

## **Objection 1: Individual Rights**

The most glaring weakness of utilitarianism, many argue, is that it fails to respect individual rights. By caring only about the sum of satisfactions, it can run roughshod over individual people. For the utilitarian, individuals matter, but only in the sense that each person's preferences should be counted along with everyone else's. But this means that the utilitarian logic, if consistently applied, could sanction ways of treating persons that violate what we think of as fundamental norms of decency and respect, as the following cases illustrate:

### *Throwing Christians to lions*

In ancient Rome, they threw Christians to the lions in the Coliseum for the amusement of the crowd. Imagine how the utilitarian calculus would go: Yes, the Christian suffers excruciating pain as the lion mauls and devours him. But think of the collective ecstasy of the cheering spectators packing the Coliseum. If enough Romans derive enough pleasure from the violent spectacle, are there any grounds on which a utilitarian can condemn it?

### *Is torture ever justified?*

A similar question arises in contemporary debates about whether torture is ever justified in the interrogation of suspected terrorists. Consider the ticking time bomb scenario: Imagine that you are the head of the local CIA branch. You capture a terrorist suspect who you believe has information about a nuclear device set to go off in Manhattan later the same day. In fact, you have reason to suspect that he planted the bomb himself. As the clock ticks down, he refuses to admit to being a terrorist or to divulge the bomb's location. Would it be right to torture him until he tells you where the bomb is and how to disarm it?

The argument for doing so begins with a utilitarian calculation. Torture inflicts pain on the suspect, greatly reducing his happiness or utility. But thousands of innocent lives will be lost if the bomb explodes. So you might argue, on utilitarian grounds, that it's morally justified to inflict intense pain on one person if doing so will prevent death and suffering on a massive scale. Former Vice President Richard Cheney's argument that the use of harsh interrogation techniques against suspected Al-Qaeda terrorists helped avert another terrorist attack on the United States rests on this utilitarian logic.

This is not to say that utilitarians necessarily favor torture. Some utilitarians oppose torture on practical grounds. They argue that it seldom works, since information extracted under duress is often unreliable. So pain is inflicted, but the community is not made any safer: there is no increase in the collective utility. Or they worry that if our country engages in torture, our soldiers will face harsher treatment if taken prisoner. This result could actually reduce the overall utility associated with our use of torture, all things considered.

## **Objection 2: A Common Currency of Value**

Utilitarianism claims to offer a science of morality, based on measuring, aggregating, and calculating happiness. It weighs preferences without judging them. Everyone's preferences count equally. This nonjudgmental spirit is the source of much of its appeal. And its promise to make moral choice a science informs much contemporary economic reasoning. But in order to aggregate preferences, it is necessary to measure them on a single scale. Bentham's idea of utility offers one such common currency.

But is it possible to translate all moral goods into a single currency of value without losing something in the translation? The second objection to utilitarianism doubts that it is. According to this objection, all values can't be captured by a common currency of value.

To explore this objection, consider the way utilitarian logic is applied in cost-benefit analysis, a form of decision-making that is widely used by governments and corporations. Cost-benefit analysis tries to bring rationality and rigor to complex social choices by translating all costs and benefits into monetary terms—and then comparing them.