An Introduction to Religion and Ethics Eduqas AS Level Knowledge Organiser:
Theme 4A Classical Utilitarianism – Jeremy Bentham's Act Utilitarianism

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Key concepts:

The principle of utility

- Jeremy Bentham, a philosopher and social reformer was also an expert in law who was dedicated to a more just society addressing issues of excessive and unnecessary pain experienced by those in prison, in poverty, and to those in same-sex relationships.

- Happiness is, therefore, the supreme ethical value, or 'the sovereign good'.

- Bentham noticed that humans seek pleasure or happiness and avoid pain. He called this the '**principle of utility**'. The most useful ethical norm should be to seek pleasure and to avoid pain; in other words, what is right maximises happiness and minimises pain.

- The most useful actions are those which produce the most happiness for all. This was then developed into both the '**greatest happiness principle**'. We should be concerned about others' happiness because our happiness is bound up with theirs. This satisfied Bentham's needs for social justice.

The hedonic calculus

- In order to act in such a way as to increase general happiness and pleasure there needed to be a way to measure happiness.

- Bentham therefore devised what is known as the **hedonic calculus** (also known as the pleasure calculus).

- It measures seven different elements; each of which are equally important to determine the amount of pleasure produced by an act:

  1. **Intensity** measures how strong the pleasure is
  2. **Duration** considers the amount of time the pleasure lasts
  3. **Certainty** assesses the probability that the act will bring pleasure

  4. **Propinquity** measures how close one is to the experience of pleasure
  5. **Fecundity** considers the possibility of this pleasure increasing further
  6. **Purity** measures how free of pain the pleasure is
  7. **Extent** assesses how many people will benefit from the pleasure.

- All pleasures were of equal value and using this calculator Bentham believed that the right course of action could be determined for every situation.

- Bentham did accept that a thorough calculation along these lines was not always possible; however, he felt that the hedonic calculus is an ideal we should attempt.

- Bentham's Utilitarianism is a **teleological** theory, concerned with the end result of actions in terms of the goal (telos) of bringing pleasure.

- It is therefore also a **consequentialist** theory because it judges actions to be right or wrong based on the variety of consequences that actions bring.

- It is also a **relativist** theory because it has no real set of moral rules but simply the principle of utility.

- Bentham's Utilitarianism is often called **Act Utilitarianism** as it has so much emphasis on considering the immediate effects of an individual action.

- Each action is unique and requires measuring and therefore the principle of utility should be applied on a case by case basis.

Key quotes:

"...when happiness is present, we have everything. When it is absent, we do everything to possess it." (Epicurus)

"Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters: pain and pleasure." (Jeremy Bentham)

"It is the greatest good to the greatest number of people which is the measure of right and wrong." (Jeremy Bentham)

"[Judge action] ...according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question." (Jeremy Bentham)

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates
Some philosophers view pleasure as too vague a concept for ethical decisions as it can be arbitrary and subjective. Others would debate the ability to predict outcomes. But how can one predict everything with equal accuracy?

Key questions
Is pleasure the same as happiness?
Is Bentham's hedonic calculus and accurate predictor?

Key words:

Bentham	pleasure	pain	principle of utility	extent
greatest happiness principle	hedonic calculus	intensity	duration	teleological
certainty	propinquity	fecundity	purity	relativist
Act Utilitarianism	consequentialist			