UTILITARIANISM (2)

(1) Explain what is meant by ‘Act’ and ‘Rule’ Utilitarianism. (30 marks)

(2) ‘Increasing human happiness and minimizing pain should be the main aim of any system of ethics.’ Assess this claim. (15 marks)
UTILITARIANISM (2)

QUESTION 1

This question is aimed at Assessment Objective 1, which means that it tests your skills in demonstrating knowledge and understanding. For high marks in this question, you need to describe and explain, but you do not need to give your opinion. The examiners will be looking for a thorough, accurate and relevant response, supported where possible with relevant evidence and examples.

Thorough Make sure that your answer includes all the key points. Here, you are being asked about Act and Rule Utilitarianism, so make sure that you cover both in detail, rather than concentrating too heavily on just one. You will probably want to include ideas about the greatest happiness principle and the hedonic calculus, and show that you understand how Mill qualified the ideas put forward by Bentham, and Mill’s reasons for wanting to modify them.

Accurate Make sure that you have your facts right and that you attribute the right ideas to the right people. Make a clear distinction between Act and Rule Utilitarianism, and also show that you have an accurate understanding of what the two have in common.

QUESTION 2

This question is aimed at Assessment Objective 2, which means that it tests your skills in evaluation. For high marks in this question, you need to consider different possible opinions and weigh them up to reach a conclusion. Just giving different opinions ‘some people think this, other people think that’ is not enough; you need to be able to show which side of the argument you are on, with your reasons for finding one side more convincing than the other.

For high marks in evaluation questions, your answer needs to demonstrate focus. You need to show reason in your presentation of different views and to offer critical analysis and support for the arguments you make.

Focus Make sure that you are discussing the question you were asked, and not just the topic in general. Here, you are being asked about happiness as a goal for human ethics, so make sure that this is what you consider, rather than the strengths and weaknesses of Utilitarianism in general.

Relevant The examiner has chosen a question which asks for specific knowledge about aspects of Utilitarianism, so make sure your answer concentrates on those aspects (Act and Rule Utilitarianism), and avoids talking too generally about the whole system of Utilitarianism.

Appropriate evidence and examples This question offers a lot of scope for using evidence and examples to illustrate your explanation. Give an example to show where Mill might have thought that Bentham’s Utilitarianism might not work too well, or an example of an ethical dilemma to illustrate the solutions an Act or Rule Utilitarian might reach.

Reason For high marks you should say why you hold your views, and why others might disagree. Avoid saying simply that ‘this is what I believe’, or ‘I feel”; continue with ‘because’ and try to give a persuasive reason. You might think that happiness is an appropriate goal for human ethics because it is something we all recognize and does not depend on any particular religious beliefs; or you might think that it is not appropriate because perhaps there are things which make us happy but which are not morally good.

Critical analysis Here, you need to show that you have the ability not simply to list arguments for and against a point of view, but to say how successful these arguments are. Do you think the arguments in favour of happiness as a goal for ethics are strong, or weak? Explain why, so that you reach a well-argued conclusion.