

My Revision Notes: AQA AS Religious Studies: Religion and Ethics and Philosophy of Religion

AS Unit A Religion and Ethics 1

1.1 Utilitarianism

(a) Explain what is meant by the terms 'Act Utilitarianism' and 'Rule Utilitarianism'.

The name 'utilitarianism' comes from the word 'utility', which means 'usefulness'. In particular it concerns itself with working out how 'useful' an action is based upon assessing its end result. Utilitarians argue that everyone should do the thing that produces the most 'useful' end.

The term Act Utilitarianism is usually associated with the writings of Jeremy Bentham and the use of his hedonic calculus. Bentham thought that previous experiences did not always help us make moral choices and that each situation was different, and so had to be calculated afresh. Therefore, for Act Utilitarianism in its strong form, the calculus should be applied in each situation regardless of previous experiences in decision making. Since this is the case, Act Utilitarianism appears to favour individual situations more than cases for the majority. Although Bentham is said to be an Act Utilitarian, he did not claim that it was necessary to calculate the rightness and wrongness of every act from the hedonic calculus, just that this was generally the case.

Rule Utilitarianism is usually associated with John Stuart Mill. Mill thought previous experiences did help us make decisions. Indeed, human beings have already developed some rules which help them make decisions more quickly. These rules are universal in nature and, if applied in any situation, they would lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number (i.e. they would maximise happiness). In Rule Utilitarianism, moral actions are those which conform to the rules that lead to the greatest good. For example, we do not need to use the hedonic calculus to work out that giving money to the poor is right because it is a well worked rule of Utilitarianism.

Mill is said to be a Rule Utilitarian. However, it is doubtful whether he advocated the strong form. He viewed the rules more as helpful guidance than obligatory. They were necessary as a means of saving time. This view, known as weak Rule Utilitarianism, states that on certain occasions the rules can be disobeyed if a greater amount of happiness will result.

(b) 'Ending pain and suffering is more important than increasing pleasure.' Assess this view.

There are two sides to this argument. Utilitarianism is a good theory, but in practice some may argue that there are cases where a consideration of pain and suffering are more of a priority. For example, if pain is too great or too long term and there is no sight of pleasure, then Utilitarianism does not work. In addition, the quality of pleasure may be poor, e.g. 'lower', and so not worth pursuing. Again, if one is already content, why increase contentment at the expense of suffering?

This is morally wrong. For example, just because many people are well fed does not mean we should continue to leave the beggar to starve.

However, although these arguments are valid they do not always account for the greater picture that Utilitarianism does. For example, the suffering of the few may lead to happiness of the majority, e.g. a just war. There may also be circumstances wherein the pain is relatively minimal and the impact of pleasure far supersedes the pain, e.g. allowing torture to save lives. It all depends upon the long-term potential, which may be to allow immediate suffering for greater pleasure later.

In conclusion, it appears that Utilitarianism needs to be applied carefully in consideration of the wider picture and that its usefulness can indeed be limited by context. Although not absolutely true, the statement does have a fair point to make.

1.2 Situation Ethics

(a) Outline Fletcher's main teachings on Situation Ethics.

American moral theologian, Joseph Fletcher, published a book called *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* in 1966. Fletcher proposed an approach to Christian ethics that considered each situation on its merits before applying the Christian principle of love (agape). Fletcher saw this as the middle way between an approach to ethics that rigidly followed laws as absolutes and that of an approach that acted without reference to any rules at all leaving a person free to do as he or she pleases.

Fletcher saw his 'Situation Ethics' as a theological way of meeting a practical need in light of the radical social changes of the twentieth century; in particular, changing views on what is seen to be acceptable moral behaviour.

Fletcher argues that absolute moral principles do not work in the real world and that in order to make a meaningful ethical decision, the situation needs to be considered for each individual moral decision and action. In turn, this decision then depends upon the practical application of Christian love (agape). The right decision in one circumstance, however, does not become the blueprint for all other circumstances. Each situation should be considered independently.

Therefore, Fletcher rejected the idea of morality as a manual for the conscience. In other words, morality is not something that is set in stone and dictates how the conscience is to react in a given situation. Situation Ethics calls for the practical application of Christian love to a given situation. The situation and context come first and principles are put aside.

However, the roots of 'new morality' can be found in 'classical' Christianity. Fletcher sees his approach to ethics as grounded in the Christian gospel. He sees love as an active principle – it is a 'doing' thing rather than a noun in itself. Agape is the word used in the New Testament for pure, unconditional Christian love. It is love which is disinterested and seeks only the benefit of the one who is loved.

