

THE APPEAL OF UTILITARIANISM. Smart begins by remarking that doctrines alternative to utilitarianism face serious difficulties. Ethical egoism is incoherent, because it asserts simultaneously that I should only look after my own interests and be indifferent to yours, his, and hers, that you should look after your interests and be indifferent to mine, his, and hers Putting this together we get an inconsistency. Other theories, like natural law ethics, are based on spurious metaphysics/theology. Finally, and most importantly, deontology: it falls victim to the ‘rule worship’. Although following the rule should, at least on a given occasion, result verifiably in human misery, the deontologist wants us to follow the rule (or ‘principle’).

This last objection has force especially (though I think, not exclusively) because Smart adopts a non-cognitivist metaethical framework. We don’t assume that ethical propositions are true the same way that propositions of natural science are true. Instead, they may be paraphrased into some statements about emotions (say), and only then fit into a truth-apt discourse. Since, therefore, ethical propositions are not taken at face value, the deontologist can’t mount an argument of this form: Though it seems to you that following the rule is repugnant, the rule is nevertheless *true*.

In persuading his audience, the utilitarian appeals not to the truth of his propositions (which, as we’ve just said, are never true or false, anyway), but to an attitude. The attitude he appeals to is ‘generalised benevolence’: so far as you care about other creatures, so far as their welfare touches your feelings, you should find the utilitarian doctrine at least initially persuasive.

RULE WORSHIP. There are two versions of utilitarianism to distinguish:

Act-utilitarianism An action is good iff roughly, it has good consequences.

Rule-utilitarianism An action is good iff roughly, it conforms to a good rule.

Smart’s objection is that a consistent rule-utilitarianism results in rule worship. Presumably we adopt a rule because it tends to produce good consequences. Then if, on the given occasion, the rule does not yield good consequences, why follow it? A typical answer is, ‘What if no-one follows the rule? Surely there will be terrible consequences then!’ But that’s implausible. If I don’t follow the rule, it may still be followed by other people. Generally, when I fail to follow the rule, the situation is, ‘Some people follow the rule, some don’t’, rather than, ‘No-one follows the rule.’

In other words, once we realise that the sole justification of the rule is the tendency to produce higher welfare, then the occasions when the rule fails to produce must also be the occasions when we shouldn’t follow it. If rule-utilitarianism insists on following the rule even on these occasions, it is guilty of an irrational rule worship.

It is, indeed, possible to think of act-utilitarianism as a species of rule-utilitarianism when we consider the rule ‘Maximise probable benefit’. This rule trumps any other rule, since that other rule will have to deal with an indefinite number of exceptions.

PLEASURE WORSHIP. Should the utilitarian adopt a policy that increases pigs satisfied, or rather the one that increases Socrates dissatisfied? Should we prefer an action that increases pleasures no matter what kind, or rather an action that increases only the ‘right’ kind of pleasures? There is a disagreement here between Bentham, Mill, and Moore.

Bentham holds that pleasures should be evaluated by their quantity alone. Certainly, if intellectual activities produce more durable or more intense pleasures, they are to be preferred over animalistic pleasures, say. But if not, then absolutely nothing should make us prefer refined, elitistic pleasures over the lower ones. Mill holds that pleasures are to be evaluated also by their intrinsic ‘quality’. When we compare listening to Bruckner and listening to ABBA, we need to consider that Bruckner’s music is intrinsically more valuable than ABBA’s (it’s not difficult to show that last point, actually). Thus if you like listening to Bruckner very much, but also like ABBA very much, you should clearly choose doing the former. That said, the quality of pleasure is just one of the factors in our choices. If it so happens that you like ABBA tremendously, but are virtually incapable of liking Bruckner, then the choice should be for ABBA.

Moore defends an altogether different view. Some states are intrinsically valuable regardless of how much pleasure they produce. We need to choose Bruckner over ABBA because of the intrinsic value of his music. Considerations of pleasure should not affect our choice at all. There may, however, be other states that carry no such intrinsic value. Moore presumably will recommend choosing apples over oranges if apples happen to produce more pleasure. Moore, therefore, is a consequentialist, but not an utilitarian: considerations of pleasure (=utility) are not always decisive.

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