8. MOTILAL SHASTRI'S "RULE UTILITARIANISM"

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ABSTRACT. Motilal Shastri developed an ethical theory which closely resembles rule utilitarianism at roughly the same time as and yet in complete independence of English-speaking philosophers. The philosophic significance of his view lies in the manner in which he develops and justifies his position. Shastri contends that efficiency in action requires indifference or inattention to ends. He appears to use the same device for justifying rule-governed duties that Mill uses to justify a move from egoism to altruism: that actions first viewed as means may later become ends in themselves. However, in Shastri's theory, ends appear to be retained as unconscious motives.

In the Introduction to his Satapatha Brahmana Bhasya, Motilal Shastri raises a question that is familiar to students of Western philosophy, and he provides an answer which readily lends itself to classification among the positions in recent ethical theory. Less familiar to Western scholars, however, is the setting in which his problem is posed; and, upon closer inspection, one finds that Shastri's answer exhibits features that are significantly different from standard Western accounts.

In general terms, the problem is posed by the opposition of teleological and deontological analyses of moral reasoning and judgment, and Shastri's answer takes the form of what is now called rule utilitarianism. This would not in itself be particularly noteworthy, perhaps, if it were not for the fact that Shastri's analysis was published in the late fifties, at a time when rule utilitarianism was only beginning to take hold in England and America. Indeed, the coincidence of these events seems especially remarkable, as there appears to have been no influence of the one upon the other. Rather, this seems to be one of those cases in which scholars, completely unaware of one another's work, were led to the same general conclusion by a consideration of essentially the same problematic concerns. The fact that the philosophers in question were on opposite sides of the globe, separated by differences in cultural heritage and philosophical style, seem to mark such an occasion as extremely rare.

Of course, in neither case were these authors presenting entirely new views. The rule utilitarians in the West were clearly expressing these embodied in the works of classical utilitarians such as Bentham and Mill. Shastri, likewise, found his theory implicit in the Vedic literature
and, like his Western counterparts, developed and refined what he received. But, certainly, the investigations of rule utilitarians in the West have uncovered aspects of traditional utilitarianism that were not fully appreciated, nor even fully recognized, in earlier interpretations of the theory, just as Shastri provides an explanation of how the apparently conflicting statements of the sages can be reconciled within a theory which he offers as a restatement of their views. In both cases, the originality of the authors lies in their clarification of earlier but less explicit positions, and in the details of the justifications they provide.

I

The teleological component in rule utilitarianism, quite obviously, is utilitarianism, and the deontological component, rules. Roughly, what rule utilitarians argue is that the rightness or wrongness of individual moral actions is determined by general moral rules, instead of holding, as so-called act utilitarians do, that individual actions should be judged according to their consequences, by direct reference to the principle of utility. In other words, according to the rule view, the justification of actions is supposed to be indirect, as reasoning proceeds from the principle to the rules, and then from the rules to particular actions, instead of applying the principle directly to the consequences of each particular act. This variation in the process of reasoning, of course, is also supposed to make a difference in the results obtained, by showing how utilitarianism can account for conventional rule-governed obligations which would appear to be violated if one reasoned or acted as an act utilitarian. For this reason, rule utilitarianism was supposed to meet the objections of deontological critics who maintained that, by appealing directly to consequences, utilitarianism was capable of justifying immoral acts.

Thus rule utilitarianism seems to capture the best of both worlds, reconciling the opposition between teleology and deontology by giving moral rules a utilitarian foundation. The characteristic feature of the theory is that it denies moral agents the option of appealing directly to consequences in attempting to justify their actions, but, instead, holds them bound by moral rules. This is precisely the point which Shastri makes in his analysis, and it is, therefore, the reason why I have labelled his theory "rule utilitarian". As to just why persons are supposed to be bound by rules and not consequences, however, accounts tend to vary, and it is in this respect that Shastri seems to present an original view.

On the other hand, Shastri is not explicitly a utilitarian in the technical sense, and there are aspects of his overall philosophical position which many would not consider to be utilitarian at all. For example, many utilitarians are naturalists, and even materialists, while Shastri includes in his account spiritual goals which seem to radically affect his analysis. He also tends to speak of elemental human motivation as being essentially egoistic in nature instead of considering any general obligation of benevolence. In this respect at least, he seems much closer to Hobbes. Yet, on the subject of motivation, even the classical utilitarians appear to be egoistic, and they are at pains to show why persons are bound by a general principle of benevolence, or even how they can be motivated by non-egoistic concerns. As a matter of fact, we shall see that the transition which Shastri makes from straightforward consequen-
tionalist considerations to the need for rule-governed behavior closely resembles in its reasoning the move which Mill makes from egoism to benevolence. In Shastri's case, the two moves may indeed coincide, as in Hobbes' philosophy, for, while human motivation may be regarded as fundamentally egoistic, at least some benevolent actions may be thought to be required by moral rules. And, among the utilitarians, Mill at least tries to distinguish higher and lower kinds of pleasure, counting intellectual pleasures among the higher, so that "spiritual" goals perhaps need not be ruled out of account. Indeed, if my interpretation of Shastri is correct, he believes that utilitarianism is not likely to work very well unless spiritual goals are included.

