

## Moore as a Utilitarian: Conservative or Liberal?

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In the history of Normative Ethics, G.E. Moore has been recognized as a utilitarian philosopher. Though Moore is well known as a meta-ethicist who is claimed to have been chiefly engaged in the analysis of the language of morals, there are quite a few thinkers who have been deeply engaged in exploring his normative ethics, paying more attention to his short book *Ethics* and the last two chapters of his famous book *Principia Ethica*. Though Moore has nowhere labelled himself as a utilitarian, clear evidence of his stance as a utilitarian has been noted by many thinkers while reflecting on his views concerning morally right action. Some commentators argue that Moore has been basically committed to act-utilitarianism, some are of opinion that Moore's stance reflects more inclination towards rule-conformity, whereas some thinkers are of the opinion that both act and rule utilitarian elements are present in Moore's theory of morally right action. In this paper, based on Moore's arguments concerning necessity of following moral rules and his consideration of the possibility of the rule-free state of affairs, an attempt has been made to examine whether Moore's utilitarian approach can be interpreted as a liberal one or conservative in character. An intensive examination of Moore's ethical writings reveals that there is a tension between these two approaches in interpreting Moore's moral views. In the first section of the paper, Moore's utilitarian stance has been briefly discussed. In the second section, Moore's emphasis upon following moral rules as well as his guidelines concerning how to act in absence of any moral rules has been reflected upon. In third section, based on analysis of Moore's views expressed in previous sections, an attempt has been made to find out whether Moore can be designated as a liberal or a conservative utilitarian thinker.

### I

Thinkers deeply engaged in the study of Moore's Normative Ethics have noted that Moore has upheld utilitarian theory of right action in his *Principia Ethica* as well as *Ethics*. Though Moore has never referred to himself as a utilitarian, he has found justification in the utilitarian theory of right action. Utilitarianism, in his opinion, is fully justified in asserting that "right and wrong conduct must be judged by its results" and in "insisting that what is right must mean what produces the best possible results." (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 106) However, it is important to note that though Moore has accepted consequentialistic structure of utilitarianism,

he has been critical of classical utilitarianism because of its acceptance of hedonistic theory of value. As a consequentialist, Moore's objective has been to establish the rightness of an action on an objective basis, so also has been his objective behind rejection of hedonistic utilitarianism. To establish objectivity of moral judgment Moore has refuted subjective theories and the Divine Command theory arguing that the notion of moral oughtness is logically independent of anyone's approval- individual, society and God. (Moore, *Ethics*, 50-78)

In defence of his own stance, Moore has urged that implausibility of these theories can be easily established by showing that, of any action considered as right on the basis of approval – either of an individual / group / society / God, it can always be meaningfully asked: is the action right because he/she approves of it or “majority of mankind” approves of it or God approves of it? Or, do we/God approve of it because it is right? Moore has specifically rejected the Divine Command theory for standing “contrary to fact” on the ground that God's existence cannot be factually established while moral justification of an action depends on facts. To provide an objective basis to our moral judgment, in *Ethics*, Moore has urged to take into consideration actual consequences instead of action's “intrinsic nature” or “motive” or “the probable consequences” while determining its rightness. According to him, since moral justification of an action needs to be empirically ascertained, none of the above-mentioned criteria can be justifiably accepted. The criterion of right action must be objective in character and hence, we are required to focus on action's immediate actual consequences instead of its remote probable consequences to ascertain its moral justification, empirically. (Moore 99-101) With similar objective in view i.e. to retain objective basis of his utilitarian stance, Moore has found fault with classical (hedonistic) utilitarianism for restricting the best possible results to a limited class of good i.e. pleasure. According to Moore, utilitarianism as a theory does not imply that rightness or wrongness of an action should be assessed according to the degree to which it is a means to pleasure. Rather, the theory simply indicates that rightness of action is “something” which is conducive to “the good” and the latter may include many things besides pleasure. Moreover, according to Moore, classical utilitarianism fails to retain autonomy of ethics by defining “good” in terms of some natural criterion such as pleasure or happiness because while “good” is a non-natural term, pleasure is a natural term. To retain objectivity of the concepts “good” and “right”, Moore unlike many other utilitarian thinkers has also upheld agent-neutrality instead of altruism, in response to the question “who should be beneficiary of the good?” Moore's agent-neutrality is actually the outcome of his non-naturalism and consequent rejection of naturalism to ascertain autonomy of ethics. According to Moore's agent-neutrality, no individual has duty either to himself as such or any special duty to others as such. The fundamental duty is to maximize as far as possible the balance of good over evil for all conscious beings, contemporary and future. (Moore, “Review of Franz Brentano”, 116, 122) Therefore, the end, which Moore has proposed for his utilitarianism, is not some natural criterion such as pleasure or evolution, not the good of the agent or that of the others, but good

without qualification. In *Principia Ethica*, therefore, Moore has stated “I am morally bound to perform this action” is identical with “This action will produce the greatest possible amount of good in the Universe.” (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 147) If a moral agent ever decides to perform an action then the only justification consists in the fact that by this action “the greatest possible amount of what is absolutely good should be realised.” (Moore 96-102) Moorean version of utilitarianism, therefore, can be obtained if hedonistic utilitarian theory of right action is represented by substituting “good” for pleasure. Moore has noted three basic principles of human conduct to which utilitarianism as a theory is committed and has accepted these principles by substituting “good” for “pleasure”.

