

ACT—UTILITARIANISM AND COORDINATION : A CRITIQUE OF ALLAN GIBBARD'S VIEW

Roughly speaking, act-utilitarianism is the view that always perform an act which has at least as good overall consequences under that particular occasion as any other act open to you. Act-utilitarian J. J. C. Smart (1956) believes that the rational policy for a purely benevolent person (who is interested to further the general good) is act-utilitarianism. But Allan Gibbard (1990) disagrees with Smart. Gibbard argued that the universal satisfaction of act-utilitarianism cannot guarantee the greatest possible good. The reason is, according to Gibbard, that there is conflict between act-utilitarianism and coordination.

Gibbard mentions three kinds of coordinating problem. These are non-cooperation, surplus cooperation and diffuse cooperation. He calls the three kinds of cases to distinguish cases of non-cooperation, cases of surplus cooperation and cases of diffuse cooperation and says that in regards to the first two he sees real conflict between act-utilitarianism and coordination; but in regards to the third sort he sees only bogus conflict.

Now the project of this paper is two-fold. First, I will argue that the reason or ground on which Gibbard bases his claim that in an act-utilitarian community there is non-cooperation and surplus cooperation is ill-founded. Second, I will argue that there is a real conflict between act-utilitarianism and coordination in the case where Gibbard sees only bogus conflict.

Non—cooperation

Gibbard uses the boulder example as a case of non-cooperation. This example is stated as follows :

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A boulder perches on the hill above a village of act-utilitarians, and threatens soon to hurtle down the hill and destroy the village. Together the villagers could push the boulder down the opposite slope of the hill, where it would fall harmlessly into the ocean. Instead, they go about removing their children and possessions, each freely helping his neighbours when it is the most useful thing to do.

A visiting sociologist interviews the villagers about what is going on, and since they are convinced of the utility of accurate social science, they answer him truthfully.

Q : Why don't you get together with the others and push the boulder down the other side of the hill?

A : The other's won't help. I can't save the village myself, and if I tried, it would take me away from saving children and possessions, with no good results at all.

Q : Why won't the others help?

A : Because each knows the others won't, and wants to do something useful.

Q : Why won't you organize them to remove the boulder?

A : They won't cooperate.

Q : Why not?

A : Each knows the other won't.

Q : If someone else tried to organize people to remove the boulder, would you join in?

A : No.

Q : Why not?

A : I know no one else would.

The visiting sociologist is disgusted with their behaviour, but being an act utilitarian himself, he can find fault with neither the ethical nor the factual beliefs of the villagers. They are act-utilitarians, and each one, given his belief that the others will not help remove the boulder

even if he tries to organize them, does the best thing he can in the circumstances. Moreover, as the sociologist has discovered to his disgust, each is correct in believing that the others would not help remove the boulder even if someone tries to organize them. From the act utilitarian point of view, each is correctly acting on correct beliefs. The sociologist sets about helping to remove the villagers' children and possession.

By the boulder example Gibbard tries to argue that a group of act-utilitarians will not cooperate with each other to maximize their utility. But we do not think that he has been able to show that in the boulder example the group of people (villagers) are act-utilitarians. In order to show that they are act-utilitarian, Gibbard needs to argue that when none of them cooperates with others, everyone has followed act-utilitarian principle. But no such reason is provided by him.

The conversation between the sociologist and the villagers suggests that each villager has acted, that is, has not cooperated with others on his knowledge that others will not cooperate. Now, in order to say that everyone is act-utilitarian, it must be shown that everyone's knowledge is grounded on act-utilitarian reason. But no such reason is provided by any of the villagers. So, what Gibbard has been able to show is that all the villagers are non-cooperative, but has not been able to show that they are act-utilitarians.

Surplus cooperation

A case of surplus cooperation is discussed by Gibbard with reference to R.F. Harrod's following remark :

It may well happen that the loss of confidence due to a million lies uttered within certain limits of time and space is much more than a million times as great as the loss due to any one in particular. Consequently, even if on each and every occasion taken separately, it can be shown that there is gain of advantage, (the avoidance of direct pain, let us say, exceeding the disadvantage due to the consequential loss of confidence), yet in the sum of all cases the disadvantage due to the aggregate loss of confidence might be far greater than the sum of pain caused by truth-telling (Harrod, 1936, p. 148).

