Critically assess a utilitarian response to environmental ethics.

Utilitarianism is teleological, concerned with the end or purpose of actions. It is also consequentialist, judging actions right or wrong according to their outcome. Many scientists, politicians and philosophers have expressed concern that the world is facing an environmental catastrophe. If this is to be believed, an ethical theory that focuses on the results of our actions seems most appropriate. Utilitarianism is able to take into account the risks to the environment of global warming, ozone depletion, pollution, deforestation etc.

Traditional utilitarianism would have done that using Bentham's Hedonic Calculus. Bentham would have asked how likely it was that certain results would occur. He would have weighed up the benefits of any proposed action, such as the building of a new motorway, against the adverse affects, focussing on the pleasure and pain that resulted, and nothing else. This sort of calculation is practical and flexible, allowing for a different answer in every different set of circumstances. For example, building a road in Rwanda might lead to increased trade, a way of transporting important materials, medicines etc – in other words, a lifeline. The destruction of wildlife in such an underdeveloped country might be negligible, and the pollution minimal. However, a similar road in the UK might run through residential areas. The pollution from the thousands of cars might have a significant impact in a more densely populated area. The benefits might simply be convenience and a reduction of travel time. It is unlikely to be of huge benefit, as there are already enough roads in the UK.

There are many problems with such a utilitarian calculation, however. It is impossible to predict the damage or benefit that any action would bring. As well as being uncalculable due to the numbers of people involved, the pleasure and pain is unmeasurable. How can you decide how the pleasure of enjoying an unspoilt stretch of land compares with the convenience of being able to use a road?

There is also disagreement amongst utilitarians about whose interests would count in environmental calculations. Bentham talks of pleasure and pain, and would count any being that had the capacity to feel pleasure or experience pain. Even in the 21st Century, scientists cannot agree about this question. Mill favoured higher pleasures like reading and appreciating art, clearly putting human concerns above other sentient beings. This sort of thinking might agree with deforestation if cutting down trees provided homes for people. Even though many more animals may be displaced, humans count for more because they experience higher pleasures.

Hare talks of preferences, which makes it harder still to imagine completing any sort of calculation concerning the environment. As well as discussions about which

animals have preferences, there is also the issue of how we can know what everyone's preferences are, and how to weigh them up against each other. Take wind turbines, for example. Many people consider them an eye sore, and would rather not use them. However, many others see this sort of advancement as essential in protecting the world from global warming. It is impossible to balance one of these preferences against the other. It is also hard to see how seriously to take the threat of global warming – will it really affect generations to come? How many people and preferences will it affect? And how do you take account of the cumulative damage of the way we treat the environment?

This last point raises a very serious concern for utilitarians. Take the case of over-fishing. A fisherman goes out and catches a thousand cod. It is then revealed that the number of cod has become dangerously low, threatening the future of fishing in that area. Is this the result of that one fisherman's actions? What consequences is he supposed to weigh against the benefits of feeding and clothing his family? It's not at all clear what would count as a consequence of my actions when considering cumulative damage.

Here it seems that a deontological approach might be more appropriate – no over-fishing, use renewable energy sources, make all development sustainable etc. However, it would be naïve to think that deontologists escape these concerns – can a single act of development be considered sustainable, or would this apply to the government's policy on development?

There are also issues of justice here. If the world is on the brink of environmental collapse, it has been put there by the developed western world. Is it fair to then argue against development in poorer countries because of the situation we are now in?

Modern utilitarians like Singer wouldn't be concerned by these questions. There are far more people in developing countries, so a fairer balance in the amount of pollution, use of chemicals etc. would benefit the vast majority. Utilitarianism points to a need for businesses and governments in Europe and America to take the environment seriously. Rule utilitarians would agree with the deontological approach of, say, Natural Law, and may come up with useful rules such as recycle where possible. However, these rules would be introduced if and only if they led to an increase in goods (pleasure, fulfilment of preferences, meeting best-interests etc.).

Such a response would be more realistic than a Natural Law response that might argue that pollution was an evil, or that the act of deforestation was intrinsically wrong. Instead, utilitarianism would weigh up the benefits against the negative effects in a way that should lead to the best outcome.