

Utilitarianism

Question 7

A) What are the advantages of Utilitarianism?

Utilitarianism is principle of making decisions on the basis of promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number of those who may be affected by the decision.

There are many advantages to the principle of utilitarianism. These many evolve around the fact that this idea takes into account many different aspects of the action and decision which helps to make the decision, in a sense, fairer.

One main advantage is that the principle appears to make sense to people. The principle is very simple and straight forward and can be easily followed. There is only one criterion to follow – ‘the greatest happiness for the greatest number’. It explains how pleasure if for the greatest number, which to most people seems like a good outcome of a decision. Many people would find it a good goal to work towards and a good basis to make their decisions in life no matter how big the decision may actually be. As the principle is so simple and almost obvious when making some decisions Richard Jones makes the statement:

“There has usually been a strong element of Utilitarianism in English moral thinking”

Linked with this idea there is the idea of morality. To many people, it seems morally right that we should base our decisions on how much happiness comes out from the decision and to how many people it effects. As happiness is not meaningless and we all know what it is, it is easy for us to know what will make other people happy, and also to know what will make other people suffer or what will cause them pain. This means it would, in essence, be easy to make the right decision when using the Utilitarianism principle.

The principle of Utilitarianism emphasises that we should not be selfish and we should be impartial about others in order to make the correct and best decision in a certain situation. It takes into account the interests of all the other people which are either directly involved or could be affected by the consequences of the action or decision. This idea of unselfishness may already be deemed to be morally right by most people which relates back to my previous strength of the principle.

Utilitarianism appears to be very flexible in that there are no laws, principle, or institution which controls the principle. This means we cannot defend things just on the idea of authority or tradition, the only way to defend them would be to look at the ‘principle of Utility.’ The main way of making the decision to do with this principle if to look to the Hedonic Calculus. This is almost a calculation which takes into account the different areas of the pleasure and pain which may come of out of making a decision. This means not only one aspect of the idea decision is taken into account but all for example the intensity, the duration, the certainty or uncertainty an so on.

The principle of Utilitarianism is also purely secular which is why it can appeal to different people. As there is no reference to any main religion it can be either followed by atheists or by many different religions separately. This helps the principle to be more widely used and maybe more appealing to many people. Many people, who do not follow the Christian faith, would refer to utilitarianism to make decisions. C Brown states:

“Utilitarian ideas tend to be regarded as a more rational alternative to Christianity as the basis for political and social action.”

Utilitarianism is based purely on human experience which means again it will appeal to more people and it also helps people to understand the aspects of it as they can see the ideas and ways for themselves in the world around them. If the idea was complex and not based on experience people may find it hard to understand and accept. C Brown states:

“Consciously or unconsciously utilitarianism has become absorbed into the bloodstream of much modern thinking.”

To sum up the strengths of the principle of Utilitarianism, it is a relative approach to ethics and ethical decisions and can be applied to many different circumstances and it can be applied in many different ways. The main strength itself is the simplicity of the argument and how it can appeal to many different groups of people and in many different ways. Richard Jones in Groundwork of Christian Ethics sums up the strength of utilitarianism by saying:

“The greatest strengths of Utilitarianism in practice are its plain universal and common sense style about much of its arguments, especially when being critical of established authorities such as church of state”

B) Identify the main problems of Utilitarianism. To what extent do these make Utilitarianism unacceptable?

One of the main weaknesses of the principle of Utilitarianism is the meaning of happiness. The main problem being finding a definition for the word 'happiness'. One definition which has been put forward is: 'state of achieving ones desire'. The question which then comes from this is 'how do we know what we desire?' Some situations may offer an obvious answer to this question but in others it may be much harder to find. Mill said:

"Ask yourself whether your happy and you will cease to be so."

The other problem with this is the fact that desires can change or be altered and manipulated. Mills says that when referring to higher and lower pleasure we should naturally choose the higher pleasure as this is what we have been taught throughout our lives. This also says how advertising can effect what we desire. This links to the idea of 'is there anything more important than happiness?' for example justice.

The second main problem is the idea of consequences. There are three things to consider when making a decision to bring the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of people. The problem being that there is no way of actually, accurately calculating the amount of pleasure. The main problem being that we can never for definite, say what the consequences of the action will be and therefore we cannot say how much happiness will come out of it. Linked with this is the fact that one consequence leads to another consequence and so on and so on which means that the chances are there will be negative consequences at some point in the future.

Special responsibility is also a problem with the principle of utilitarianism. We all have family, friends, colleagues etc who we have more responsibility to than people we don't know. This point is not taken into account when using the principle of utilitarianism. The main example used to demonstrate this is: two men drowning in a river, one is your father, one a scientist on the verge of curing cancer, a utilitarian would save the scientist but you would naturally want to save your father. This is a major problem with the principle of utilitarianism.

The problem on justice is another major problem with the principle of utilitarianism. The greatest amount of happiness is achieved but through unequal distribution in which one person is deprived of happiness. This can lead to punishment of an innocent person which we all would class as wrong. An example to show this is if a murderer has murdered many children, the families of these children want someone to be punished for this; this punishment would make all these families feel better about it. A utilitarian would say it is ok for an innocent man to be blamed and punished for the murders, as this would bring greater happiness to more people. D. Cook says in the Moral Maze:

"Utilitarianism has been criticised as being only interested in the consequences of actions. Morality is also about motive and intention."

One major wide spread problem with utilitarianism is that it can promote people to do wrong actions, which may even be against our law, but according to a utilitarian this would be the right thing to do. Wrong things can be made to appear right to a utilitarian. Not only this but it does not take into account the actual action and intention. It only takes into account the result or consequence and this again can result in the action its self being wrong.

I think these problems make utilitarianism unacceptable. The fact that you are to go against your family if it is to bring happiness to people you don't even know, to me is completely wrong and goes against family loyalties which I believe are the strongest loyalties you should have. Not only this but in some circumstances this can encourage people to break the law and go against 'wrong' and 'right'.

The fact that utilitarians base the decisions on the consequence but yet have no way of knowing the consequences of the action is extremely unreliable. This means that there is no certainty that there principle is the best thing to do.