

J. J. C. SMART

Defending Utilitarianism

J. J. C. Smart, an Australian philosopher born in 1920, works in ethics and philosophy of science. His *Philosophy and Scientific Realism* defended a physicalist view of mind. This present selection is taken from his defense of utilitarianism in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, co-authored with Bernard Williams.

After distinguishing various types of utilitarianism, Smart opts for act-utilitarianism. He hopes that our widely shared desires to promote everyone's happiness may lead others to become act-utilitarians too.

As you read the selection, note the different types of utilitarianism. Do you find Smart's argument for act- over rule-utilitarianism convincing? Ought consequences alone to determine whether individual acts are right or wrong? Should other factors be considered?

Method

Act-utilitarianism is the view that the rightness of an action depends only on the total goodness or badness of its consequences, i.e. on the effect on the welfare of all human beings (or perhaps all sentient beings). The best exposition of act-utilitarianism is Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*, but Sidgwick stated it within the framework of a cognitivist¹ metaethics which supposed that act-utilitarian principles could be known to be true by intellectual intuition. I reject Sidgwick's metaethics for familiar reasons, and will assume the truth of some such "noncognitivist" analysis as that of Hare's *Language of Morals*, or possibly that of D. H. Monroe in his *Empiricism and Ethics*. Both imply that ultimate ethical principles depend on attitudes or feelings. In adopting such a metaethics, I renounce the attempt to *prove* the act-utilitarian system. I shall be concerned with stating it in a form which may appear persuasive to some people, and to show how it may be defended against objections.

In setting up a system of normative ethics, the utilitarian must appeal to ultimate attitudes which he holds in common with those whom he is addressing. The sentiment to which he appeals is generalized benevolence, the disposition to seek happiness or good consequences for all mankind, or perhaps for all sentient beings. His audience may not initially be in agreement

with the utilitarian position. For example, they may have a propensity to obey the rules of some traditional moral system into which they have been indoctrinated in youth. Nevertheless the utilitarian will have some hope of persuading the audience to agree with his system of normative ethics. He can appeal to the sentiment of generalized benevolence, which is surely present in any group with whom it is profitable to discuss ethical questions. He may be able to convince some people that their previous disposition to accept non-utilitarian principles was due to conceptual confusions. He will not be able to convince everybody, but that is not an objection. It may well be that there is no ethical system which appeals to all people.

Act- and rule-utilitarianism

I am here concerned to defend act-utilitarianism. Act-utilitarianism is to be contrasted with rule-utilitarianism. Act-utilitarianism is the view that the rightness of an action is to be judged by the consequences, good or bad, of the action itself. Rule-utilitarianism is the view that the rightness of an action is to be judged by the goodness and badness of the consequences of a rule that everyone should perform the action in like circumstances.

I have argued elsewhere the objections to rule-utilitarianism. Briefly they boil down to the accusation of rule worship: the rule-utilitarian advocates his principle because he is ultimately concerned with human happiness: why then should he advocate abiding by a rule when he knows that it will not in the present case be beneficial to abide by it? To refuse to break a rule in cases in which it is not beneficial to obey it seems irrational and to be a case of rule worship.

Hedonistic and non-hedonistic utilitarianism

An act-utilitarian judges the rightness of actions by the goodness and badness of their consequences. But is he to judge the goodness and badness of consequences solely by their pleasantness and unpleasantness? Bentham, who thought that quantity of pleasure being equal, the experience of playing pushpin was as good as that of reading poetry, could be classified as a hedonistic act-utilitarian. Moore, who believed that some states of mind, such as knowledge, had intrinsic value independent of their pleasantness, can be called an ideal utilitarian. Mill seemed to occupy an intermediate position. He held that there are higher and lower pleasures. This seems to imply that pleasure is a necessary condition for goodness but that goodness depends on other qualities of experience than pleasantness and unpleasantness. I propose to call Mill a quasi-ideal utilitarian.

