

Discussion Guide, Beginner

Episode 2

Let's continue the discussion of utilitarianism. According to Jeremy Bentham's principle of utility, we should always do whatever will produce the greatest amount of happiness. Is that right? Consider the following questions, and ask yourself whether they point to a defect in the doctrine of utilitarianism.

1.

Suppose we have to choose between building a new sports stadium and building a new hospital. Should we build the stadium if there are many more sports fans than sick people? What about the sick people? Aren't we sacrificing their interests?

2.

Suppose we have \$1 million of government money. We can use it either to build a new school for one thousand children, or to buy one million ice cream cones for one million children. Should we buy the ice cream cones, if that would produce the greatest balance of pleasure? Are all pleasures created equal?

3.

What if the majority of the members of a community derive pleasure from being racist? Should we let them be racist, if that would produce the greatest balance of pleasure? Are some pleasures objectionable?

4.

Suppose you have to move to Boston or to Las Vegas. If you move to Boston, you'll fall in love and get married. If you move to Vegas, you'll get rich but stay

single. Should you move to Vegas, if being rich gives you more pleasure? Are all pleasures commensurable?

5.

John Stuart Mill, a utilitarian, says that we should protect individual rights because, in the long run, that is the best way to increase the sum of happiness. Is that true? Is that really the reason why you shouldn't imprison and torture innocent people?