

## Explain how Utilitarianism might be applied to the issue of euthanasia.

Classical utilitarianism is teleological, and says that the outcome of an action determines whether the action is right or wrong. In the case of Dianne Pretty, who had motor neurone disease, they would be concerned with the suffering that would result from the decision not to let her die. Bentham developed a hedonic calculus to work out factors like the duration of the pain, its intensity, how remote it was etc. He was also concerned with the extent of the suffering – in Dianne's case, her husband would have suffered greatly watching her die in agony. As an Act utilitarian, Bentham would have considered Dianne Pretty's case individually, and would not have been concerned with the precedent it might set.

Mill adapted the theory to include the quality as well as the quantity of the pleasure and pain that would result. While he may have supported euthanasia in the case of an Alzheimer sufferer who would lose their mental capacities, he may have thought differently about Thomas Hyde, who suffered from ALS. In Hyde's case, he could still have lived a long life (like Stephen Hawking who has the same condition), and would have been able to enjoy the higher pleasures like reading, watching plays, listening to opera etc. However, Mill placed a high value on individual freedom, saying that one should have sovereignty over the things that didn't affect other people, whether or not it led to the best outcome for that individual.

Modern utilitarians like Hare have argued that people don't just value pleasure. If someone was suffering from a debilitating condition that took away dignity, this could be a valid reason for allowing euthanasia. Hare said that the greatest good meant fulfilling the greatest number of preferences. In the case of Dax Cowart, who lost his independence when badly burnt in an explosion, Hare would have supported Dax's own decision to end his life. However, whilst some utilitarians would have agreed with allowing Dax to die because of the great suffering his treatment led to, Hare would argue that it was his preference that was important.

Singer agrees that we should look beyond merely pleasure, to people's interests. This sort of 'welfare' utilitarianism would ask what was best for the people concerned. In the case of someone suffering from cancer, Singer might ask whether the illness was curable, whether it was terminal and whether it led to great suffering. Singer's response will be similar to a

classical utilitarian response, but will include more than just the pleasure and pain of the individual – it would look at the patient's overall well-being, welfare or interests.

Sidgwick criticised classical utilitarianism's focus on the outcome of actions. Consider the case of a doctor who ignores requests to help a cancer sufferer to die because he believes that chemotherapy has a good chance of success. He has tried to bring about the greatest good. If the chemotherapy was unsuccessful, his actions may have led to greater suffering than if he had helped the patient to die. However, Sidgwick says it is not the outcome that determines whether an action was right, but the motive.

In all of these dilemmas, Act utilitarians would assess the individual situation – the right course of action is relative to the particular circumstances. Rule utilitarians believe that a society needs clear laws. They might agree with the High Court judges who overturned a court's decision to allow Dianne Pretty to die. These judges said that, although in Dianne Pretty's case the arguments for euthanasia were convincing, to make a rule that allowed euthanasia would be to put pressure on people who are suffering greatly and are very vulnerable. In order to protect people who are ill, rule utilitarians might support anti-euthanasia laws, even though in some individual cases these would lead to great suffering.

Look at the structure of the answer above.

- Each paragraph takes an **aspect of the ethical theory**.
- It then applies it to a **relevant example** or case study (sometimes made up, sometimes a real example).
- It then develops the answer, showing a **more complex understanding** of the theory and the issues.

Notice that *this question* asks you to apply the theory. You will get no marks for evaluating the theory! However, a different question might ask you to assess a utilitarian response to euthanasia. This would be a very different question, and would require evaluative comments.

My key exam tip:

Answer the question!