TOEFL Listening Lesson 12

Setting: A college-level *Philosophy* class.

Questions

1. What is the main topic of the lecture?

A. The development of Western political theory
B. How philosophers define personal morality
C. The core principles and modern uses of utilitarian ethics
D. The differences between Eastern and Western ethical systems

2. What distinction did John Stuart Mill make that Jeremy Bentham did not?

A. Mill believed pain was more important than pleasure
B. Mill introduced rule utilitarianism
C. Mill argued that some pleasures are higher than others
D. Mill rejected the idea of quantifying happiness

3. According to the professor, why is utilitarianism often used in public health decisions?

A. It prioritizes individual rights over collective needs
B. It helps determine what actions maximize overall benefit
C. It guarantees accurate predictions of public behavior
D. It avoids controversial ethical debates

4. Why does the professor mention the example of punishing an innocent person?

A. To show how utilitarianism protects legal systems
B. To argue that utilitarianism always promotes justice
C. To illustrate a common critique of utilitarianism
D. To demonstrate the need for stricter laws

5. What can be inferred about the professor's view of utilitarianism?

A. The professor believes utilitarianism is outdated
B. The professor thinks utilitarianism is too rigid to be useful
C. The professor views utilitarianism as useful but not without problems
D. The professor prefers other ethical theories over utilitarianism

Script

Professor:

Today we're going to explore one of the most influential moral theories in Western philosophy—utilitarianism—and look at how it's applied in some contemporary debates. Utilitarian ethics is a type of consequentialism, which means it judges the rightness or wrongness of actions based on their outcomes. The central idea of utilitarianism is straightforward: the best action is the one that maximizes overall happiness or well-being. This idea is often summarized in the phrase: "the greatest good for the greatest number."

Utilitarianism is most closely associated with the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, both of whom lived in the 18th and 19th centuries. Bentham believed that all human beings are governed by pleasure and pain, and so a good action is one that increases pleasure and reduces pain. He even tried to quantify happiness through what he called a "hedonic calculus"—a sort of formula that could, in theory, measure the amount of pleasure or pain produced by an action.

Mill built on Bentham's ideas but made some key refinements. He argued that not all pleasures are equal. For example, the pleasure derived from reading a great novel or solving a challenging problem is more valuable than the pleasure of eating ice cream. Mill introduced the idea of higher and lower pleasures and believed that intellectual and moral pleasures should be weighted more heavily.

Now, why is utilitarianism still relevant today? Well, let's take a few modern examples. One area where utilitarian thinking is frequently applied is public health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments had to make tough decisions: whether to impose lockdowns, mandate vaccines, or allocate limited medical resources. Utilitarian reasoning guided many of those choices. For example, limiting social activity caused hardship, but it was argued to be justified because it protected more people from illness and death. In other words, the policy was thought to produce the greatest benefit for the greatest number.

Another example comes from environmental ethics. Consider a government deciding whether to build a dam. A utilitarian approach would weigh the benefits—such as electricity, water storage, and jobs—against the costs, which might include displacing communities, harming ecosystems, or increasing pollution. The decision would come down to whichever outcome yields the most net benefit for everyone affected.

In medical ethics, utilitarianism often plays a role in decisions like organ allocation. Let's say there's one liver and three patients who need it. A utilitarian framework would recommend giving the organ to the patient who has the best chance of survival and the potential for the longest, most productive life—again, aiming to maximize total well-being.

However, utilitarianism has its critics. One major criticism is that it can justify morally questionable actions if they lead to better overall results. For instance, suppose punishing an innocent person might prevent widespread panic or civil unrest. A strict utilitarian might say that's

acceptable, even though most of us would see it as unjust. In that sense, utilitarianism sometimes conflicts with individual rights.

To address this, modern philosophers have tried to refine the theory. One approach is rule utilitarianism. Instead of evaluating individual actions, rule utilitarianism looks at whether a rule, if generally followed, would produce the greatest good. For example, the rule “don’t punish innocent people” tends to create trust in legal systems and reduce fear—so even from a utilitarian perspective, that rule might be seen as beneficial in the long term.

There’s also the problem of measurement. How do we accurately calculate happiness or well-being? Is it even possible to compare different people’s experiences in a meaningful way? Critics argue that trying to assign numbers to human suffering or joy oversimplifies complex moral decisions.

Despite these challenges, utilitarianism remains highly influential, especially in policy-making, bioethics, economics, and even artificial intelligence design. When engineers program self-driving cars, for instance, they sometimes use utilitarian logic. In a potential crash, should the car prioritize the safety of its passenger or the pedestrian? A utilitarian might argue for choosing the outcome that leads to the fewest deaths overall.

In summary, utilitarianism is a flexible and widely applicable ethical theory. It asks us to think not just about what feels right, but about what actually does the most good. While it doesn’t offer easy answers, it does encourage us to look beyond ourselves and consider the broader

consequences of our actions. In many ways, that makes it a powerful tool for navigating the moral dilemmas of modern life.

Answers

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