

Utilitarianism – Revision

Possible questions:

Explain the theory:

- Describe and explain the main principles of Utilitarianism (or specific features e.g. Mill's Utilitarianism)
- Explain the main differences between Act and Rule Utilitarianism (or other variants)

Apply the theory:

- Explain a Utilitarian approach to issues raised by fertility treatment (or any other issue)

Evaluate the theory:

- Explain the main strengths of a Utilitarian ethical system (or e.g. Bentham's Utilitarianism)
 - What are Utilitarianism's main weaknesses?
 - To what extent is Utilitarianism a useful method of making decisions about euthanasia? (or any other issue)
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Explain the theory:

- The principle of utility (teleological, consequentialist)
- Bentham (Hedonism, Hedonic Calculus, quantitative)
- Mill (qualitative, higher/lower pleasures, individual sovereignty)
- Act/Rule Utilitarianism
- Preference Utilitarianism (Hare, Singer) and other advances

Evaluate the theory:

Strengths

- Makes the world a better place (Bentham/Mill were reformers who made positive changes)
- Practical and useful (this is the way lottery money is distributed or hospital budgets are spent) and easy to use
- Flexible – allows for the fact that people find happiness in different ways in other societies
- Overcomes problems inherent in deontological ethics (what do you do if two rules clash?)
- Easy to apply, and intuitive – if it upsets people, don't do it, but why is it wrong if no one gets hurt?
- Fair – treats everyone's pleasure as equal, challenging elitism and any form of favouritism

Weaknesses

- Consequentialism is inherently flawed – it is easy to think of examples of wrong actions that happen to lead to good consequences by chance
- Hedonism is wrong – just because someone enjoys an activity (e.g. looking at paedophile pornography) this doesn't make it right, even if no-one else was affected
- Unpredictable – we cannot know what will happen, so can never know what the right course of action will be
- Incalculable – what I do affects so many people, I couldn't add up all the effects even if I could see the future
- Immeasurable – you can't put a value on our feelings. If only I was affected, e.g. by going to a concert or buying a CD, I still couldn't put a number on the pleasure I would feel either way
- It is unfair – it justifies doing horrible things to innocent people for the 'greater good'
- Naturalistic fallacy – just because people desire pleasure, this doesn't make pleasure 'desirable'. Or, why should we maximise people's preferences just because they have them?