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SMART

SMART, JOHN JAMIESON CARSWELL
(1920–2012)

J. J. C. (Jack) Smart was born on 16 September 1920 in Cambridge, England, to Scottish parents. His father, William Marshall Smart, was Professor of Astronomy at Cambridge University. Smart’s family returned to Scotland in 1937, when his father accepted a position at the University of Glasgow. The following year, Smart entered the University of Glasgow as an undergraduate. He served in the military from 1940 to 1945, and returned to Glasgow at the conclusion of World War II to earn his MA degree (in 1946). Two years later, he earned a B.Phil. degree at the Queen’s College, University of Oxford. For 2 years thereafter, he was a Junior Research Fellow at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Smart’s brothers, Alastair and Ninian, were also academics, the former in art history and the latter in religious studies.

In 1950, Smart moved to Australia to take a position at the University of Adelaide, where he remained for 22 years before moving to La Trobe University in Melbourne in 1972. Four years later, he took a position at the Australian National University in Canberra. He retired from ANU in 1985 and in 1999, at the age of 79, he returned to Melbourne to become Honorary Research Fellow at Monash University. Although Australia was Smart’s home for more than half a century, he held visiting professorships or fellowships at Princeton (1957), Harvard (1963), Yale (1964), Stanford (1979 and 1982), and Alabama (1990). From 1969 until his death on 6 October 2012 (at the age of 92), he was a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. In 1990, he was made a Companion in the General Division of the Order of Australia, and in 1991 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

Smart’s work in ethics—one of several philosophical fields to which he contributed—spanned half a century: in July 1950, at the age of 29, he published “Reason and Conduct” in the British periodical Philosophy, and at the age of 78 he published “Ruth Anna Putnam and the Fact-Value Distinction” in the same periodical (July 1999). Smart’s first publication on utilitarianism, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment,” came in 1954, in the form of a comment on an essay by C. S. Lewis. In 1991, Smart returned to the topic of punishment in the Israel Law Review with “Utilitarianism and Punishment,” an essay that contains his final statement of utilitarianism. During the nearly four decades in which he wrote about utilitarianism, Smart became, along with Richard B. Brandt, R. M. Hare, John Harsony, and Peter Singer, one of its foremost expositors and defenders.

According to Smart, “Utilitarianism is the view that the rightness of an action depends entirely on expected utility, that is on the sum of the utilities of its consequences weighted by their various probabilities” (Smart, 1991, p. 360). Smart’s utilitarianism was put forward not as true or correct, but as a systematization of feelings, arranged in the form of a hierarchy. He endorsed what he called a “non-cognitivist” view of ethics, “according to which ethical sentences do not express statements of fact, whether natural or non-natural, but rather express attitudes, or make prescriptions, rather as imperative sentences do” (Smart, 1984, p. 6). In a late essay, Smart was more specific, claiming that “ethical principles (which could be expressed in the imperative grammatical form) are the expressions of attitudes, not of beliefs about some realm of ethical fact” (Smart, 1991, p. 367). To Smart, there are no ethical facts. This is the main respect in which, in his view, ethics differs from science: “In science we are trying to fit our beliefs to the world. In ethics we are concerned to fit the world to our desires” (Smart, 1999, p. 437). This means, among other things, that “science is objective in a way that ethics is not” (Smart, 1981a, p. 18).
Because of his noncognitivist metaethical view, Smart disclaimed any attempt to prove, justify, or rationally establish his normative theory. All that can be done by way of defending utilitarianism, besides presenting it clearly, is to “refute various specious objections which have been and still are being brought against it” (Smart, 1980, p. 120). The hope is that one’s interlocutor will find the theory attractive as a systematization of his or her benevolent feelings. If a particular person does not find the theory attractive, then there is nothing else for Smart to say to him or her. As for what Smart himself found attractive about utilitarianism, two things stand out. First, “it is congenial to the scientific temper” in its “empirical attitude to questions of means and ends.” Second, it “has flexibility to deal with a rapidly changing world” (Smart, 1965, p. 349). Smart also admitted to having “a strong, passionate desire to see the world sub specie eternitatis” (Smart, 1993, p. 79). No particular time, place, or biological species is favoured by the theory. If a being is sentient, then it has moral status.