By the above phrase Harrod suggests that an act-utilitarian will tell a lie whenever his/her lying has a gain of advantage over loss of

confidence in a particular occasion; but if everyone does the same, that is, if act-utilitarianism is universally satisfied, then the total loss of confidence will be greater than the total gain of advantage and hence a great consequential harm will take place.

David Lyons (1965) rightly wonders how a series of lies, each of which taken separately has an advantage over loss of confidence, together can produce a total loss of confidence greater than the total gain of advantage? In order to grasp that defect of Harrod's argument, let us consider the following set or series of lies : [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...n]. Harrod argues that even though each of the lies of this set, eg. lie 1 or lie 2... or lie n, has an advantage over loss of confidence, yet the set of lies as a whole, that is n lies, produces loss of confidence greater than the total gain of confidence. But how one can consistently hold that in a set of n lies, up to lie n has a gain of advantage over the loss of confidence but n lies as a whole has a loss of confidence over the gain of advantage? In order to say that the set of n lies produces a loss of confidence over that gain of advantage we must recognize that there is a point on the set, which is called threshold, where the particular lie does not have the gain of advantage over the loss of confidence. Hence Harrod's argument that the universal satisfaction of act-utilitarianism, that is, each person's telling a lie when his/her lying has a gain of advantage over the loss of confidence, together can produce the loss of confidence greater than the total gain of advantage does fail. Hence, in an act-utilitarian community there can have no surplus cooperation. This shows that the ground on which Gibbard bases his claim that the universal satisfaction of act-utilitarianism leads to surplus cooperation is wrong.

Bogus conflict?

A case of bogus conflict between act-utilitarianism and cooperation is discussed by Gibbard with reference to an example used by Richard. B. Brandt in his *Ethical Theory* (1959). Brandt developed this example to show the conflict between act-utilitarianism and cooperation. In this example Brandt tells us to consider the position of an act-utilitarian Frenchman living in war-time England who has to take decision as to whether to obey the government request to conserve gas and electricity by having a maximum temperature of 50 degree Fahrenheit in his home,

or to use more gas and electricity to raise the temperature up to 70 degree Fahrenheit to keep his home warm.

Under the above circumstances, Brandt believes, the Frenchman will not cooperate with the government, that is, the Frenchman will not help to win the war by conserving gas, since as an act-utilitarian he will reason as follows :

All the good moral British obviously will pay scrupulous attention to conforming with this request. The war effect is sure not to suffer from a shortage of electricity and gas. Now, it will make no difference to the war effort whether I personally use a bit more gas, but it will make a great deal of difference to my comfort. So, since the public welfare will be maximized by my using gas to keep the temperature up to 70 degree F. in my home, it is my duty to use the gas (pp. 389-90).

Brandt goes on to say that the Frenchman can also reason in a different way. This reasoning is phrased by R. E Bales as follows :

If enough other people decide to use gas and electricity, so that the war is lost, my abstaining won't have made any difference to the war effort, but it will have made a lot difference in my comfort. Thus, the general harm will be decreased if I use enough gas and electricity to keep my home warm. Therefore, I ought to keep my home warm (1971, p. 259).

Brandt now asks us to suppose that every Englishman reasons just like the Frenchman. If so, then the war will be lost. So he concludes :

If everybody follows this act-utilitarian reasoning, the war will be lost, with disastrous effects for everybody. Thus, universal obedience of the act-utilitarian directive to seek the public good may well cause the public harm (p. 390).

J. J. C. Smart (1973), however, rejects Brandt's argument from universal act-utilitarian reasoning, namely, that if every Englishman follows the Frenchman's reasoning, disastrous result will follow. Smart writes :

This objection fails to recognize that the Frenchman would have used as an empirical premise in his calculation the proposition that very few

people would be likely to reason as he does. They would very likely be adherents of a traditional, non-utilitarian morality (p. 58).

Smart believes that the basis of the Frenchman's reasoning is that most of the Englishmen will comply with the government request to conserve gas and electricity. So, it is wrong to say that most of the Englishmen will follow the Frenchman's reasoning.

