Bentham's Utilitarianism

What you need to know:

The question of what is meant by 'utility' and 'maximising utility', including:
Jeremy Bentham's quantitative hedonistic utilitarianism (his utility calculus)

Issues, including:

whether pleasure is the only good (Nozick's experience machine)
fairness and individual liberty/rights (including the risk of the 'tyranny of the majority')
problems with calculation (including which beings to include)
issues around partiality
whether utilitarianism ignores both the moral integrity and the intentions of the individual.

Key terms

Principle of Utility: The principle of utility states that a good action is one that is based on the greatest happiness for the greatest number. It is the basis of utilitarianism.

Maximisation of Utility: The maximisation of utility is the idea that we should seek to maximise happiness and minimise pain.

Possible Exam Questions

What is meant by the principle of utility? (3 marks)
What is meant by the maximisation of utility? (3 marks)
Outline Jeremy Bentham's quantitative hedonistic utilitarianism. (5 marks)
Outline Jeremy Bentham's utility calculus. (5 marks)
Outline act utilitarianism. (5 marks)
Explain the similarities and differences between Bentham and Mill's Utilitarianism. (12 marks)
How convincing is utilitarianism as an account of what makes an action morally right? (25 marks)

Bentham's quantitative hedonistic utilitarianism (act utilitarianism)

1. The moral value of any act is calculated by considering its consequences (hence it is a consequentialist theory).
2. Good acts are those that apply the principle of utility: the greatest happiness for the greatest number.
3. To calculate the moral worth of an action, it is necessary to add up all the pleasure the act brings and subtract all the pain/suffering
4. Good acts maximise pleasure and minimise pain. This is known as the maximisation of utility.
5. A utility calculus should be used to calculate the moral worth of an action. This includes taking account of intensity, duration, certainty, remoteness, fecundity, purity and extent.

Bentham's Utility Calculus

Bentham believed that a good act is an act that leads to the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. The utility calculus was designed by Bentham for the purpose of measuring pleasure. He proposed seven criteria to consider when measuring pleasure. These are:
P: Purity – asks whether proposed action will cause any pain
R: Remoteness (propinquity) – asks whether the whether the pleasure to gained from an action will be immediate
R: Richness (fecundity) – asks whether the proposed action will lead to more pleasure
I: Intensity – asks whether the proposed action will lead to a large amount of pleasure
C: Certainty – asks whether the pleasure gained from an action will definitely occur.
E: Extent – asks whether the proposed action will make a lot of people happy.
D: Duration – asks whether the pleasure to be gained from an action will be long-term.

The happiness of animals (Peter Singer)

Peter Singer argues that as humans and animals have sentience, then the happiness of all creatures need to be taken into account when seeking to maximise happiness:

P1: If only humans have moral status, there must be some special quality that all humans share.
P2: All human-specific possibilities for such a quality will be a quality that some humans lack (for example, intelligence)
P3: The only possible candidates will be qualities that other animals have too.
C: We cannot argue that only human beings deserve moral status.

Bentham's Utilitarianism

Criticism 1: Whether pleasure is the only good (Nozick and pleasure machine)

Imagine scientists have developed a pleasure machine: if you enter the virtual – reality machine you are guaranteed a pleasurable life. You don't know you are in the machine and can never come out.

The fact that many people would not want to enter the machine, shows that we do not all want to maximise pleasure. We want:
- To do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them
- To be a certain sort of person (rather than a floating mind)
- Things in the real world, not just sensations.

Criticism 2: Fairness and individual liberty/rights (including the risk of the 'tyranny of the majority')

Act utilitarianism can lead to some counter-intuitive moral judgements e.g. it may be good to sacrifice an innocent scapegoat to placate the masses.

In this way, utilitarianism can be used to justify taking away the individual right off a minority to increase the happiness of a majority.

Criticism 3: Issues around partiality

Utilitarianism calls for us to be neutral and to never to favour yourself or your family.

However, it goes against our intuition to not show preference for a family member. We could also question whether it is even possible. about what to do or who to save? Consider the below example:

Criticism 4: whether utilitarianism ignores both the moral integrity and the intentions of the individual.

Moral integrity

Bernard Williams argued that Utilitarianism requires us to do things that go against our intuitions and challenge our personal integrity. For example, tells the story of 'Jim and the Indians':

Jim is working in South America and comes across a Warlord who has captured 20 people from a local tribe He tells Jim if he personally kills one of them he will release all the others as a sign of goodwill. If he doesn't the Warlord will kill all of them.

If Jim did kill a person, then his sense of self, sense of purpose may be destroyed. In this way, utilitarianism can undermine our personal integrity.

Intentions of the individual

Utilitarianism focuses on consequences and does not consider motives. Two individuals could perform the same action (e.g. caring for an elderly family member), one could do it out of genuine compassion, another could do it to be left money in their will. The pleasure they bring could be identical, so for a utilitarian both acts are equally good. However, this is counter-intuitive. It seems more appropriate to consider the motive as an aspect of the moral worth of the action.

Criticism 5: Problems with calculation

There are a number of problems with calculating the greatest happiness for the greatest number:
- Should we aim for average happiness or total happiness? e.g. is it better to have a large population who are less happy or a smaller population who are happier per person?
- Distribution of happiness e.g. Is it better to make one person 50 points happier or 5 people 10 points happier?
- Do consequences end? If you save a drowning boy who later becomes a dictator, is the action good? If we think about consequences, our judgement about our actions constantly needs to be revised.
- Should we consider the happiness of animals? (Singer thought we should. See over the page for his argument.