An Introduction to Religion and Ethics Eduqas AS Level Knowledge Organiser:
Theme 4B John Stuart Mill's development of Utilitarianism

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Key concepts:

- **John Stuart Mill**, a student of Jeremy Bentham, was also a prolific philosopher and an advocate of political reform who became a Member of Parliament.
- Mill fought against colonialism, unfair wages and patriarchy. He compared the status of women in Britain to slaves and advocated full equality.
- Mill developed Utilitarianism and focused not on the amount of pleasure or pain an action brings but rather on the on the type or **quality** of pleasure in response to the criticism that Utilitarianism leads people to act like swine.
- Mill held that if we distinguished between the **quantity** of pleasure and the quality of pleasure then pleasures of the intellect such as moral development, education and aesthetic appreciation are given their true value.
- Mill therefore distinguished between **moral and intellectual** pleasures as **higher pleasures** and **physical pleasures** as **lower pleasures**.
- Mill argued that this would make a better and fairer society in which to live if we collectively sought the higher pleasures as a **priority**.

The Harm Principle

- The problem with Bentham's Utilitarianism for Mill was that it was too **individually focused**. This did not account for times when there is a need for society to override individual pursuits.
- Social reform was a case in point whereby colonial politics, the denial of women's rights and poverty meant that the political tyranny of the few dictated the freedom of others to pursue happiness.
- He argued that society should be guided by '**one very simple principle**' – the **harm principle**. This was to restrict the powers of individuals so that their actions would not cause the need for self-protection by other individuals.

- Mill argued that if society maintained this rule then no one should be forced to do anything and individuals should be free to follow their own life plan.
- The harm principle allows people to **progress** in society under the most beneficial conditions and allows for both freedom and a variety of life experiences in which humans can apply the **principle of utility**.

The use of rules

- One criticism of Bentham was the impractical nature of continually calculating the course of individual actions. Mill instead argued that human beings had, throughout history, been learning from experiences of the past - '**landmarks**' and '**direction posts**' - implying that whilst not absolute they were useful.
- Since Mill discussed the notion of using rules to guide us in applying the principle of utility, he is sometimes associated with the label '**Rule Utilitarianism**'. However, there is a debate about the extent to which Mill can be called a Rule Utilitarian.
- Some people prefer to label Mill's view as, '**Weak Rule** Utilitarianism' and argue that Mill allows that rules can sometimes be broken in unusual or extreme cases if a greater amount of happiness will result.
- Others use the term '**Strong Rule** Utilitarianism' for this approach and establish the principle that never breaking a rule established by the principle of utilitarianism is how Utilitarianism should work.

Key quotes:

"...some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others." (J. S. Mill)

"It is better to be a human being dissatisfied, than a pig satisfied." (J. S. Mill)

"... no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base." (J. S. Mill)

"All action is for the sake of some end..." (J. S. Mill)

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates
Some philosophers Rule Utilitarianism puts its emphasis on the ways that humans have responded well to recurring situations and that it can be an incredibly powerful tool for learning from the past. Others would argue that Rule Utilitarianism is in danger of becoming deontological and not doing justice to the principle of utility.

Key questions
Can any pleasure be justified?
Are the ethical teachings of religious traditions just as useful?

Key words:

Mill	quality	quantity	intellectual	moral
higher	lower	harm principle	landmarks	
directions post	Rule Utilitarianism	Strong	Weak	