Utilitarianism can be understood as either a descriptive theory or a normative theory. The former seeks to describe or explain what Smart variously called “the common moral consciousness” (Smart, 1967, p. 208), “how the ordinary man ... actually thinks about ethics” (Smart, 1961b, p. 41), “common moral notions” (Smart, 1978b, p. 105), “the ordinary man’s moral beliefs” (Smart, 1978c, p. 288), and “our common ethical beliefs” (Smart, 1986, p. 25). The latter, by contrast, seeks to guide conduct. Smart took utilitarianism to be a normative theory. He was therefore unmoved by the claim that the theory conflicts with “the common moral consciousness.” If it did not so conflict, then “the acceptance of it as a normative system would have left most men’s conduct unchanged” (Smart, 1967, p. 209). The purpose of a moral theory (or system; note the title of Smart’s 1961 monograph) is not to get the world right, in the sense of correctly describing it, but to set it right, in the sense of changing it for the better.

Smart, like many utilitarians, was a bullet-biter. A typical criticism of utilitarianism has the form of a modus tollens argument: “Utilitarianism implies proposition p; p is false or unacceptable; therefore, utilitarianism is false or unacceptable.” Sometimes Smart grabbed the bull by the horns and denied the first premise, but more often than not he bit the bullet and denied the second premise. As he famously put it in his 1973 monograph (a revision of Smart, 1961b):

Admittedly utilitarianism does have consequences which are incompatible with the common moral consciousness, but I tended to take the view “so much the worse for the common moral consciousness.” That is, I was inclined to reject the common methodology of testing general ethical principles by seeing how they square with our feelings in particular instances (Smart, 1973, p. 68).

Smart believed that utilitarianism, when understood as a descriptive theory, is false. His counterexample was that of a desert-island promise to a dying man. The “common moral consciousness” would judge that the promise qua promise should be kept, but a utilitarian would judge that it should be broken, on the ground that breaking it would (on the facts given) maximize overall utility. Whether Smart was correct about descriptive utilitarianism being false is controversial. Some utilitarians, such as Henry Sidgwick, believe that all or most of common-sense morality can be accommodated or explained by utilitarianism. It should be noted that Smart did not reject all aspects of common-sense morality. It may be, for example, that by following the rules of common-sense morality, or even by inculcating the rules of common-sense morality in one’s children, one maximizes overall utility; but
if that is the case, then it is only an accident, morally speaking.

Smart’s method can be described as progressive, as opposed to conservative. There are, in general, two attitudes that one can take towards intuitions or considered moral judgements. The methodological progressive, such as Smart, accords intuitions no weight in his or her deliberations. The methodological conservative, by contrast, accords intuitions some weight (at the limit, infinite weight). John Rawls’s method of “reflective equilibrium” counts as a conservative method in this view, and it is no surprise that Smart rejected it, for the following reason:

The method of reflective equilibrium puts our feelings on a level [with one another], e.g. our feeling of benevolence may sometimes be in direct opposition to our feeling for justice, and both with our approval of promise keeping and truth telling. All these feelings are like various forces acting on a single particle in various directions and with various intensities (Smart, 1991, p. 368).

To Smart, an ultimate ethical principle such as utilitarianism is an expression of an over-riding attitude. In the case of utilitarianism specifically, the overriding attitude is generalized benevolence (Smart, 1977; 1986, p. 26). When other attitudes, such as the aforementioned “feeling for justice,” conflict with this attitude, they must be subordinated to it. Smart believed that the method of reflective equilibrium accords too much weight to intuitions, some of which may reflect bias, prejudice, superstition, or ignorance. Smart preferred to subordinate his intuitions to his normative theory, rather than the other way around.

Smart took sides on most of the issues that divide utilitarians. In 1956, he coined the terms “extreme” and “restricted” to describe what are now known (respectively) as act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism (by 1961, Smart had accepted the latter terms, which were coined by Richard Brandt in 1959; see Smart, 1961a, p. 134n). He pointed out as early as 1956 (echoing J. S. Mill) that act utilitarians can make use of rules. The difference between act utilitarians and rule utilitarians is not that only the latter make use of rules; it is that the theories accord a different status to rules. To an act utilitarian, rules are rules of thumb, designed merely to facilitate decision making, especially when there is insufficient time for deliberation. To a rule utilitarian, rules are more than rules of thumb; they have weight of their own in one’s deliberations. For example, both act and rule utilitarians can endorse a rule against torture. The act utilitarian will be willing to break the rule in particular cases, on the ground that some tortures maximize overall utility; the rule utilitarian will not.

