

Discussion Guide, Beginner

Episode 3

Utilitarians think that the right thing to do is whatever produces the greatest amount of happiness. Libertarians disagree. They think that we must never violate anyone's rights—even if doing so would increase overall happiness.

According to libertarians, the greatest threat to individual rights comes from the government. You should be able to drive without a seat belt if you want. The government has no business giving you a ticket. That's unacceptably paternalist. And if you want to use drugs or engage in deviant sexual practices, you should be free to do so, provided you don't violate anyone else's rights in the process. The government has no business passing moralistic legislation. It shouldn't tell you how to live your life. Most importantly, the government should never tax for redistributive purposes. Redistributive taxation is theft. Taking your earnings and giving it to other people is like forcing you to work for those people. Libertarians say it's almost like slavery. Libertarians make strong claims. But are they right about rights?

1.

Is it unjust for the government to require people to wear seat belts and to prohibit them from engaging in other self-endangering activities? What if we know that many more people will die without such legislation? Should people be free to hurt or kill themselves, provided their actions do not violate anyone's else rights?

2.

Should the government legalize narcotics? After all, some adults want to use drugs privately.

3.

Should the government legalize prostitution? After all, some adults want to buy and sell sex.

4.

Should there be a minimum wage? What if employers want to pay people \$1.25 per hour, and some desperately poor people would work for that wage? Is the government being unjust by requiring employers to pay them at least \$7.25 per hour?

5.

Should the government impose occupational safety standards? What if employers refuse to spend money on safety measures, and some desperately poor people would agree to work in dangerous conditions. Should the government prohibit certain contracts that some workers and employers would be willing to make, and insist on safe working conditions?

6.

Is it just to tax the rich to pay for public services? Should the government tax Bill Gates and other wealthy people and use the money to pay for public schools, hospitals, roads, parks, fire departments, and police departments, or would all of that be unjust?

7.

Is it just to tax the rich to give to the poor? Should the government tax Bill Gates and other wealthy people and use the money to supplement the income of unemployed people, single mothers with low incomes, or other poor people? Should the government tax rich people and loan the money, interest-free, to poor kids so that they can go to college? Would all of that be unjust? Why?