

Section 4 – Moral Philosophy

Question 7

Utilitarianism is the ethical theory that strives for the greatest aggregate happiness. It is based on three principles (called the greatest happiness principle): consequentialism, where the only thing worth valuing in a moral dilemma is the consequences; hedonism, where we must strive for happiness; and equity, where everyone's happiness counts equally. Bentham's Utilitarianism is a form of act utilitarianism (a branch of Utilitarianism that considers each individual dilemma separately) and it gives a numerical value to various factors so that a calculation can be used to determine the correct action in a moral dilemma. This is called the Hedonic Calculus. A philosopher called John Stuart Mill had a different method for working out the correct action in a dilemma called the principle of higher and lower pleasures. Mill says that we should always strive for higher pleasures, or any intellectual pleasures, and stay away from lower pleasures, or those pleasures that we share with animals. Mill also says that competent judges, or people who have experienced both types of pleasures, will be able to determine whether a pleasure is higher or lower but in the end Mill says we will always go for the higher pleasure. Rule Utilitarianism differs in that it does not treat each dilemma separately but rather follow a set of rules that usually create the most happiness. Ideal Utilitarianism, which is most famously attributed to G.E. Moore, still tries to maximise the greatest aggregate happiness but it varies in what it sees as the good we are striving for. They say that an object is valuable not only is it causes pleasure but also in itself, thus they value beauty and friendship as well as pleasure. Preference Utilitarianism, which is most famously attributed to Peter Singer, defines right actions as the actions that fulfil the preferences of those beings involved.

Other Utilitarianism have modified Bentham's version of Utilitarianism in the past due to some of the problems that it brings up. Bentham's Utilitarianism is unable to stand up for justice and rights due to some pleasures forcing you to go against justice and rights. This same problem affects Preference Utilitarianism as it can force you to act out situations that are crazy if that is what the preference wants. Ideal Utilitarianism could avoid this situation but no method is given for deciding what is most important in an act so a situation could easily deteriorate and go against justice and rights. Rule Utilitarianism does provide an answer to this as the rules are not fashioned around individual situations but rather the wider picture. Bentham's Utilitarianism also involves quite complex sums every time that you are in a dilemma. Mill's version of Utilitarianism was created both to modify this position and also to remove the problem of Bentham quantifying happiness as some pleasures can be immeasurable although preference Utilitarianism says Mill's theory doesn't go far enough and should include beauty and friendship as well as pleasure. However another problem which Bentham's Utilitarianism suffers is tyranny of the majority. This also suffered by Preference Utilitarianism as priority is given to those capable of having preferences. Ideal Utilitarianism can also suffer from tyranny of the majority but rule Utilitarianism avoids this problem as it has general rules that usually create the most happiness.

Although every form of Utilitarianism looks at the consequences of an action, the way this is put into practice is what brings Bentham's Utilitarianism under criticism and thus causing other philosophers to modify his position.