

Utilitarianism

b) 'Rule Utilitarianism ignores the consequences.' Discuss (17 marks)

It could be argued that Rule Utilitarianism does ignore the consequences, for example we can use the case study of Dianne Pretty who was suffering from motor neurone disease. The condition further led to her great distress and eventually to the loss of all self-dignity until the end of her slow and painful death. The courts cases showed an interesting range of ethical responses, ending with the statement from the European courts that Dianna Pretty did not have the right to die. The deontological argument however was not the only argument to come out of the courts. The reason for the rule utilitarian to go with this decision is because, even though Dianne's suffering was horrific thus justifying her assistance in death, rule Utilitarians would argue that to change the law, would lead to more harm than good. So a Rule utilitarian approach was followed. **Brilliantly put – this is exactly how to use a case study. Genius.**

On the other hand however, you could argue that the rule 'not to kill under any circumstances' has been thought over to act as a rule that would in the long run bring about the greatest good. Act Utilitarians in this case would argue that allowing the husband to help Dianne to die would have been the right action to take as it leads to the greatest happiness in this case. Rule Utilitarians however, would argue that if you allow exceptions in these circumstances you would have to allow for exceptions in other circumstances, this would cause greater conflict and distress in the long run. Rule Utilitarians would argue that this would lead to a worse society and cause greater pain than if in the one circumstance where Dianne had to suffer. For example you can study, the case of Barbara Salisbury, she was a nurse who was sentenced to 5 years in jail after she was found guilty of trying to kill two elderly patients in a bid to release beds. This therefore creates an element of pain, as people in the hospitals could be scared that they will be killed off. The staff therefore may also feel pressured into making the decisions themselves. This therefore suggests that Rule Utilitarians are looking solely at the act that can be used universally as a rule to bring about the greatest happiness. **This is so close to being right. Utilitarians don't claim that an act is good or bad in itself. For example, they don't think the act of using cannabis is bad, and therefore universalising an anti-cannabis law would bring about the greater good. Instead, they imagine a rule – e.g. that you can use cannabis. They consider the effects of this (lots of happy customers, but equally lots of people with serious problems, and lots and lots of concerned non-users). They then consider the rule that you don't allow cannabis – this means a majority of happy citizens no longer so worried about drugs, a lot of unhappy potential users, and a few seriously unhappy ill people for whom cannabis would have been a blessed relief. The rule utilitarian thinks that the anti-cannabis rule would lead to a happier society, so they choose that rule. So the rule utilitarian doesn't really look at the act at all, more the rule.**

One major argument is whether you can break a rule if the consequences are good. In all circumstances, Rule Utilitarians would say No. For example in the case with Baby Theresa, who was born with effectively no brain? **(she was an anencephalic infant - important parts of the brain - the cerebrum and the cerebellum - were missing, as well as the top of the skull. There was, however, a brain-stem, and so autonomic functions such as breathing and heartbeat were possible.)** She could not have survived for longer than 2 weeks. The parents wished that her organs be used to help someone else who could survive. To allow this to happen it would involve killing the child to get the organs. This was not allowed by anybody, and so the organs could not be used even though

the consequences would have been better. Rule Utilitarians could not break a rule, 'you must not kill'. An Act Utilitarian therefore would say that the consequences have been ignored. In a counter argument from a rule utilitarian they would come back at this and say, that all humans need rules and if you have no rules the consequences are worse. For example, humans cannot be trusted to do the right thing. They become selfish and act in their own interests without realising it. This would lead to confusion and there would be no rules to guide them. In addition to this, Act Utilitarians have to weigh up the consequences in every situation. Bentham's response to this impossible demand is what he calls the 'Rule of Thumb' where your analysis of consequences in a similar situation can help you. The point being made here is that for any Utilitarians the consequences are hard to accurately predict, they are unpredictable, for example you cannot know the future and things rarely turn out how we think. They are incalculable, even when you know exactly what is going to happen it is impossible to add up the amount of pleasure and pain in each situation. Finally they are Immeasurable; it is impossible to decide on a value to give of the happiness that will be experienced.

Rule Utilitarians are consequentialists. They ignore the consequences in individual circumstances, but this is because they have made rules that bring about the greater good. Most of them would allow lying. An example of this is in Alder Hay Children's Hospital when doctors used organs from dead children for transplants and medical research, without parents' permission. An Act Utilitarian might have allowed this sort of practice in individual cases, lying to save a life. However, a Rule Utilitarian might have said "If we think about the rule 'Lie to parents and steal organs', we would see that if we follow that, it would eventually get out, and this would undermine confidence in the medical establishment and make millions unhappy." So they make the rule, and then when a doctor says "We need that organ to save a life, let's take it without telling the parents" the rule utilitarian says no.

It is clear therefore that a strong Rule Utilitarian would ignore the consequences in individual circumstances, but this is because they have made rules that bring about the greater good. However it is arguable that a weak Rule Utilitarian may take account of consequences and break the rules accordingly thus supporting the view that rule Utilitarians do not ignore the consequences. This however comes under the debate again as to whether the Weak Rule Utilitarian is taking an Act Utilitarian approach.

Katharine, you are starting to use examples really effectively, and I can see from the detail that you have gone away and read up about Dianne Pretty – well done. To get an A in the exam (which this answer definitely would), you need to know the theory, and you need to know the issues. It's not that hard really, and here you make it look easy too. Well done!