and frustrating and have difficulty using them with success. (p. 16)”

Social Contract

The social contract ethics generate prima facie duties of compliance on the part of those who expressly or impliedly consent to the term of the social contract as described by Dunfee (1990). The adhesion to a social contract derives many ethical norms and compliance of actors engaged in the pursuit of a business endeavor. This compliance could be voluntary, implied, or, in certain case even a party rejects it, enforceable based on the application of a justice principle.

Fullinwider (2005) reports "... the autumn of 1972, when the Secretary of Labor's Revised Order No. 4,... by extending to all contractors the basic apparatus of the construction industry "plans," the Order imposed a one-size-fits-all system of "underutilization analyses," "goals," and "timetables" on hospitals, banks, trucking companies, steel mills, printers, airlines—indeed, on all the scores of thousands of institutions, large and small, that did business with the government, including a special set of institutions with a particularly voluble and articulate constituency, namely, American universities". In that sense, this new social contract expanded the applicability of affirmative action policies beyond the original scope of government contracts into the private sector of economy. Based on the social contract ethics, it is ethical to provide adequate measure to close the gap between the dominant position of white male and targeted groups identified by the affirmative action policies through this new social contract imposed by the government.

Game Theory

The game theory is being frequently applied in the analysis of economy, sociology, or biology phenomena and rightly so it provides insights and conceptual models of existing events and actors. Some authors are trying to extend this theory to ethics in general and business ethics in particular. The game theory provides guiding principles and rules to engage in many fields of economic activities and how-to play "the game". Unfortunately, I believe that most people are going to work to make a living. The concept of a game suggests that one is not really concerned about the reality and the outcome of a game should not impact an individual well being and moral characters, since it is understood that it is just a game and not reflection of a person over all status. In the other hand, the business for the majority of people has a real consequence in

term of reward, punishment, and fair share of economic and social standing. The concept of the game theory to maximize someone beneficial position could lead a disaster from a society perspective.

Solomon (1999) argue “that the business world involves a great many different sorts of activities and forms of interaction, a few of which might be imperfectly captured in the "prisoner's dilemma." But the ill-fated attempt to capture all of business and economics (and the misleadingly singular "the market") in a single, mathematically precise model denies this obvious truth for the sake of playing a game with strategies rather than trying to understand the actual, necessarily personal dynamics of actual business activity”. In addition, the game theory doesn’t take into consideration the complexity of social issues, and human behaviors. The fact that the women and minorities are under represented in the business activities and is compensated less than the majority of the population might not be a big deal for a game theorist.

As Solomon (1999) takes a quote from Bertrand Russell, “we are not calculating creatures” and have ethical and moral concerns about people who being denied a fair share of economic prosperity and lack of basis rights and human dignity to have decent jobs, housing, medical care, education, and celebrated for their uniqueness and culture heritage.

Ethical Arguments against Affirmative Action Policies

Moral Principal

Reverse discrimination is not justifiable as it is described by Newton (1989). She argues, “It is then, an ironic paradox, if not a contradiction in terms, to assert that the ideal of equality justifies the violation of justice; ...”. If the affirmative action violates a right, she concludes, they are morally wrong no matter how much good they might do. She adds that reverse

discrimination does not redress past wrongs and the justice requires rooting out unjustified discrimination. The ideal must be, as Aristotle suggested, equal treatment for all citizens, but reverse discrimination doesn't provide equal treatment for all, rather, it encourages, even requires, that some be treated "more equally" than others. She poses some intriguing questions: How does discriminating against the white male and in favor of someone of a different race today reverse the effects of discrimination against that other person's father or grandfather? How do we define a "minority" that has been discriminated against? American society is a society of minorities. How will we know when the groups previously discriminated against have achieved equality, and no longer require "assistance"? "[Reverse discrimination] destroys justice, law, equality and citizenship itself, and replaces them with power struggles and popularity contests."

Walzed (1983) points out the principle of merit requiring that the most qualified candidate get the position. He argues that the selection criteria for an employment's position should be based on the merit of the candidate and the race factor as selection criteria ought to be used in rare occasion and under special circumstances.

Gross (1994) argues that the Principe of compensatory justice is compromised by affirmative action. He adds that the application of such policies violates the esprit and the intent of just compensation and places unfair weights on the shoulders of people who have not perpetuated any discrimination against the minorities.