Fletcher identified four working principles against which a practical application of his theory could be tested. First of all, any solution to an ethical problem has to be practical (pragmatism) Fletcher wrote: 'All are agreed: the good is what works, what is expedient, what gives satisfaction.' Secondly, crucial for Situation Ethics is that love (agape love) should be applied in a way that is relative to each individual situation (relativism). Fletcher wrote: 'The situationist avoids words such as "never" and "perfect" and "always" and "complete" as he avoids the plague, as he avoids "absolutely".' Thirdly, Situation Ethics is a positive statement of the priority of faith. Faith comes first. Moral choices must be vindicated by showing that they work and are based on commitment to agape love (positivism). Finally, Fletcher argued that ethics concerns itself with people rather than things. The command is to love people and not laws or principles and therefore any solution has to pass this test (personalism).

Fletcher also identified six fundamental principles that Situation ethics was rooted in. These included the ideas that love is the only thing that is intrinsically good and that love and justice are the same because justice is love distributed. Love wills the neighbour's good whether we like him or not and only the end justifies the means, nothing else. Fletcher argues that Situation Ethics deals with end results. To follow absolutes is impossible and love's decisions are made situationally, not prescriptively. For real decision making, freedom is required. Fletcher's clear conclusion is that all ethical decisions must be situation-based (led, of course, by agape) and not principle-based.

(b) 'Situation Ethics cannot be considered a Christian approach to ethics.' Assess this view.

Against this statement situation ethics is clearly compatible with other Christian approaches because agape makes it compatible with any Christian approach that sees 'love' as the centre of Christianity. Jesus himself broke the Sabbath law on work in favour of a person-centred approach. He plucked 'heads of grain to eat' on the Sabbath when he and his disciples were hungry. In addition, one only has to look at the change in views within Christianity on issues such as war, slavery, the death penalty and equality for women to see that absolutes are not always absolute. In this sense it is clearly compatible. It can also be argued that Christians may follow teleological theories such as Utilitarianism and these have some similarities with Situation Ethics.

However, in contrast to the above argument, it cannot be denied that in 1956, the study of the situationist approach to ethics (referred to as 'new morality') was banned from all Roman Catholic academies and seminaries on the grounds of its incompatibility with Roman Catholic teaching. William Barclay's official critique that was written years later also supports the argument for incompatibility. Moreover, there are clear fundamental laws and absolutes in the Bible that many Christians adhere to when making moral decisions. In addition, Kant's categorical imperative, which is based in rules that are 'set', and the underpinning principles of Natural Law that point out we can work out a definitive course of action through reason, are certainly not compatible with Situation Ethics.

In conclusion, it appears that Fletcher's intention of a middle way is not accepted by all. Unless, Situation Ethics can be accepted as that of the middle way it will always be open to claims of incompatibility on the grounds that it encourages total freedom from moral rules.

1.3 Religious teaching on the nature and value of human life

(a) Explain what religion means when it talks about the 'value of human life'.

According to Christianity, in all situations, human life has the quality assurance of God. This would include all people in the following categories: those with disabilities; those who are terminally ill; those in poverty; those who are oppressed. It is the duty of a human being to act positively towards human life.

Christians believe that God is the creator and has almighty power. A human being is seen as being created in God's image to rule over everything in creation. This means that Christians see their role in preserving the creation as very important. They believe that all humankind has the responsibility to act as the servants of God and to summarize the idea of stewardship. Stewardship is the Christian belief that you should act with responsibility: human beings cannot do as they like – they must respect life, as all life has been created by God and is therefore sacred and precious. The Ten Commandments show that man has a duty to God and to others; for example, 'Do not kill' shows that life has a value and no one has the right to take it. It also shows that no life is disposable and everyone has a value and a purpose. As all humanity is the family of God then all are equal so no one's life has more value than that of another. It also means that all have the duty to care for one another – which ties in with stewardship, as all are part of the creation. The life of a human being is therefore of value in this way.

The belief that human life has value for Christians can be explained though considering the potential that it has been given. The endeavours of the human condition for Christians are to fulfil their true nature; that is, to develop in their 'likeness' of God (Genesis 1:26). Until the time of Jesus (who brought a message of forgiveness and reconciliation to God), humans were given the Ten Commandments to try and follow, living as God would want them to. The teachings of Jesus are also of great significance to the Christian journey through life. Jesus came to complete or fulfil the religious law of Judaism (Matthew 5:17). His teachings on law and behaviour can be summarized by the two teachings of the Greatest Commandment – 'Love the Lord your God and, your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:27) – and, the Golden Rule, 'do to others what you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7:12). Such teachings serve to underline once more the value of human life.