II

Motilal Shastri begins his investigation by noting that a Brahmana is one who studies the Vedic literature "without any immediate motive of utility" or "selfish interest". It seems that, at this point, he is not concerned with the supposed distinction between egoistic and benevolent motivation, or that, if he is, he comes down on the side of egoism. Since he speaks of utility and self-interest in the same breath, he is obviously not thinking of a utilitarian principle which prescribes the greatest good for the greatest number. But he does have in mind natural consequences and enjoyments, so that, in these respects, his theory is both consequentialist and at least broadly hedonistic, as the classical utilitarian theories tend to be. However, for the purposes of this paper, the more important consideration is that he tries to explain how the Brahmana can study without selfish motive, given the apparent fact that all behavior must be so motivated or "caused", and that his answer involves essentially the same insight as is expressed in rule utilitarianism.

As Shastri notes, the sages have proclaimed that the root of every action is always kamana, or motive, and that without motive there is no possibility of action. Motive or desire is supposed to attach itself to the fruit or utility of action, for gain is its basis. Therefore, it would seem that, in the natural world of space and time at least, there can be no action which is without a desire for gain. But how then is motiveless action (nishkama karma) possible? How can a Brahmana engage in intellectual tasks and at the same time adopt an attitude of indifference (nishkarana) towards the fruits of his work? Shastri's answer, naturally, is that it is impossible.

Or so it seems, for he then proceeds to draw a distinction between the selfish motives of the masses, who constantly strive for earthly goods, and the higher motives of those who adopt the transcendent attitude, seeking "eternal status and permanent solutions of (their) problems". The former type of person is said to be narrowly utilitarian in the sense that he has his eye on the fruit, whereas the latter suppresses his desire and acts out of obedience to the Vedic science. Shastri reminds us that his answer is in conformity with the teachings of the Gita:

Your responsibility lies in performing your duty and not attaching yourself to the fruit (or consequences); your action should not be merely for the sake of fruition, nor should you engage yourself in non-activity.
However, the distinction he draws appears to mark off merely two different kinds of motivation and not the difference between motivated and non-motivated behavior. Apparently both the masses and the Brahmana desire the fruit, but the Brahmana realizes that it can be attained only by following the path of *buddhi yoga*, which Shastri speaks of as "efficiency of action". But, later, he goes on to explain why he considers the latter path more efficient, holding that those who become absorbed in seeking immediate goals tend to ignore the most effective means (as outlined by the sages). Hence they do not achieve what they desire. The Brahmana, on the other hand, attains his goal, for he has his attention focused on the means. Therefore, while there appears to be a difference in the types of goal desired, the basic consideration seems to be the agent's focus of attention, on the one hand, and the corresponding efficiency of his action, on the other. The Brahmana is different from others, it turns out, not really because his behavior is unmotivated, but because he attends to actions which are effective means to his goal, instead of attending to the goal itself. He does not seek "immediate utility" but places his trust in the law.

If my interpretation is accurate, then, Shastri believes that a deontological type of ethics can be justified on the basis of teleological considerations, the latter being necessary to account for a natural human drive towards ends, and the former being necessary to mark off the domain of effective means. Indeed, the supposed necessity of rules appears to be based, partly at least, upon Shastri's rendering of the so-called paradox of hedonism, according to which those who consciously aim at producing pleasure by their actions are the least likely to succeed, whereas those who tend to follow the path of duty, without thinking of the consequences, will almost certainly enjoy their lives. The argument is valid, even if unsound, if, as Shastri appears to assume, one can act effectively only by following the rules which he has in mind, and if the pleasure-seeker is bound to be so absorbed in imagining his enjoyments as to ignore totally the means of attaining them. Even then, one might suppose, the narrow-minded hedonist might sometimes hit upon effective means, even if only by accident, and, in this introduction at least, Shastri does not explain why he thinks that the traditional rules, and only those rules, will work. 4

