



Explain Bentham's hedonic calculus as a means of measuring pleasure (20)

Jeremy Bentham's theory of utilitarianism is **teleological** (meaning it looks at the consequences of an action rather than the action itself) and **relative** (meaning it assess each individual ethical situation on its own merit) and was devised in the **19th century**. Bentham's utilitarianism is a secular ethical approach which focuses on '**utility**' meaning usefulness. It therefore assesses the usefulness of each individual action for a greater goal.

Jeremy Bentham saw **pleasure** as being at the heart of ethical behaviour. This means that Bentham rejected previous ethical theories which focused on reason or religious rule, and instead suggested that what makes people happy is surely the right action in a given situation. Bentham was influenced by the ancient Greeks to suggest that what is pleasurable is what is good. For example, Bentham would suggest that if a moral agent were to achieve happiness through a homosexual relationship, then this should be permitted.

Moreover, Bentham explained that pleasure should be pursued as **the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people**. In this sense he suggested that the moral agent should add up how many people would gain pleasure from an act against how many people wouldn't. He called this a **hedonic calculus**. The agent is then required to continue with the action which pleases the most amount of people, rather than just the agent themselves.

To help agents further to discern what the right action is in a given situation, Bentham split the hedonic calculus into **7 factors**. Firstly, Bentham asks us to consider the **intensity** of the pleasure and how great the pleasure will be. Secondly, the agent must consider the **duration** of the pleasure and needs to weigh up how long the pleasure will last. Thirdly, we are asked to consider the **remoteness** of the pleasure, meaning how soon the pleasure will occur. For example, if a woman was considering an abortion she would have to consider how intense her pleasure would be in terminating her fetus, but also how long would she feel pleasure from not having a child and would this wear off?

The final 4 factors of the hedonic calculus are **fecundity** (will the action produce more happiness in the future), **purity** (will it produce unhappiness in the future) and **extent** (how many people will it affect?) and **certainty** (how convinced are we that the pleasure will occur). Bentham encourages the agent to consider all factors of the hedonic calculus in moral dilemmas and literally **weigh up** whether an action is going to create a consequence of pleasure overall. To go back to the abortion example, we would have to assess these factors with regards to whether the action really does encourage the most amount of pleasure i.e could the abortion cause unhappiness with the mother in time and who else besides the mother will benefit from the abortion besides the mother. For Bentham, the hedonic calculus acts as a guide to ensure that the moral agent is aware of exactly what is meant by pleasure and also considers different facets of pleasure in their decision making.

'Rule Utilitarianism works better as an ethic than Act Utilitarianism.' Evaluate this view. (30)

John Stuart Mill devised rule utilitarianism in the 19th century as a response to his Godfather's (Bentham's) act utilitarianism. Mill saw grounds in a teleological ethical theory but was concerned that Bentham's approach of approaching each act in separation could potentially lead to immoral acts. Some people argue that **act utilitarianism doesn't work well as an ethical theory because it can promote immoral acts**. That's because it can penalize the minority as long as the majority are kept happy. For example, cases are reported from 20th century America where black people were chased and killed for a crimes which they didn't commit in order to calm the mob rule. According to



Bentham's act utilitarianism this would be permitted as long as most people benefited from the pleasure of feeling safe, despite one person being falsely accused. In this sense, act utilitarianism arguably doesn't work well because minorities are left too vulnerable which doesn't lead to justice.

Because of this Mill devised rule utilitarianism whereby a deontological aspect is introduced which states that, based on past experience, society can create a certain set of rules which tend to create the greatest happiness for the greatest amount of people. For example, 'do not kill', tends to be a rule which encourages pleasure for the masses. In some respects this approach is better than Bentham's act utilitarianism because **justice is more likely and certain actions are simply out of bounds**. Having said this, others would disagree and suggest that act utilitarianism also prevents bad things from occurring if the moral agent uses the hedonic calculus appropriately. For example, if you looked at the 'intensity' of killing the minority in a mob rule situation, arguably most people wouldn't enjoy watching someone die. Having said this, we can still effectively use all the other 6 factors of the hedonic calculus to condone killing a minority to please the majority which suggests that utilitarianism does work best when some rules are established based on past experience of pleasure.

Moreover, Mill also questioned the effectiveness of act utilitarianism with regards to what is constituted as pleasure. Many people criticize act utilitarianism on the grounds that **it is too subjective and can condone immoral acts because someone else may find them pleasurable**. For instance, a sadomasochist may get pleasure from pain and if a group of sadomasochists gathered together they could arguably hurt someone else for the majority of them to acquire pleasure. To this end, **Mill introduced higher and lower pleasure**, the former being education and higher culture, the latter being animalistic desires such as eating and sex. Arguably, this is more effective as an ethical theory because we can therefore instantly rule out sadomasochist acts as being immoral on the ground that they pursue animalistic desires. By Mill stating which pleasures are good enough to be pursued (higher pleasures) then he is removing an element of the subjectivity for the agent which undoubtedly gives them a more helpful guide than Bentham's general rule of 'pursue pleasure'. Having said this, there remains a problem with Mill's utilitarianism in that it can be perceived as 'snobbish' and too directive. Is not the point of utilitarianism that it awards an individual with autonomy in a given situation, so it could be said that Mill's introduction of rules and higher pleasures removes a sense of the very essence of utilitarianism. Also, why should Mill choose what constitutes a higher pleasure? It seems now that whilst Mill's utilitarianism is more effective in ethical situations than Bentham's, it still isn't ideal.

Finally, some criticize Bentham's act utilitarianism on the grounds that **it is arguably too unpredictable**. Because it focusses on the consequences of an action, an agent may do something with intended consequences that never come to fruition. For example, what if a pilot dropped a bomb killing innocent civilians because they think that this will end a war, but it doesn't? Then they have arguably killed innocent civilians to no benefit. **Mill tried to get around this point by introducing rules which have been based on past experiences**. For instance, Mill only created rules that in the past have tended to work for the most amount of pleasure for the most amount of people. In this sense, we have more certainty when making moral decisions using rule utilitarianism that the best consequences will occur to produce happiness. So whilst rule utilitarianism is a better ethic than act utilitarianism in this sense, it still remains problematic because at the very heart of utilitarianism is the notion that every situation is unique. Therefore, how can we be sure that what has worked well in previous situations will work well again? At least with other deontological theories, such as natural law, there is a religious idea that the rules set out are in line with a higher Divine rule. All that rule utilitarianism has to offer is 'it has worked well in the past'.



Overall, it seems that Rule utilitarianism is a better ethic than act utilitarianism; it offers more guidelines for the agent and also is more specific about what is meant by 'pleasure'. However, rule utilitarianism still has its problems in that it arguably undermines the foundations of what utilitarianism is meant to be; flexible, teleological and relativistic. In some respects rule utilitarianism is a half-way house between teleological and deontological theories, but pleases no one.