

Utilitarianism

- a) Explain the main differences between Act and Rule Utilitarianism (33 marks)

Act Utilitarian's supports that, ~~whenever possible~~ the principle of utility must be applied to each individual situation. This was Bentham's idea once he had established that pleasure and pain were important qualities for determining what was moral. The rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by its usefulness. With Act Utilitarianism, one must decide what action will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number in the circumstance that would have arisen. For example, if you are in a situation where lying would bring about the greatest good then, you should lie. Act Utilitarians support the view that it is the value of the consequences of the particular act that count, so if breaking the law would lead to the greatest good for the majority then it would be the correct act to follow.

Another benefit of Act Utilitarianism is that, it allows for flexibility, unlike rule utilitarianism. You aren't evaluating the theories, you are comparing them. You can therefore take into account individual situations, and know the right course of action to take to bring about the greatest happiness. Act Utilitarianism is generally associated with Jeremy Bentham and the use of the Hedonic Calculus. This is a means of determining the amount of pleasure or pain that is derived from an action. However a flaw with Act Utilitarianism is that it does become a very impractical means of establishing the right course of action to take. You have bypassed a major source of points here – the Hedonic Calculus can be used to make points about Act and Rule Utilitarianism

Rule Utilitarianism however, focuses on general rules that everyone should follow to bring about the greatest good for that community. Utilitarianism shouldn't be limited to a community. It should count all people. Unlike Act Utilitarianism, it establishes the best overall rule that would be pursued by the whole community. We associate this form of Utilitarianism with Mill. Rule Utilitarianism, states that you must follow the rules even if it doesn't lead to the greatest pleasure for the individual at the time. It focuses solely on the idea that you should follow the rule that will bring about the greatest good within the community. For example you could use the example of road rules. For example if the rule is "you must drive on the left hand side of the road in the UK" This applies and is the rule that should be followed in all situations, even if you were stuck in a traffic jam, and you wanted to drive on the right, you must not, seeing as the rule is to keep order on the road, you cannot take into account your personal circumstances as in act utilitarianism. This is a bad example – I don't know that it is even a rule. It is certainly not an ethical issue. You have studied abortion, euthanasia and genetic engineering. Surely you could come up with a better example. E.g. if rule utilitarianism decides that doctors should not be able to end a human life, would a rule utilitarian have killed Mary to save Jodie? If it was agreed that allowing euthanasia would be a bad rule as it would lead to people who are old or ill being scared or worried about being pressured into dying, would a rule utilitarian break this rule such as in the Dianne Pretty case? There has to be boundaries and rules to keep the society tolerable. In all cases the rule would take priority over the immediate situation. The rules established would be followed universally and would apply in all situations.

With Rule Utilitarianism however, you can also understand that there is some leeway, for example you are faced with weak and strong rule Utilitarians. Some rules if followed will clearly decrease happiness for example, To never kill a human might

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seem to be a good rule, but this could make defense against aggressors for example very difficult. Rule utilitarians would then add that there are general exception rules that allow the breaking of other rules if this increases happiness, one example being self-defense. This is therefore showing a weak rule Utilitarian approach. **No. What you're describing here is a complex set of clauses and sub-clauses, a lot like our legal system. In fact, the example you give is a valid example from UK law. The law does distinguish between killing in self defense and murder. This would be a criticism of Kant, who is trying to find absolute universal laws, but is not a problem for rule utilitarianism. Weak, or Soft, Rule Utilitarianism says that sometimes you can break the rules if doing so leads to the greater good. This is totally unlike our legal system. You can't break the law in the UK. So, this sort of Rule Utilitarianism, where you can break the rules if it leads to the greater good, is really Act Utilitarianism. and could be argued to be falling under Act Utilitarianism, it is difficult therefore to understand and distinguish between the two, critics would use this to suggest a flaw in rule Utilitarianism because you are looking at the individual case. Strong Utilitarians would however always persist with the rules, for example in the case with Diane Pretty, even though in this case the greater happiness for the individual would have been seen by allowing euthanasia, it would lead to further conflict and debate about under what circumstances you are allowed to use Euthanasia. Strong Rule Utilitarianism leaves no potential leeway or flexibility.**

Another good essay. Please take note of the comments!

Mr E.