The types of goals which Shastri distinguishes seem to bear upon his argument, however, for one may suppose that it is not the material, external goods, which the masses seek, that are likely to be produced by inattention to goals, but, rather, the internal peace that comes from indifference to one's lot in life. Focusing upon the rules of righteousness, and acting according to them, may even accomplish this end necessarily, for it may be impossible to follow the rules properly without detachment. Shastri's distinction between transcendent and empirical consequences would seem to support this conclusion, although he also seems to think that obedience to the law will promote material prosperity as well. What he apparently has in mind is that the masses of men, who are anxious about their lot in life, are not psychologically disposed to appreciate even the goods they do receive, while the Brahmana can appreciate them fully, without concern. 5

In support of his position, Shastri also makes a technical distinction between actions and the consequences of actions. He quotes Krishna as saying that "Your rightful claim lies in action", for man, he continues, has no direct right over the fruit. This does not mean, he says,
that man should engage in action without intending to attain the fruit (as that has been ruled out as impossible), but that man has no control over the fruit. That is, he appears to mean that, although a person can choose his actions, he cannot choose the consequences of his actions, since he has no direct control over them. Those who are foolhardy, therefore, think they can choose to attain their goals without attending to the appropriate means. Indeed, according to Shastri’s psychological analysis and that of the Gita, the person who focuses upon immediate results lives a life of fancy and thereby becomes incapable of effective choice. The only reasonable alternative, he concludes, is to adhere to the prescribed ways of doing things laid down by the sages, instead of choosing acts which, narrowly conceived, merely appear to produce goods.

III

The main purpose of this paper has been to show that Motilal Shastri’s moral philosophy is structurally the same as rule utilitarianism, for he holds that persons are bound by moral rules directly and only indirectly by a consideration of the consequences. To act directly for the sake of consequences is wrong, he claims, because it creates a state of mind in which effective means are ignored, and hence ineffective actions are chosen. Of course, one would suppose that someone, at some time, must consider which kinds of actions are likely (if not certainly) to be effective, and that when one does, he himself must be detached from an immediate desire for gain. This is, I take it, the role of the sages, and it is perhaps worth pointing out that the detachment required for evaluating rules is itself a state of mind which the rules, or rule-governed behavior, is designed to produce. The sage can speak with authority on the means of attaining the goal, supposedly, as he is one who has attained it himself.

As I have noted above, Shastri’s strongest claim is that it is even impossible not to achieve the desired effect, if one follows the right path. He does not speak of probabilities. But if this is taken to mean anything more than that the right path simply is the path which produces the desired effect, it must be taken to mean that, by following the rules, one becomes disposed to accept the consequences, whatever they may be. Conformity to rules of whatever kind, I imagine, could not otherwise invariably produce good effects, for as even Shastri has noted, we have no direct control over the effects, and we cannot always predict them accurately, except, perhaps, within given ranges of probability. Thus I have argued that his theory can work only if material goods are subordinated to spiritual goals, as I believe he intends.

Shastri’s theory appears to have the advantage of not only combining the teleological and deontological points of view, but also of expressing what I take to be their major points of emphasis. That is, teleology, and especially utilitarianism, places its emphasis upon changing human circumstances in order to improve human life, whereas deontological accounts tend to emphasize the importance of improving human character. Shastri holds that a person of good character will be productive of more good, and more appreciative of the goods he receives, than the person who seeks the goods of life but does not follow the rules of right conduct. Plato, among others, presents a similar view in his Republic, as he maintains that only a person with an harmonious or heal-
thy soul can be happy, for the person who suffers emotional torment cannot be happy by any means.

On his main point, however, Shastri does not fully explain how it is possible to be motivated by ends and, at the same time, be indifferent to them. He says that one should attend to the rules which are the means of attaining the ends instead of attending to the ends themselves, but it would seem that one could not be motivated to follow the rules without having the ends in mind. If such motivation must always be present, as he maintains, then it must be present even when one attends to the law. What he needs, it seems, is an explanation of how persons can be motivated by ends without attending to them. He cannot be taken to mean that a person should attend to both ends and means at the same time, for the Brahmana is supposed to be indifferent to the results of his action. What he might mean is that he is indifferent to the consequences of his actions when acting, thinking that he would attend to the consequences at other times. But that would still leave him without motive when acting, which Shastri claims is impossible.

Hence the only solution, it appears, would be to hold that ends can motivate persons to act even when those ends are not explicitly or consciously in view. I believe that this is what Shastri means, and that it really is the case, for we frequently act for the sake of bringing about effects which we do not have in mind at the time of our action. A carpenter, for example, may be sawing a board in order to build a house, but he may not be thinking of completing the house while he is sawing, for he may be attending to the work at hand. We may suppose that he has learned how to saw and that he knows that the house will be constructed properly only if he saws according to the rules he has learned. It also seems true that he is likely to be more effective if he attends to his sawing instead of thinking about his ultimate goal--whether it is the house he is building, his pay check, or even the things he plans to do with the money he earns. But, of course, there are other times, when he is planning his actions, that he must think about his goals, so, it would seem necessary to distinguish the phase of moral reasoning in which we justify our rules of action from the phrase in which we act upon them.

