

Rashdall, Hastings

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Hastings Rashdall (1858–1924) was educated at Oxford University. He taught at St. David's University College and at Oxford, among other places. He produced seminal works in history and theology. His most important contribution to ethics is his articulation and defense of ideal utilitarianism, which appears in *The Theory of Good and Evil* (1907) and *Ethics* (1913).

Rashdall's moral view comprises two elements: that “acts are right or wrong according as they do or do not tend to promote the greatest quantity of [general] good” (1913: 60; 1907 II: 1); and that there are four goods: virtue (loving and willing what is intrinsically good), intellectual activities, “various kinds of affection or social emotion,” and pleasure (1913: 69–70; *see* INTRINSIC VALUE; VALUE PLURALISM). The basic position is that an agent's act is right insofar as it tends to produce at least as much virtuous willing, intellectual activity, affection or social emotion, and pleasure for the aggregate as any other act she could have performed in her situation. He dubs this view “ideal utilitarianism” (*see* UTILITARIANISM).

Rashdall's defense of his value theory begins with an attack on Henry Sidgwick's hedonism (*see* HEDONISM; PLEASURE; SIDGWICK, HENRY). It attempts to show that virtue is good. Sidgwick holds that we are rationally required to maximize only net aggregate pleasure, that in rational agents recognition of this requirement produces a desire to do so, that satisfying this requirement may come at a cost to the agent, and that this sacrifice has no intrinsic value. It is, Rashdall contends, rare, if not psychologically impossible, to hold this set of propositions (1885: 215–22; 1907 I: 57–9; 1913: 63–5). The difficulty is that the “acceptance of rationalistic Hedonism kills and eradicates all those impulses upon which it has to depend for the practical fulfillment of its own precepts, by pronouncing that they have no true worth” (1907 I: 58). Indeed, it is “impossible to give any satisfactory reason for preferring the general pleasure to one's own unless we regard Morality [i.e., virtuous willing] as an end-in-itself, and an end of more value than pleasure” (1913: 65). Thus, in order to motivate agents to maximize net aggregate pleasure, Sidgwick has to admit that loving and willing the good is an intrinsic good and a good to a person.

The premises of Rashdall's argument do not obviously secure the claim that virtue is intrinsically good. Motivating agents to promote the greatest amount of aggregate pleasure seems to require only the belief that virtue is valuable. Securing this requires no departure from hedonism (Shaver 2013). In addition, Sidgwick might suggest that there are other and perhaps equally plausible ways to motivate agents to

do the right thing, for example, by educating their natural sympathies with the common weal.

Rashdall's other argument for his value theory is that it captures and explains commonsense moral judgments better than hedonism. Common sense condemns infanticide, "the extinction of life in the case of the old or the sick or the insane, and generally speaking, persons whose existence is a burden to the community," sexual indulgence outside monogamous marriage, and all but a few cases of divorce (1907 I: 96–7, 189, 197–200). These judgments are explained by the fact that the emotions of kindness and affection (love) are intrinsically valuable. It also condemns "even the most occasional act of deliberate drunkenness," lying in all but a select number of cases, and lack of humility (1907 I: 203, 192–6, 204–7). Such attitudes are explained by the fact that intellectual activities and virtue have intrinsic value. That pleasure has intrinsic value accounts for the commonsense intuition that we have obligations to nonhuman animals (1907 I: 213–15, 239).

One might balk at Rashdall's appeal to common sense. His attitudes regarding divorce, sexual relations, and drunkenness appear no different from certain of the "prejudices due to inheritance or environment or superstition" that he thinks dispensable (1907 I: 211), for example, that it is wrong to eat rat flesh. He might concede this, but argue that this strategy does not cast doubt on all his appeals to common sense. His views on veracity are plausible. Lying is problematic because it subverts the virtue of loving, pursuing, and communicating the truth, which promotes the good of rational cognitive activity (1907 I: 193–4). His view explains why we insist on veracity in our social relations: it promotes an attractive value, while explaining our intuitions about the conditions under which it is permissible to lie (e.g., where it is necessary to save a life or to promote a greater truth). The difficulty with hedonism is that it entails that "there would be no reason why we should resist that tendency to say (in matters of no importance), at any expense to Truth, what would be agreeable to the hearer" (1907 I: 192–3). This is not a terribly powerful argument, however, for it is not clear that we should care about lies regarding matters of "no importance."

Rashdall has a better argument. He notes that we believe that there are bad pleasures (e.g., pleasures of lust) and higher pleasures (e.g., intellectual pleasures) (1907 I: 72–3, 98–9, 294; 1913: 66–70). The hedonist cannot capture these judgments in a plausible way. At best, she can argue that we ought to favor so-called "higher pleasures" and disfavor so-called "bad pleasures" in practice, since this will produce more net pleasure over the long run. This is not a plausible explanation of our intuitions regarding bad pleasures in particular: we think them bad even when they threaten no ill effects (1913: 66–7). The best a hedonist can do here is challenge the intuition that so-called "bad pleasures" with no ill effects are bad. This may, however, be difficult to do.