(b) 'People are different and so cannot be treated the same.' Assess this view.

There is no doubt that in theory all religions can support the idea of equality. Spiritually everyone is given equal status before God and the sanctity-of-life teaching promotes this equality. However, in reality, there are clear suggestions of inequality.

There are many Christian teachings that appear to be against this statement. For example, the teaching that God created every person and the sanctity of life teaching. In addition, the Holy Spirit is within all and so we all contain divine essence according to the Bible. God cares for all creation without discrimination and the absolute teaching of equality amongst people can be found in such teachings as 'there is neither Greek nor Jew, but all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:26–28).

However, there are some disparities within religion, for example, in Christianity, that appear to support the statement. For example, there have been issues of gender inequality such as Paul's view of the role of women. In addition the Roman Catholic Church does not allow women to be priests and there is debate about whether women can be bishops in the Anglican church. Throughout history it has been seen that religion has sometimes been used to promote racial inequality.

However, there are clear roles often given to different people and some people do have more authority, e.g. leaders. So whilst one can argue either side to defend or challenge the above statement, it may not always be as clear cut as to suggest being different and having a role to perform implies inequality.

1.4 Abortion and Euthanasia

(a) Explain the different ideas concerning the start of human life.

The initial problem for the abortion debate is in establishing the point at which human life begins. This is not universally agreed upon and there are different explanations for this, whether biological, philosophical or religious. The point at which human life begins has a direct impact upon the views about abortion in several ways because primarily, if a fetus is not a human being then it may not have the same rights and need not have the same kind of protection in law. However, if the point at which a fetus becomes human is during pregnancy, then this could lead to a conflict of rights between the mother and the unborn child.

Biological debates depend upon physical evidence to define the status of the fetus. Some would argue that life begins at birth, that is, the status of personhood is only applied at actual physical birth, the first true point of independence and individuality. Others may consider the point of viability, that is, the status of personhood is awarded at that time when the unborn can exist beyond any dependence on the mother. Another argument presented is one for potentiality which basically implies the point at which the entity displays the potential of becoming a human being – for some this may be the primitive streak (14th day) and for others the quickening (first feeling of movement). Finally, there are others who would argue firmly that life begins at conception, that is, from the point of fertilisation of the egg. The resulting product is a human being.

In contrast to biological debates, philosophical or religious arguments are based on concepts or principles beyond the physical evidence, that is, the metaphysical issues. Some argue that life and the status of personhood is applied at the first point of consciousness or awareness. Others would suggest the moment of ensoulment, that is, the status of personhood is deemed appropriate when the soul enters the body.

The problem with establishing a clear answer as to when human life begins is that all arguments are based upon the meaning of words, or what the philosopher Peter Vardy calls 'relational factors'. That is, there are different interpretations or understandings of the same words. Until accurate definitions of key terms are agreed, the stage at which personhood status is awarded can never be universal.

Finally, another factor to consider once definitions are agreed is that there is a clear disparity in the development of individuals. During life, although there are broad timescales at which people mature, develop and grow, there is, by the very nature of individuality, a blurring of the exact moment one moves from adolescence to adulthood, from childhood through puberty and so forth. Why are the early stages of development any different?

(b) 'Abortion cannot be considered murder.' Consider how far this is true.

On the one hand and in support of the statement, a fetus has no legal rights so abortion cannot be murder as it is in accordance with the Abortion Act and within the law. In addition, even with cases of double effect for those religious people who class a fetus as a person the act of abortion is not 'murder'. Even amongst those who hold that the fetus is a living being some would argue that aborting the fetus is not murder if it means the life of the mother is saved.

Nonetheless, abortion is a strong and emotive subject and for some people, in particular those with religious convictions that see the fetus as a human being, just because something is 'lawful' does not mean it is not sinful or unjust. Many religious believers see abortion as 'murder' due to definitions of when life begins, namely, before birth. In addition, the scientific views support the 'potential' arguments used by religious believers.

The truth of the statement all depends upon the definition of 'murder'. If it is according to a legal understanding and abortion is performed under the parameters of the law it cannot be murder. However, if 'murder' is given a broader understanding such as 'the taking of life' then the matter is very much open for debate.