But if we analyze Brandt's argument carefully, we shall see that the Frenchman adopted a different line of reasoning. Actually, the Frenchman's reasoning takes the following form. Either enough of the vast Englishmen will probably conform to the government directive, or enough of them will probably decide not to conform with the government directive. In the former case, the war effort will probably not suffer, if the Frenchman uses enough gas and electricity to keep his home warm, but it will make a lot of difference in his comfort. Thus, general good will be increased if the Frenchman uses more gas and electricity to keep his home warm. In the latter case, Frenchman's abstaining from using gas and electricity probably will not make any difference to the war effort but it will make a lot of difference in his comfort. Thus, the general harm will be decreased, if the Frenchman uses enough gas and electricity to keep his home warm.

Hence, the Frenchman's reasoning is not based on, as Smart thought, only the premise that most of the Englishmen will comply with the government directive. He also considers the possibility that most of them may not comply with the government directive. What Brandt's argument suggests is that for the Frenchman using gas and electricity is a dominant strategy from the act-utilitarian point of view. For, if the war is won because of the participation of enough other Englishmen, he can maximize general good by using more gas and electricity. Again, if war is lost because of the non-participation of enough other Englishmen, he can minimize the general harm by using more gas and electricity. Thus, given either alternative—lose or win—he should use more gas and electricity. In other words, as an act-utilitarian using gas is the dominant strategy for the Frenchman. If this is the correct interpretation of the Frenchman's reasoning, and I believe

it is, then there is no reason why all the Englishmen cannot reason the way the Frenchman does. So, Smart's objection against Brandt's argument from universal act-utilitarian reasoning does not stand.

We have seen why does Brandt believe that there is conflict between act-utilitarianism and cooperation? Now, let us see why does Gibbard find only a bogus or no conflict between act-utilitarianism and cooperation in the example we are dealing with.

According to Gibbard the argument Brandt gives regarding why the Frenchman will not cooperate with the government to win the war by conserving gas is that the Frenchman will reason as follows : one agent's using gas has no effect on the total gas supply (or that an individual's cooperation is too diffuse to be noticeable); even though if everyone did the same, the result would be dire.

On the basis of his analysis of Brandt's argument Gibbard disagrees with Brandt that in the gas example act-utilitarianism prescribes non-cooperation. In order to defend this claim Gibbard challenges the validation of the reasoning of the Frenchman. He argues :

...the net value of what n gas cheats accomplish is the sum of the values of n effects individual gas cheats could have. It is the sum of the net benefit from one gas cheat in a world with no other, the net benefit from one gas cheat in a world of two others, and so up to a world with $n-1$ others. If the effect of n gas cheat is calamitous, at least one of these net benefits from an individual gas cheat must be negative. Hence, it is possible for an individual to produce a bad result by helping to strain the gas system, no matter how uncertain and diffuse that result may be. If the system is likely to be under strain even with everyone cooperating, an act-utilitarian will cooperate. He will calculate the average expectable net benefit from an act of gas cheating by dividing the likely effect of a large number of gas cheats by n .

Gibbard is right to reject the reasoning that one individual's gas cheating has unnoticeable or no effect on the total gas supply. For, if one individual's gas cheating has unnoticeable or no effect, then we can reasonably ask how a series of gas cheating make a noticeable effect?

But the problem is that Gibbard misunderstood Brandt's argument. Brandt does not argue that the reason why the Frenchman will not conserve gas is that his using gas has, as Gibbard thought, a negligible or diffuse effect on the total consumption of gas. Rather, Brandt says that the Frenchman will not cooperate to win the war by conserving gas, since this course of action is the dominant strategy for him in order to promote the interest of the community by his own action.

Again, Gibbard is wrong to believe that the Frenchman will cooperate to conserve gas. The reason why the Frenchman will conserve gas is, according to Gibbard, that he will calculate the average expectable net benefit from his act of gas cheating by dividing the likely effect of a large number of gas cheats by all Englishmen (p. 27).

But I do not believe that as an act-utilitarian the Frenchman will follow the course of action suggested by Gibbard. For, a) the Frenchman has no reason to believe that all Englishmen will cheat gas and b) if all Englishmen cheat gas then as an act-utilitarian the Frenchman's rational policy is to cheat gas also because in this way, as we have seen earlier, he can minimize the general harm of the community.

Indeed, in the gas and electricity example there is no clear direction for the Frenchman unless he has the premise how each of the Englishmen will do. Under this circumstance, the rational course of action for him is to follow the dominant strategy, that is, not to cooperate with the government directive.

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