Rashdall's case for ideal utilitarianism's theory of rightness begins by rejecting what he calls intuitionism, the view that "actions are pronounced right or wrong *a priori* without reference to their consequences" (1907 I: 80; *see* DEONTOLOGY). His attack sometimes relies on the claim that "right" means "that which promotes the

good” (1907 I: 138; 1913: 14). It is risky for Rashdall to give this argument. He rejects arguments defending hedonism appealing to the claim that “good” means “pleasure” on the grounds that “pleasure is good” is not a tautology (1907 I: 48; 1913: 16). One could reject his claim on the grounds that “right action is that which promotes the good” is not a tautology (Skelton 2011).

The more plausible version of Rashdall’s argument appeals to the allegedly self-evident propositions that “we should endeavour to secure as much as possible of ... [the] good ... for as many individuals as possible” and that it is “impossible to regard it as *right* to bring about what is not really *good*” (1907 I: 281; 1913: 53). The argument against intuitionism is designed to establish that these are the only self-evident propositions that survive scrutiny and that these support utilitarianism. The main rules of commonsense morality comprise, among others, rules of benevolence, purity, and veracity. One needs to appeal to consequences to make these rules more precise, to reconcile conflicts between them, and to determine exceptions, and in some cases (e.g., drunkenness) one needs to appeal to consequences to determine the nature of the act in advance of moral evaluation. Rashdall argues that if we must appeal to some outcomes in determining the rightness of an action, we must appeal to all the outcomes, and if we cannot know the morality of an action until we know all its outcomes, then outcomes are the only thing that determine the morality of an action (1907 I: 83–91; 1913: 51–60).

There are two problems with this argument. First, it is a non sequitur. It establishes only that promoting good outcomes is a necessary condition of right action. It shows that to determine the morality of an action we must determine its outcomes. It does not follow from this that outcomes are the only thing that matter. Prichard and Ross seem to agree, for example, that we ought to keep a promise just in case it produces good outcomes; however, they deny that this is the only factor that matters to the morality of promise keeping (see PRICHARD, H. A.; ROSS, W. D.). Nothing Rashdall says will convince them otherwise. Second, his argument is in tension with a view he holds about good states of consciousness. He admits that all valuable states of consciousness must contain some pleasure. “Value is not a feeling, but it cannot be recognized as attributable to anything in consciousness which can excite no feeling of pleasure in its possessor” (1907 I: 153–4; II: 37–8). Therefore, we must “be able to estimate their pleasantness before we can pronounce upon their value” (1907 II: 51). He does not infer from this that the value of a state of consciousness is due exclusively to the pleasure it contains (1907 I: 67). This seems to be in tension with his objection to intuitionism, which moves from the claim that it needs to appeal to outcomes to determine the morality of actions to the claim that outcomes alone matter. It seems unfair to block this move when it hurts value pluralism but to permit it when it helps to vindicate ideal utilitarianism’s theory of rightness. If in reply Rashdall says that commonsense morality points to resisting the inference in the case of value pluralism, the proponent of intuitionism may argue that commonsense points to resisting the inference in the case of moral requirements (Skelton 2011). *A fortiori*, the hedonist might modify Rashdall’s argument to his own benefit. When rejecting intuitionism, Rashdall argues that “if every act ought to realize some

good, the supreme end of all action must surely be to realize the greatest attainable good” (1913: 53). The hedonist might argue that if every valuable state of consciousness must possess some pleasure, then the supreme good must surely possess the greatest attainable pleasure.

Rashdall’s argument for ideal utilitarianism also involves showing that it can deflect objections that seem to impugn other forms of utilitarianism. He agrees with common sense that “if a very small sacrifice of good on the whole could secure much greater equality in its distribution, we should say that the sacrifice ought to be made” (1907 I: 265). On the face of it, this view is in tension with utilitarianism. To overcome the tension, one might argue that “equality of distribution is itself good” (1907 I: 266). Rashdall rejects this option on the grounds that a distribution is too abstract to count as a good. The better option is to hold that “a disposition and a will to distribute justly” is a good, which takes the form of a virtue (1907 I: 267). This allows him to explain on utilitarian grounds why it is right to produce a much greater equality in the distribution of goods at the expense of a very small sacrifice of other goods on the whole. The good of the disposition outweighs the loss of the other goods.

There are two problems with this suggestion. First, if equitable distributions have no worth, there appears to be little reason to think that a will to produce them has worth. Second, the suggestion conflicts with Rashdall’s view of the value of virtue, according to which virtue’s value depends on its promoting what has worth (e.g., intellectual activity) (1907 I: 59). He might instead support the commonsense view of justice by arguing that forgoing a small increase in (some) good on the whole in favor of greater equality in its distribution displays “kindness and goodwill for individuals” (1907 I: 268), and that this is a good. The virtue that promotes it would then be the will to prevent “extreme hardships” (Shaver 2013). The value of these things when exhibited in producing a much fairer distribution outweighs the loss of the other goods, making the promotion of such a distribution the right thing to do on ideal utilitarian grounds.

See also: DEONTOLOGY; HEDONISM; INTRINSIC VALUE; PLEASURE; PRICHARD, H. A.; ROSS, W. D.; SIDGWICK, HENRY; UTILITARIANISM; VALUE PLURALISM

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