

## Discussion Guide, Advanced

### Episode 2

A good way to continue the discussion of utilitarianism is to *describe* its main features in detail and to *evaluate* each feature.

### ***Describing Utilitarianism***

According to the principle of utility, an action is *right* insofar it tends to increase happiness and *wrong* insofar as it tends to decrease happiness. In other words, the principle tells us that the right thing to do is always whatever will produce the greatest amount of happiness and whatever is necessary to prevent the greatest amount of unhappiness.

But how are we supposed to figure out what to do in a particular, real-life situation? Suppose that we have to choose between building a new sports stadium and building a new hospital. According to Bentham, we should consider how much *pleasure* sports fans would get if we were to build a new stadium, and how much *pain* sick people would be relieved of if we were to build a new hospital. If building the stadium would produce a greater balance of pleasure, then we should build the stadium. This explanation reveals three important features of Benthamite utilitarianism.

1.

For utilitarians like Bentham, happiness is simply pleasure and the absence of pain. People are happy insofar as they *feel pleasure*, unhappy insofar they *feel*

*pain* ;  
there is nothing else that goes into happiness. Abilities, achievements, friendship, love—all these are, at best, only means to being happy, and only insofar as they give rise to pleasure.

2.

The second feature of Benthamite utilitarianism is that it counts all pleasures and pains, and it treats every type of pleasure and pain as equal. If the quantity is the same, the pleasure of mocking someone counts just as much as the pleasure of helping someone. The pleasure of having a successful career can, in principle, be outweighed by the pleasure of eating a great many ice cream cones. The same goes for pains. The pain that someone feels when they are insulted can, in principle, be outweighed by the pleasure that another person derives from the insult.

3.

The third feature of Benthamite utilitarianism is that it permits sacrificing one person's interests for the sake of the majority. If the greater balance of pleasure would be produced by building a sports stadium rather than a hospital (say, because there are few sick people but many sports fans), then the principle of utility tells us to build the stadium—even if a small number of sick people will suffer greatly as a result.

### ***Evaluating Utilitarianism***

In your discussion, try to evaluate these three features.

1.

Is it true that happiness is simply pleasure and the absence of pain, and that the goal of all human action should be pleasure? Or is utilitarianism too crude as a moral doctrine?

2.

John Stuart Mill tried to defend utilitarianism against this charge by arguing that greater weight should be put on “higher” pleasures. But which pleasures are “higher” pleasures? Mill proposed that, of two pleasures, the pleasure preferred by a *majority* of people who had experienced *both* pleasures should be counted as the higher pleasure.

Is this a good way to distinguish “higher” from “lower” pleasures? Does the majority, even when it is well-informed, always prefer the “higher” pleasure? Does Mill’s proposal succeed in making Utilitarianism less crude? If not, is there another way to defend utilitarianism against this charge?

3.

Are all goods commensurable? Can they all be weighed on a common scale, or is it possible that the value of some goods, such as love, cannot coherently be balanced against the value of other goods, like money? Is this a fatal problem for utilitarianism?

4.

Do all pleasures deserve to be counted—even objectionable pleasures, like the pleasures that racists derive from being racist?

5.

John Stuart Mill thought that the right laws, education, and public opinion would prevent people from having objectionable desires. Was he right to be so confident about this? Either way, does the fact that utilitarianism counts *all* pleasures make it admirably neutral or hopelessly defective?

6.

Does utilitarianism threaten individual rights? What if the sum total of the pain caused by sacrificing the civil rights of a minority is less than the sum total of the pleasure derived as a result by the majority?

7.

John Stuart Mill tried to rebut the objection that utilitarianism cannot account for individual rights. He argued that, far from being in tension with individual rights, the principle of utility was actually the *justification* for protecting rights. In other words, Mill believed that protecting individual rights is the best way to increase the sum of happiness in the long run. Was Mill right? Either way, is this really the *reason* why we should not violate people's basic rights?