

Welcome to the study of justice!

Episode One opens our study of justice by considering the philosophy of utilitarianism. A good way to continue the discussion is to consider the principle of utility and to ask whether it always gets the right answer.

Harming the Innocent

According to the principle of utility, we should always do whatever will produce the greatest amount of happiness and whatever is necessary to prevent the greatest amount of unhappiness. But what if the only way to produce happiness, and to prevent unhappiness, is to harm or even kill innocent people?

1. Suppose you are driving through a narrow tunnel and a worker falls onto the road in front of you. There is not enough time for you to stop. If you keep straight, you will hit the worker and kill him, but if you swerve left into oncoming traffic, you will collide with a school bus and kill at least five children. What's the right thing to do? Does utilitarianism get the right answer?
2. Suppose ten thousand innocent civilians live next to a munitions factory in a country at war. If you bomb the factory, all of them will die. If you don't bomb the factory, it will be used to produce bombs that will be dropped on fifty thousand innocent civilians in another country. What's the right thing to do? Does utilitarianism get the right answer?
3. Suppose a man has planted a bomb in New York City, and it will explode in twenty-four hours unless the police are able to find it. Should it be legal for the police to use torture to extract information from the suspected bomber? Does utilitarianism get the right answer?
4. Now suppose the man who has planted the bomb will not reveal the location unless an innocent member of his family is tortured. Should it be legal for the police to torture innocent people, if that is truly the only way to discover the location of a large bomb? Does utilitarianism have the right answer?

Telling the Truth

The principle of utility tells us to do whatever is necessary to minimize pain and unhappiness, but pain and unhappiness have many sources. There are times when telling people the truth would make them very unhappy. Should you lie to a person whenever lying is the only way to spare his or her feelings and prevent unhappiness?

1. Suppose your friend likes to sing in the shower, and he thinks he is an excellent singer. In fact, however, he sounds truly awful. Should you tell him the truth, even if it will ruin his self-confidence? Does utilitarianism have the right answer?
2. Suppose a man has been missing for many years, and you have just learned that he is

dead. Should you tell the man's father, even if it will crush his hopes and send him into despair? Does utilitarianism have the right answer?

3. If you think it would be wrong to lie in one or both of these cases, do you think there is sometimes a moral duty to tell the truth despite the consequences? Does this duty mean that the principle of utility is mistaken?

Living Your Life

The principle of utility says that we should always maximize happiness. It does not matter whether we are deciding on the laws of our country as citizens and officials, or whether we are deciding what to do in our own private lives. In every possible case, the principle of utility tells us to choose the course of action that will produce the greatest amount of happiness. Is that right?

1. There are many needy people in the world who could benefit from your help. If you were to volunteer one evening per week, you could reduce need and thereby increase the sum of happiness. But if you were to volunteer all of your evenings, then you could produce even more happiness. Should you volunteer all of your spare time to helping the needy? Would it be wrong not to do so?

2. There are many poor people in the world who lack the money to buy food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. If you were to donate \$100 to a charity such as Oxfam, then some of these people would get what they desperately need and you would thereby increase happiness. But if you were to donate all of your spare income each month, then even more people would get what they desperately need and you would produce even more happiness. Should you donate all of your spare income to charities such as Oxfam? Would it be wrong not to do so?