The utilitarian addresses himself to people who likely agree with him as to what consequences are good ones, but who disagree that what we ought to do is to produce the best consequences. The difference between ideal and hedonistic utilitarianism in most cases will not lead to disagreement about what ought to be done.

Let us consider Mill's contention that it is "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." A hedonistic utilitarian, like Bentham, might agree with Mill in preferring the experiences of discontented philosophers to those of contented fools. His preference for the philosopher's state of mind, however, would not be an *intrinsic* one. He would say that the discontented philosopher is useful in society and that the existence of Socrates is responsible for an improvement in the lot of humanity generally.

Again, a man who enjoys pushpin is likely eventually to become bored with it, whereas the man who enjoys poetry is likely to retain this interest throughout his life. Moreover reading poetry may develop imagination and sensitivity, and so as a result a man may be able to do more for the happiness of others than if he had played pushpin and let his brain deteriorate. In short, both for the man immediately concerned and for others, the pleasures of poetry are, to use Bentham's word, more *fecund* than those of pushpin.

Average and total happiness

Another disagreement can arise over whether we should try to maximize the *average* happiness or the *total* happiness. I have not yet elucidated the concept of total happiness, and you may regard it as a suspect notion. But for present purposes I shall put it in this way: Would you be quite indifferent between (a) a universe containing one million happy sentient beings, all equally happy, and (b) a universe containing two million happy beings? Or would you, as a humane and sympathetic person, give a preference to the second universe? I myself feel a preference for the second universe. But if someone feels the other way I do not know how to argue with him.

This disagreement might have practical relevance. It might be important in discussions of birth control. But in most cases the difference will not lead to disagreement in practice. For in most cases the most effective way to increase the total happiness is to increase the average happiness, and vice versa.

Rightness of actions

I shall now state the act-utilitarian doctrine. For simplicity of exposition I shall put it forward in a hedonistic form. If anyone values states of mind such

as knowledge independently of their pleasurable-ness he can make appropriate verbal alterations to convert it from hedonistic to ideal utilitarianism.

Let us say, then, that the only reason for performing an action *A* rather than an alternative action *B* is that doing *A* will make mankind (or, perhaps, all sentient beings) happier than will doing *B*. This is so simple and natural a doctrine that we can expect that many readers will have some propensity to agree. For I am talking, as I said earlier, to sympathetic and benevolent men, that is, to men who desire the happiness of mankind. Since they have a favorable attitude to the general happiness, surely they have a tendency to submit to an ultimate moral principle which expresses this attitude. It is possible, then, that many sympathetic and benevolent people depart from a utilitarian ethical principle only under the stress of tradition, of superstition, or of unsound philosophical reasoning.

The utilitarian's ultimate moral principle, let it be remembered, expresses the sentiment not of altruism but of benevolence, the agent counting himself neither more nor less than any other person.

Suppose we could predict the future consequences of actions with certainty. In order to help someone to decide whether to do *A* or to do *B* we could say to him: "Envisage the total consequences of *A*, and think them over carefully and imaginatively. Now envisage the total consequences of *B*, and think them over. As a benevolent and humane man, and thinking of yourself just as one man among others, would you prefer the consequences of *A* or those of *B*?" That is, we are asking for a comparison of one (present and future) *total* situation with another (present and future) *total* situation. So far we are not asking for a *summation* or *calculation* of pleasures or happiness. We are asking only for a comparison of total situations. And it seems clear that we can frequently make such a comparison and say that one total situation is better than another.

When we look at our ordinary decisions, we see that most people think that we can weigh up probabilities and advantages. A man deciding whether to migrate to a tropical country may well say to himself, for example, that he can expect a pleasanter life for himself and his family in that country, unless there is a change in the system of government there, which is not likely, or unless one of his children catches an epidemic disease, which is perhaps more likely, and so on, and thinking over all these advantages and disadvantages and probabilities and improbabilities he may come out with the statement that on the whole it seems preferable for him to go there.