The example just mentioned is, of course, just an example and not a philosophical analysis. It shows, if anything, that a person can be motivated to follow rules by desiring an end, and yet without having that end in mind at the time of his action. What it does not explain is how he can. For this purpose, I suppose, an analysis of human action and intention is required, such that the ends may be said to be somehow implicit in the actions which we choose or contemplate, without our explicitly intending them. However, the absence of such explanation does not invalidate Shastri's analysis, for, in order to make his point, he merely needs to show that such motivation is possible. The "how" of the matter is not so much a topic for moral philosophy as it is for philosophical psychology or the philosophy of action.

IV

The fact that Shastri has developed a form of what might be called rule utilitarianism, at roughly the same time as, and yet in complete independence from, English-speaking philosophers, is itself inter-
testing and noteworthy from an historical and comparative point of view. However, the original way in which he attempts to justify that view is philosophically even more significant. A number of philosophers have argued for similar conclusions, but none of them, to my knowledge, has offered precisely the same reasons in support of his claims.

There has been much talk, for example, about special logics, the requirement of universalizability, the need for conformity or at least coordination in action, or even how induction itself is productive of rules; but Shastri does not explicitly cite any of these reasons in support of rule-morality. He may have some such things in mind when he claims that obedience to rules is bound to be more effective, or that persons who ignore rules, acting according to their own individual calculations, are bound to go wrong. Indeed, at least one of the reasons he offers is not new, for it is part of the stock in trade of all deontologists: that persons in a state of high emotional pitch, eager for results, are not likely to reason well. Even teleologists, like Mill, have argued for a disinterested-spectator view.

But what is unique in Shastri's theory is his contention that efficiency in action requires indifference or inattention to ends. As I previously remarked, he appears to use the same device for justifying rule-governed duties that Mill uses to justify a move from egoism to altruism, for Mill holds that actions which are first viewed as means to ends may later become ends in themselves. However, on Mill's account, the original end not only ceases to be conscious but also appears to drop away entirely, whereas, in Shastri's theory, the original end seems to be retained as an unconscious motive. Therefore, it would appear that Shastri thinks of motivation as always ultimately egoistic, even if he also believes that it is advantageous to block such ends from view.

There are, of course, a number of other elements in Shastri's Introduction that are worthy of attention, although not all of them bear directly upon the topic of this study. For example, he uses a Humean-like analysis of the association of ideas to explain how the narrow-minded utilitarian substitutes imaginary goals for effective means. In fact, he develops from this analysis a theory of neurotic behavior which is fascinating in its own right. His investigation also reminds one of a number of "existential" writings, such as Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's, in his celebration of decisive action and his description of the jealousy or resentment of those who rationalize their indecision. Perhaps it is better to act decisively rather than to refrain from acting, but I do not see how this point in particular lends anything to Shastri's rule-view, for it does not follow that such action can be accomplished only by following moral rules. In any case, these subjects, as interesting as they are, are topics for another work.

ENDNOTES

1 This paper is based on Dr. I.C. Sharma's translation of the Introduction which he made available to me in manuscript form. The Introduction appears in Part I of Satapatha Brahmana Bhasya, published by the Rajasthan Institute of Vedic Research, Jaipur, India, 1958. The topic of the paper, in turn, was suggested to me by Dr. Sharma's remark that Motilal Shastri offers a solution to the apparent conflict between Kantian
and utilitarian ethics. I then read his translation and discovered that Shastri's proposal was remarkably similar to rule-utilitarianism.

2 As I go on to point out, the doctrine is not as new as the name, for the name was not in general use until the early sixties, although S. Toulmin, for example, presented a version of the theory in his *Place of Reason in Ethics* (1950), and J.O. Urmson attributed the doctrine to Mill in his "The Interpretation of the Moral Philosophy of J.S. Mill", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 1953.

3 Shastri, however, does not speak of the material and the spiritual as two separate realms, although he does make a distinction between them.

4 He does argue that some kind of discipline is required, but his argument is not specific enough to justify any one set of rules. In fairness, however, the same criticism may be made of other, Western versions of the theory.

5 "When the inspiring vital force is inactive", he asks, "how can he attain that peace which is the result of the conviction of duty, born of the vital force"? He then quotes the *Gita* as saying that there can be no happiness for a person who has no peace of mind.