Smart was eager to show that an act utilitarian may, and indeed will, live in accordance with rules (including, as we saw, the rules of common-sense morality). But he was also critical of rule utilitarians for viewing rules as more than rules of thumb. “Rule worship,” a (pejorative) term coined by Smart—sometimes termed “absurd rule worship” (Smart, 1991, p. 371)—consists in acting in accordance with a rule when it is clear that breaking the rule will maximize overall utility. In this respect, rule worship is a form of superstition, like religion.

Smart remained noncommittal on the question of what, precisely, is to be maximized by the utilitarian: pleasure, high-quality pleasure, pleasure plus something else, or the satisfaction of desires. He did much, however, to clarify the differences between, and to identify problems with, hedonistic, quasihedonistic, ideal, and satisfaction utilitarianism (see Smart, 1978a). On the question of whether the satisfaction of evil desires enters into the utilitarian calculus, Smart answered in the affirmative, but emphasized that evil desires are likely to be offset by the suffering they bring about (Smart, 1991, p. 361). Smart
preferred total utilitarianism to average utilitarianism (Smart, 1961b, p. 18), maximizing utilitarianism to satisficing utilitarianism (Smart, 1986, p. 28), and expected utility to actual utility (Smart, 1991, p. 360). The latter preference has the paradoxical consequences that (1) a person can act rightly while making things worse (indeed, much worse), and (2) a person can act wrongly while making things better (indeed, much better), for the consequences of our actions are not always as we expect, intend, or foresee them to be (see, e.g. Smart, 1961b, pp. 33–4.) Smart might have replied that these are acceptable consequences of his theory, for, as he repeatedly observed, “It can be expedient to praise an inexpedient action and inexpedient to praise an expedient one” (Smart, 1956, p. 347). The person who maximizes expected utility should be praised, even if the act turns out to have bad consequences, while the person who fails to maximize expected utility should be blamed (or at least not praised), even if the act turns out to have good consequences.

In 1961, following in the footsteps of Bentham (Smart, 1986, p. 37), but 14 years before the publication of Peter Singer’s important book Animal Liberation (1975), Smart proclaimed the moral significance of nonhuman animals. In 1980, perhaps emboldened by Singer’s work, for which he had high praise (see Pettit, et al., p. 192), Smart wrote:

I now think that the “perhaps of all sentient beings” should be much more uncompromising. It is a merit of utilitarianism, with its stress on happiness and unhappiness, that lower animals must be considered along with human beings, so that they are not debarred from full or direct consideration because they are not “rational” (Smart, 1980, p. 115).

The following year, in a discussion of the similarities and differences between ethics and science, Smart opined that “the increased attention to the sufferings of animals is one of the most notable examples of progress in ethics over the last hundred years or so” (Smart, 1981a, p. 2). Smart was always careful to add, when discussing the moral status of animals, that sentient aliens—should there be any!—must also be taken into account in the utilitarian’s deliberations (Smart, 1991, p. 361).

Some utilitarians, such as Sidgwick, believe that utilitarianism should not be propagated too widely, for “most people are not very philosophical and not good at empirical calculations” (Smart, 1956, p. 348; see also 1961a, p. 134; 1986, p. 27; 1991, p. 364). The rationale for this paradoxical belief is that people are more likely to promote overall utility if they focus on immediate or intermediate objects and projects, such as their families, friends, occupations, and communities. Smart took the opposite position: “I myself have no hesitation in saying that on extreme [i.e. act] utilitarian principles we ought to propagate extreme utilitarianism as widely as possible”—especially in the public realm. With the advent of nuclear weapons in the middle of the twentieth century, the world is a more dangerous place than it was in Sidgwick’s day. Nation-states now have the capacity to destroy entire peoples. Smart believed that “extreme utilitarianism makes for good sense in international relations” (Smart, 1956, p. 348).

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**Further Reading**


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See also ACT UTILITARIANISM; AGGREGATE AND AVERAGE UTILITARIANISM; ANIMALS; BENEVOLENCE; CONSEQUENTIALISM; EXPECTED UTILITY HYPOTHESIS; MAXIMIZATION; POLITICAL ECONOMY; RAWLS, JOHN; RULE UTILITARIANISM; SATISFICING; SINGER, PETER; TOTAL UTILITARIANISM; WILLIAMS, BERNARD.