

What are the main features of utilitarianism as an ethical theory? (10)

Utilitarianism is a teleological ethical theory. Deontological ethical theories concentrate on moral rules that cannot be broken because the act itself is bad, whereas teleological theories concentrate on the consequence of an action instead. 'For a teleological thinker, the ends justify the means'. Followers of teleological ethical theories decide whether an act is good or bad from the consequences it will produce. Therefore, whereas a deontological thinker would say stealing was wrong, a teleological thinker might say stealing in situations where the consequences bring the greatest good to the greatest number was acceptable. Therefore, for teleological thinkers a way in which to determine the good or bad outcome of an action needed to be devised. This led to the principle of utilitarianism.

Jeremy Bentham developed the theory of utilitarianism. His theory formed three parts. The first part is what he believed motivated human beings. He was a hedonist in his belief that pleasure was what motivated human beings, them turning away from pain, and that pleasure was the sole good and pain was the sole evil.

"Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure"

Bentham developed the utility principle that stated the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by its usefulness, or utility, where usefulness refers to the greatest pleasure or good caused by an action.

"An action is right if it produces the greatest good for the greatest number" Bentham. Hence, his theory was not just applying to individuals but to the whole of society and was democratic. Bentham argued that when faced with a moral dilemma, a person should act on what would be the most utile to the greatest number of people. This proposed a problem however, on how one could judge how utile an action was, and this led to the development of the hedonic calculus.

The hedonic calculus weighs up pleasure and pain generated by moral actions to find the best option. When weighing up the consequences, the hedonic calculus explores; its intensity, its duration, its certainty, its remoteness, its fecundity, its purity and its extent. This means that

Bentham's hedonic calculus looks at pain on a much broader scale than just how many people are affected. He considers the pain of repercussions and also the type of pain an individual may experience.

Two types of utilitarianism have emerged since Jeremy Bentham first invented it; act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism is the form that Bentham is more closely associated with because it is the principle where utilitarianism is applied to individual situations and has the flexibility of being able to assess every individual action in a certain time, although the actions that it justifies can change with time. Therefore, if jumping traffic one day causes the greatest good, and obeying the road laws the next day causes the greatest good, then a person's actions from one day to the next will change.

Rule utilitarianism, however, focuses on general rules that everyone has to obey. Rule utilitarians would say that jumping traffic on any day was wrong, because the law is in place for the greatest good of the community. This form of utilitarianism is associated with John Stuart Mill and involves sacrificing your personal happiness sometimes to obey laws and rules enforced to create law and order which benefit everybody in the long run.

Examine and consider criticisms which have been made against utilitarianism. (10)

Act utilitarianism is seen as a way of justifying breaking laws. For example, if murdering a person can be justified because it causes the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, then people would go around murdering for the good of mankind. People can only really establish what is better for society on a personal level, their opinion of whether their act of murder is right might not be other people's opinion on whether it is right. Therefore, act utilitarianism is not effectively sound. However, to counteract this argument, rule utilitarianism has been brought about by John Stuart Mill. This states that laws in society should be followed as strictly as possible, so that the greater good for society is achieved and leaves little option for personal perception to corrupt an act of evil or good.

The theory of utilitarianism banishes selfish pleasures and welcomes democratic

decisions that cause the greatest good to a large amount of people. It is a practical theory and can be applied to real life situations without a need for any special wisdom, only considering actions before we carry them out- which is natural anyway. There are, however, a great deal of criticisms of the theory.

The first being that all decisions are decided on whether or not the outcome of an action is good or not. It relies on accurate predictions of the future and this is not possible, no outcomes are guaranteed, especially the outcomes of big decisions. Consequences of an action may be delayed for some considerable amount of time, years, decades, centuries, and human beings cannot know this. Hence it is difficult to use teleological ethics to make complicated decisions and utilitarianism is therefore not efficient.

The second criticism is the fact different pleasures and different pains cannot be easily quantified. Although the hedonic calculus makes it appear straightforward, the birth of a child and eating a chocolate bar cannot be judged on the same scale. John Stuart Mill criticised the hedonic calculus and made a new scale which separated types of pleasures. Here he concluded that pleasures of the mind were more important than bodily pleasures, and thus this makes utilitarianism a better model for life, favouring paths of knowledge and self improvement to paths of drug abuse and promiscuous sex which on Bentham's calculus were equally as important. The hedonic calculus alone is somewhat inefficient in creating a good society.

The third criticism is the difficulty of justice, because while utilitarianism goes about giving pleasure to the largest amount of people, it guarantees nothing for the minority. Therefore acts like sadistic guards torturing their prisoners could be allowed, and the Nazi policies of Jewish extermination could be justified if it created the largest amount of pleasure for the largest amount of people. In A Theory of Justice by John Rawls, this issue is highlighted and it explains the need to protect minorities.

The fourth criticism is that utilitarianism gives no definition on what definitely causes pain or pleasure. One person's pleasure may be the other persons pain, so making decisions for the majority of people is impossible. The premise on which utilitarianism is based is weakened because there is no definite answer on what causes pain or pleasure, so no rule can be made for

general purposes.

In conclusion, despite its faults, utilitarianism has proved very popular, even by today's standards. People have followed hedonism especially, seeking their own pleasure from their actions.. *'It remains a persuasive ethical theory due its practical dimension, which provides organisations with clear-cut system for making decisions.'*

Personally I think utilitarianism is a posh name for common sense, and that there is no way people can write law books for ethics in life, but instead people should use the theories as rough guides to decisions. Everyone makes decisions differently, and there can be no handbook to being a good person, it has to come from within. However, I respect John Stuart Mill's theories more than Bentham's original plan, as he explain mind pleasures are more important than bodily pleasures, and this clarified an issue that was severely wrong with basic utilitarianism.