

February 26, 1980

In his "An Outline of a Utilitarian System of Ethics," J.J.C. Smart discusses what seem to be three different cases of rule-worship. The first case is the kind of rule-worship shown to be peculiar to "ethical deontologies," such as that of Sir David Ross, once they are stripped of their "cognitivist metaphysics." The second case is the kind of rule-worship involved in a rule-utilitarianism that is (neither reducible <sup>difference?</sup> to nor coextensive) with act-utilitarianism. The third case of rule-worship is associated with the belief in taboos in "primitive" societies, and with any customary practices or ordinary moral convictions in "civilized" societies. As we consider each of these cases of rule-worship in turn, we shall see that Smart's view of them is not consistently pejorative. *wow - dis (only words & other verbal things can be pej.)*

In his attack on the deontologist form of rule-worship, Smart is mainly concerned with rejecting a non-utilitarian principle as the ultimate principle of morality. The <sup>act</sup> utilitarian principle for Smart is the following: "the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be judged by the consequences, good or bad, of the action itself."<sup>1</sup>

"Maximize probable benefit"<sup>2</sup> is another form of the same principle. The deontologist, however, claims as an ultimate moral principle that certain kinds of actions are right or wrong no matter what the consequences. This "no matter what the consequences" principle is based on a "cognitivist

*does S. say so? Ross' view is - but deontology in general?*

*Explicitly labeled the act-utilitarian principle - tho it may not be clear why.*

metaphysics," which ignores the "consequential" questions of human happiness and welfare. Smart argues that after this metaphysics has been peeled away from the deontological ethical theory, "the obligation to keep promises," for example, "seems to be too artificial, to smack too much of human social conventions, to do duty as an ultimate principle."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the deontologists have attempted merely to provide a rational foundation for traditional moral rules; but, Smart thinks, unless the actions falling under these rules can meet the test of utility, any foundation for the rules is irrational.

Smart directs most of his criticism at the rule-worship of the rule-utilitarians. Given the role of the principle of utility in exposing the deontologists' rule-worship, Smart admonishes that the utilitarian should know better than to try to reconstitute the same rules on a utilitarian foundation. The rule-utilitarian says that "the rightness or wrongness 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."<sup>4</sup> That a rule may be in agreement with the principle of utility, Smart admits; but in cases where the particular action required by the rule is in conflict with the ultimate principle, any utilitarian worthy of the name should either break the rule or revise it on the spot to take account of the exception:

to refuse to break a generally beneficial

*I think admon. always  
takes a direct object*

rule in those cases in which it is not most beneficial to obey it seems irrational and to be a case of rule worship.<sup>5</sup>

For Smart rules are justifiable under the utilitarian principle only as "rules of thumb." If Smart adopts the rule of keeping promises, he follows the rule only because the time saved in applying the rule is a greater benefit than would be the time lost in calculating the ultimate consequences of keeping any particular promise.<sup>6</sup> However, keeping promises contributes no benefit over and above this time saved; and appeal to the principle of utility is always open in particular cases. Thus, the only absolutely beneficial rule is the ultimate rule, the principle of utility itself; and "an adequate rule-utilitarianism would be extensionally equivalent to act utilitarianism."<sup>7</sup>

Smart's third kind of rule-worship affects the largest class of people (and perhaps includes the first two classes also): the "many sympathetic and benevolent people" who "depart from or fail to attain a utilitarian ethical principle only under the stress of tradition, of superstition, or of unsound philosophical reasoning."<sup>8</sup> In contrast to those who should know better, this class of rule-worshippers must be led gradually (and in some cases, not at all) to an awareness of the utility principle; otherwise, the act-utilitarian reformer might find himself in a pot of boiling oil, after the

"must be led... in some cases, not at all...?"  
(at best, awkward)

now m. quite? An rule abt keeping  
promises didn't come into existence  
because of a time-saver - surely the primary  
benefit of promise-keeping lies elsewhere.  
prom-keeping

community that he has been trying to "enlighten" has collapsed into moral anarchy. In direct contrast to his attack on the rule-worship of rule-utilitarianism, Smart warns us not to interfere with the rule-worship of ordinary folk in a non-utilitarian society:

though on occasion the keeping to taboos does harm, on the whole the tendency of the taboo ethics is more beneficial than the sort of moral anarchy into which these people might fall if their reverence for their taboos was weakened.<sup>9</sup>

If the act-utilitarian can affirm and even encourage the belief in traditional moral rules in this case of rule-worship, why does Smart deny the same affirmation and encouragement to the class of deontologists and rule-utilitarians? Smart claims that the act-utilitarian can somehow support the traditional practices of non-utilitarian societies on act-utilitarian grounds. Short of the utilitarian value of saving one's own skin, the grounds for the act-utilitarian strategy in this situation are none too clear. If the act-utilitarian must continually affirm the status quo rules to keep the non-utilitarian society from collapsing into moral anarchy, one wonders at what point he will ever be able to fulfill his mission of reforming the moral consciousness of his audience. Presumably, by some sort of subtle subversion, a very gradual "withering away" of taboos will be accompanied by a development of "rules of thumb" to take their functional place.

why assume that he has such a mission? Unlike, say, the gospel of Jesus, act-utilism does not dictate its own propagation (unless, of course, that would

well, not quite - he creates the sort of rule, in fact, further

"All cases are not parallel. Surely I would say that rule-utilitarianism is a deontological, I'm criticizing [over]

promote the greatest util.

We can say in conclusion that Smart's overall view of rule-worship is tied to his overall view of social development. Some form of rule-worship is apparently necessary at certain stages on the ladder of social evolution, while the prolongation of rule-worship beyond a certain point in a more or less utilitarian society would inhibit further moral progress. However, the way in which the transition from rule-worship to rule of thumb is made in the concrete context of a non-utilitarian society is by no means clear.

## Notes

All references in this paper have been taken from Utilitarianism for and against by J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973).

<sup>1</sup> p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> p. 51.

Still, you're not that it would be odd if the act-utilitarian did not feel some obl. to preach his gospel to society, however subtly & patiently. One would think he shld., on his own grounds, if he assumes that human life will go on for a long time.