Social Utility

There are many authors who criticized the affirmative action policies based on the utilitarian ethical theory arguments. For example, Blackstone (1975) predicts that the affirmative

action will lead to a Balkanized society, fragmentation, and continual polarization of the United States of America. So, overall everybody will be worst off and this create social and economical inefficiency.

On the personal level, Steele (1991) and Sowell (1999) argue that affirmative action might imply that the minorities are less competent and do more harm than good. The perception is that they don't deserve to get a job or be admitted to the university based on their merit and personal efforts. Therefore, these minorities will suffer from low self-esteem and will be stigmatized further in the society.

Loury (1997) rejects the idea of preferential treatment of women and minorities based on the economical inefficiencies. He argues, "Another reason for being skeptical about the practice of affirmative action is that it can undercut the incentives for blacks to develop their competitive abilities. For instance, preferential treatment can lead to the patronization of black workers and students. By "patronization," I mean the setting of a lower standard of expected accomplishment for blacks than for whites because of the belief that blacks are not as capable of meeting a higher, common standard".

Schuck (2003) describes the diversity in the United States and the role of the government to mandate affirmative action to promote diversity. He argues in favor of diversity as a valuable goal for the society and accepts the limited role of government to manage and protect it where it exists. But, he is in favor of laws promoting diversity and against discrimination in education, employment, and housing.

Discussion/Conclusion

Reskin (1988) says employment discrimination is still prevalent in the United States of America. Thus, the affirmative action policies are needed to remedy discriminatory hiring practices. In her report, published in August 1998, she demonstrates how age-old recruitment practices such as informal networks and employee's referrals result in discrimination. She argues "Discrimination in job assignment and promotion - whether the result of intentional acts or customary business practices - is still common." It seems that the discrimination is very subtle and does look to be deliberated. Reskin (1998) adds that "While some discrimination results from employer's active preference for one group over another, much of it stems from simply by doing 'business as usual'." Especially, one of most common method of recruitment is the old fashioned word of mouth method. It looks like most of the employees' referrals generally maintained the existing racial and ethical making of a company. The rational to use the word of mouth method was simply for economical reason and most cost effective way to recruit potential employee. This type of example forces us to take into the account that without an affirmative action in employment it will be almost impossible to promote workplace diversity and reliance on the voluntary compliance of businesses to attract and hire minorities and women will be an exercise in futility as far as the targeted groups are concerned.

So far, we saw two competing view of affirmative action. The first view is that the only means to the end of a color-blind, sex-blind society is preferential treatment of women and/or minorities. The second view is that a color-blind, sex-blind society can be achieved by guaranteeing equal opportunities to all citizens, irrespective of race or sex. In this view a preferential treatment is considered a reverse discrimination.

Sheer (1999) argues that past discrimination warrants present remedies for those discriminated against in the past; therefore the affirmative action is just.

In contrast, Arnold (1998) argues that the employment discrimination in society is presently minor and controllable. Those harmed by past discrimination are no longer alive to be compensated. The management's fiduciary responsibilities are to its shareholders to act in the firm's best financial interest and the state's responsibilities to its citizens. Thus, the affirmative action is unjust.

Finally, Nagel (1981) argues that "there is an element of individual unfairness" in strong affirmative action plans, but these plans are justified as a means to the end of eradicating an intolerable social situation. Beauchamp (2004) argues that even some form of reverse discrimination can be justified as a means to the end of a nondiscriminatory society.

We also reviewed some of the most common ethical theories and tried to use their arguments to justify a balanced approach to the affirmative action. As long as we live in a society where there are huge disparities in income level and there is ongoing social injustice, the need for corrective actions are necessary if we want to live in a free society where each individual have equal chance to live in peace and can have equal access to quality education, healthcare, and job opportunities.

Future Research Issues

I think the topic of affirmative action and its ethical and moral justification will call forth many more debates for many years to come. It will be beneficiary to study the following questions and formulate some hypotheses to go beyond a preferential treatment and toward a just social system. These questions are as follow: 1) what has been the real consequences of

affirmative action for last 40 years? And 2) what are the conditions in which it is no longer necessary to enforce the affirmative action policies?

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