Does Naturalism Imply Utilitarianism?

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Bernard Williams concluded his famous 1973 “Critique of Utilitarianism” with these words: “The important issues that utilitarianism raises should be discussed in contexts more rewarding than that of utilitarianism itself. The day cannot be too far off in which we hear no more of it.” But the day Williams looked forward to has not arrived. Indeed, since his essay was published there has been a nearly continuous debate over ever more sophisticated versions of utilitarianism. Part of the spur to the development of new versions of utilitarianism has been the widely felt, and widely commented upon, tensions between our received moral views and the apparent dictates of utilitarianism. The most common strategy that utilitarians adopt in the face of such tensions is to argue that when utilitarianism is properly understood and utility levels are accurately assigned and indirect effects are fully taken into account, the tensions vanish: it turns out that utilitarians recommend more or less what we thought all along. The other possibility, of course, is to acknowledge that the conflicts are real, and insist that utilitarian theory requires a revision of established moral views. Utilitarians often profess allegiance to this harder line, claiming that the theory gives us a solid foundation from which to criticize existing moral views as mere prejudices. Richard Brandt, for example, writes: “What we should aim to do is step outside our own tradition somehow, see it from the outside, and evaluate it, separating what is only the vestige of a possibly once useful moral tradition from what is justifiable at present.” Brandt, like many other philosophers such as R.M. Hare, believes that when we engage in moral theory, we must scrupulously avoid appeals to our current moral judgments, “even if this were to mean (as it does not) that we must end up as complete sceptics in the area of practice.” Still, despite this hard line, at the end of the day, there can be little doubt that Williams was correct when he wrote: “But, except for the well-established areas of sexual and penal reform . . . modern utilitarian theorists tend to spend more effort in reconciling utilitarianism with existing moral beliefs than in rejecting those beliefs on the strength of utilitarianism.”

In the same year that Williams’s “Critique of Utilitarianism” was published, Herbert Hart wrote in a similar anti-utilitarian spirit: “We are currently witnessing, I think, the progress of a transition from a once widely accepted
old faith that some form of utilitarianism, if only we could discover the right form, must capture the essence of political morality.” Hart may have been right that the old faith may not be as widespread as it once was, but there can be little doubt about its lasting appeal. As Philippa Foot has pointed out, this appeal is something felt even by the opponents of utilitarianism: “It is remarkable how utilitarianism tends to haunt even those of us who will not believe in it. It is as if we forever feel that it must be right, although we insist that it is wrong.” What explains this persistent and widespread belief that some form of utilitarianism must be right?

One element of utilitarianism’s lasting appeal is a supposed congruence between it and a modern scientific world view. In particular, utilitarianism, unlike rival moral theories, is often thought to be compatible with a metaphysics shorn of any mysterious, intrinsically normative properties which might stand outside of a physical, mechanistic nature. We may call this metaphysical view a form of naturalism, although there is a danger in relying on a term used in such different ways. We may use the term as Charles Larmore does: “Naturalism is the view that the world, as the totality of what is, consists solely of the physical and psychological phenomena that are the object of the modern natural sciences.” Most importantly, irreducibly normative features of the world are excluded on such a view. As Charles Pidgen writes: “Finally, naturalism is (in a loose sense) a reductive doctrine. Though there are moral truths (i.e. propositions) there are no peculiarly moral facts or properties (no distinctively moral states of affairs) over and above the facts and properties that can be specified using non-moral terminology.” It is important to emphasize that against this understanding of naturalism some authors have urged an expanded understanding of nature which includes irreducible normative elements.

This type of naturalism forms an important, although often unstated background from which utilitarianism gains much of its appeal. In particular, it informs the work of Richard Brandt and John Harsanyi, though not all utilitarians are naturalists in the sense intended here. G.E. Moore, to choose a prominent example, is well-known for having defended a non-naturalistic form of utilitarianism. The affinity between utilitarianism and naturalism may be surprising, since utilitarians purport to make objective, normative claims, and the very possibility of such claims is put in doubt by naturalism. Nonetheless, there is commonly thought to be a close relationship between naturalism and utilitarianism for the following reason. We can introduce utilitarian evaluations into a naturalistic picture of the world in two easy, and seemingly uncontroversial, steps. Put in rough terms, we first define each individual’s own good in such a way that she has a reason to pursue it, and then universalize each person’s concerns in such a way that everyone is directed to pursue the aggregate good of all individuals. To be compatible with naturalism, each