



Mains Practice Question

Q. Discuss the ethical theories of utilitarianism and deontology. How do these theories differ in their approach to decision-making? (150 words)

06 Jun, 2024 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach

- Introduce by giving a background to emergence of utilitarianism and deontology
- Give ethical theories of utilitarianism and deontology
- Mention key difference in their approaches
- Conclude in a balanced manner.

Introduction

In **moral philosophy**, the quest to determine what constitutes right and wrong has led to the development of various ethical frameworks.

- Among these, **utilitarianism and deontology** stand out as two of the most influential and widely debated theories.
- Both offer distinct lenses through which to view moral dilemmas

Body

Ethical Theories of Utilitarianism and Deontology

- **Utilitarianism:**
 - **Ethical Theory:** Utilitarianism, championed by **Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill**, emphasizes maximizing overall happiness or well-being for the greatest number of people.
 - **Example:** Consider a policy decision to demolish a historic building to create affordable housing for a large number of citizens.
 - A **utilitarian** would likely support this action despite the loss of a cultural landmark, as it **benefits a greater number of people.**
- **Deontology:**
 - **Ethical Theory:** Deontology, with Immanuel Kant as its prominent figure, focuses on the **inherent rightness or wrongness of actions**, regardless of the consequences.
 - In this case, certain moral duties and principles are considered absolute and universal.
 - **Example:** A situation where a government official can secure a crucial economic deal by bribing a foreign official.
 - Despite the potential benefits for the nation's economy, **a deontologist would object to bribery** as it violates the principle of honesty.

Key Difference in their Approaches:

Aspect	Utilitarianism	Deontology
Focus	Consequences of actions	Adherence to moral rules

		or duties
Decision Basis	Outcomes and overall welfare	Intentions and adherence to moral laws
Flexibility	High; actions judged by results	Low; actions judged by conformity to rules
Key Question	"What leads to the best outcome?"	"What is my moral duty?"
Main Criticism	Can justify unethical means for good ends	Can lead to rigid, impractical decisions
Application	Often in public policy, economics	Often in personal ethics, human rights

Conclusion

In the complexity of real-life ethical dilemmas, a nuanced understanding of both theories is valuable. Effective **moral reasoning** often requires **balancing the deontological respect for duties and rights** with the **utilitarian consideration of outcomes** and overall well-being.

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