Maybe we have not any precise methods for deciding what to do, but then our imprecise methods must serve.

The place of rules

The utilitarian position is here put forward as a criterion of rational choice. We may choose to habituate ourselves to behave in accordance with certain rules, such as to keep promises, in the belief that behaving in accordance with these rules is generally optimistic, and in the knowledge that we often do not have time to work out pros and cons. The act-utilitarian will regard these rules as mere rules of thumb and will use them only as rough guides. He acts in accordance with rules when there is no time to think. When he has to think what to do, then there is a question of deliberation or choice, and it is for such situations that the utilitarian criterion is intended.

There is no inconsistency in an act-utilitarian's schooling himself to act, in normal circumstances, habitually and in accordance with rules. He knows that we would go mad if we went in detail into the probable consequences of keeping or not keeping every trivial promise: we will do the most good if we habituate ourselves to keep promises in all normal situations. Moreover he may suspect that on some occasions personal bias may prevent him from reasoning in a correct utilitarian fashion. If he trusts to the accepted rules he is more likely to act in the way that an unbiased act-utilitarian would recommend than if he tried to evaluate the consequences himself.

This is not the law worship of the rule-utilitarian, who would say that we ought to keep to a rule that is the most generally optimistic, even though we *knew* that obeying it in this instance would have bad consequences.

Nor is this utilitarian doctrine incompatible with a recognition of the importance of warm and spontaneous expressions of emotion. Consider a case in which a man sees that his wife is tired, and from a spontaneous feeling of affection he offers to wash the dishes. Does utilitarianism imply that he should have stopped to calculate the various consequences of his different possible courses of action? Certainly not. This would make married life a misery and the utilitarian knows well as a rule of thumb that on occasions of this sort it is best to act spontaneously and without calculation. There are good utilitarian reasons why we should cultivate in ourselves the tendency to certain types of warm and spontaneous feeling.

Some further examples

We are here considering utilitarianism as a *normative* system. The fact that it has consequences which conflict with some of our particular moral judgments need not be decisive against it. The utilitarian can contend that since his principle rests on something so simple and natural as generalized benevolence it is more securely founded than our particular feelings, which may be subtly distorted by traditional and uncritical ethical thinking.

The chief argument in favor of utilitarianism has been that any deontological [rule-based] ethics will always, on some occasions, lead to misery that could, on utilitarian principles, have been prevented. Thus if the deontologist says that promises always should be kept (or even if, like Ross, he says that there is a *prima facie* duty to keep them) we may confront him with a situation like the well-known "desert island promise": I have promised a dying man on a desert island, from which subsequently I alone am rescued, to give his hoard of gold to the South Australian Jockey Club. On my return I give it to the Royal Adelaide Hospital, which badly needs it for a new X-ray machine. Could anybody deny that I had done rightly without being open to the charge of heartlessness? (Remember that the promise was known only to me, and so my action will not weaken the general confidence in the social institution of promising.) Think of the persons dying of painful tumors who could have been saved by the desert island gold!

Normally the utilitarian is able to assume that the remote effects of his actions tend rapidly to zero, like the ripples on a pond after a stone has been thrown into it. Suppose that a man is deciding whether to seduce his neighbor's wife. On utilitarian grounds it seems obvious that such an act would be wrong, for the unhappiness which it is likely to cause in the short term will be obvious. The man need not consider the possibility that one of his remote descendants, if he seduces the woman, will be a great benefactor of the human race. Such a possibility is not that improbable, considering the number of descendants after many generations, but it is no more probable than that one of his remote descendants will do great harm, or that one from a more legitimate union would benefit the human race. It seems plausible that the long-term probable benefits and costs of his alternative actions are likely to be negligible or to cancel one another out.

