

What are the main features of 'Utilitarianism as an ethical theory?_(10)

It is important to note that whilst Utilitarianism is an ethical theory, it was also conceived as a political measure. Bentham, for example, thought that he had developed a means by which governments and individuals could work out what the correct course of action was.

Utilitarianism is based on the idea of 'utility'. Utility means usefulness. What utilitarians suggest is that everyone should do the most useful thing. However, there seems to be an immediate problem with this idea in that it is not obvious what 'useful' means. The answer to this problem, according to Utilitarians, is that 'useful' means happiness. This is in fact, a development of another ethical theory known as Hedonism. Utilitarians also define good in terms of happiness. Indeed for a Utilitarian the only thing that is good itself is happiness.

Another key feature of Utilitarianism is that it attempts to be 'scientific' in that Utilitarians believe that the amount of happiness can be calculated. Bentham believed that it was possible to calculate the amount of happiness in a similar way to the way that calculations are made in science and maths. He called the means for doing this the Felicific Calculus.

Bentham believed that it was possible to work out what is right and wrong by following one rule. 'The greatest happiness for the greatest number'. This is another key feature of Utilitarianism. A good way of summing up the Principle of Utility is to say that 'it is not the happiness of the majority, it is the majority of happiness'.

Bentham also tried to establish a reason why people should follow the Principle of Utility. The reason he gave was that people should be punished if they do not follow the rules and laws determined by the Principle of Utility. Another word for punishment is sanction and this is the word that Bentham preferred. These sanctions could be physical, political or moral.

A lot of the features of Utilitarianism are same and they all eventually link back to the Principle of Utility and that it is 'the greatest good for the greatest number'.