Killing the innocent

It is not difficult to show that utilitarianism could, in exceptional circumstances, have horrible consequences. H. J. McCloskey has considered such a case.² Suppose that the sheriff of a small town can prevent serious riots (in which hundreds of people will be killed) only by "framing" and executing (as a scapegoat) an innocent man. In actual cases of this sort the utilitarian will usually be able to agree with our normal moral feelings. He will point out that there would be some possibility of the sheriff's dishonesty being found out, with consequent weakening of confidence and respect for law and order in the community, the consequences of which would be far worse even than the painful deaths of hundreds of citizens. But as McCloskey is ready to point out, the case can be presented in such a way that these objections do not apply. For example, it can be imagined that the sheriff could have first-rate

empirical evidence that he will not be found out. Someone like McCloskey can always strengthen his story to the point that we would have to admit that if utilitarianism is correct, then the sheriff must frame the innocent man.

Now though a utilitarian might argue that it is empirically unlikely that some such situation would ever occur, McCloskey will point out that it is *logically* possible that such a situation will arise. If the utilitarian rejects the unjust act he is giving up his utilitarianism. McCloskey remarks: "As far as I know, only J. J. C. Smart among the contemporary utilitarians is happy to adopt this 'solution.'" Here I must lodge a mild protest. McCloskey's use of the word "happy" makes me look reprehensible. Even in my most utilitarian moods I am not *happy* about this consequence of utilitarianism. Nevertheless, however unhappy about it he may be, the utilitarian must admit that he might find himself in circumstances where he ought to be unjust. Let us hope that this is a logical possibility and not a factual one.

No, I am not happy to draw the conclusion that McCloskey quite rightly says that the utilitarian must draw. But neither am I happy with the anti-utilitarian conclusion. For if a case *did* arise in which injustice was the lesser of two evils (in terms of human happiness and misery), then the anti-utilitarian conclusion is a very unpalatable one too, namely that in some circumstances one must choose the greater misery, perhaps the *very much* greater misery, such as that of hundreds of people suffering painful deaths.

Among possible options, utilitarianism does have its appeal. With its empirical attitude to means and ends it is congenial to the scientific temper and it has flexibility to deal with a changing world. This last consideration is, however, more self-recommendation than justification. For if flexibility is a recommendation, this is because of the utility of flexibility.

Study questions

- 1 Does Smart believe in objective moral truths? How does he propose to defend utilitarianism?
- 2 Explain the difference between act- and rule-utilitarianism. Construct an example that illustrates this difference.
- 3 Why does Smart reject rule-utilitarianism?
- 4 How do hedonistic and ideal utilitarianism differ? Is there much difference between them in practice?
- 5 Why does Smart call Mill a "quasi-ideal" utilitarian?
- 6 How does Smart formulate and apply act-utilitarianism?
- 7 Explain why Smart thinks it is consistent for one who is an act-utilitarian to habituate oneself to follow certain rules.
- 8 Explain the objection to utilitarianism illustrated in McCloskey's "sheriff" example. How does Smart respond to the objection?

For further study

This selection has excerpts, sometimes simplified in wording, from John Jamieson Carswell Smart's *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pages 4-5, 7, 9-10, 12-16, 27-8, 30-3, 39-40, 42-5, 56, 62, 64-5, and 69-73; this book was co-authored with Bernard Williams. Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) examines utilitarianism in Chapter 10.

Related readings in this anthology include Brandt, Mill, and Singer (who defend versions of utilitarianism); Finnis, O'Neill, Rawls, Ross, Sloc, and Williams (who criticize utilitarianism); Hume (who also appeals to sympathetic feelings), and Hare (whose analysis of ethical terms Smart assumes).

Notes

- 1 Smart uses the term "cognitivist" to refer to views that recognize objective moral truths and moral knowledge. Smart rejects such views.
- 2 H. J. McCloskey, "A note on utilitarian punishment." *Mind* 72 (1963): 599. [Note from Smart]