- The first principle is that “a voluntary action is right, whenever and only when no other action possible to the agent under the circumstances would have caused more good [pleasure]; in all other cases, it is wrong.” (Moore, *Ethics*, 13)
- The second principle is that voluntary actions are right or wrong because they maximize or fail to maximize good (pleasure). This principle emphasizes that the only right making characteristic is the maximization of good (pleasure), not any other result.
- The third principle suggest that the proposition that “an action is right because it maximizes good” if true, is true in all conceivable circumstances and all logically possible universe. The relation between rightness and the maximization of good is very much like that of a mathematical relation. Just as two times two necessarily equals four in any conceivable universe, no matter how that universe differs from the other one, likewise any characteristic which belongs to all right voluntary actions *would* belong to absolutely any voluntary action, which was right, in any conceivable universe, and *under any conceivable circumstances*. (Moore 26-27)

Ross has described Moore’s utilitarianism as “the culmination of all the attempts to base rightness on productivity of some sort of results.” In favour of Moore’s stance Ross argues “though other forms of utilitarianism could be false due to their natural or other-referential accretions, Moore’s utilitarianism could not be as it was one of their logical bases.” (Ross, *The Right and the Good*, 10,16) In the subsequent section, the place of act and moral rules ingrained in Moore’s utilitarianism has been explored to unravel if he has upheld a conservative or liberal position.

## II

As a utilitarian philosopher to achieve the goal of utilitarian morality, Moore has emphasized upon following moral rules in rule-governed situations and acting according to one’s own choices in those situations that are not governed by any generally established useful moral rules. In *Principia Ethica*’s chapter V “Ethics in Relation to Conduct” Moore has laid emphasis upon following moral rules and urges that unconditional allegiance to certain types of moral rules is necessary to

produce the greatest possible amount of the good in the universe. In this context, drawing our attention to a vast range of social and moral rules that we come across while determining our obligation, Moore has classified rules into four categories:

1. Moral rules considered as “generally useful” and “generally practised” under all possible conditions of society.
2. Moral rules considered as “generally useful” and “generally practised” under specific conditions of society.
3. Moral rules that are considered as merely “generally practised” such as certain customary rules prevailing in a society.
4. Moral rules that are newly proposed by philosophers and reformers which they claim to be “generally useful”

In response to the question “what we ought to do to promote the greatest possible amount of the good in the universe?”, Moore has urged that moral rules belonging to the category 1, ought absolutely always to be obeyed by every individual irrespective of their circumstantial and dispositional differences. The examples of such kinds of the rules are: “Do not commit murder”, “Do not steal”, “Do not break promises” etc. According to Moore, these rules rest on certain universal or widespread human desires i.e., “the tendency to preserve and propagate life and the desire for property”. These desires, in his opinion, are “so strong, that it would be impossible to remove them.” (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 157) Therefore, strict adherence to these moral rules fulfilling our universal desires is not only necessary for maintaining a civilized social order, but also become “necessary for the existence, in any degree, of anything which may be held to be good in itself.” (Moore 158) The utility of these rules, according to Moore, is more or less certain under all possible conditions of society. Like many other utilitarian thinkers, although Moore has been firm in following these universal moral rules, he has not considered these rules as inherently valuable. These rules are valuable because by elevating our universal desires, they are expected to pave our way to attain certain things in life that are considered as intrinsically valuable.

Unlike the rules belonging to the category 1, the rules belonging to the category 2, according to Moore, cannot be considered as good as a means in every state of society. The conditions on which utility of these rules depend are “more or less likely to alter” based on circumstances relative to a certain period of time or certain societies. (Moore 158) Moore has taken example of the rules regarding chastity as belonging to this category. Rules regarding chastity, as he notes, requires for its justification “necessary existence of sentiments such as conjugal jealousy and paternal affection” and it is very much possible to imagine a civilized society without these sentiments. (Moore 158) These rules, however, ought to be followed by all in those societies where these sentiments are sufficiently strong. The utilitarian justification behind following such moral rules consists in the fact that by following them more goodness can be produced in the universe than by not following so and violation of such rules are likely to produce evil effects other

than social disintegration.

Although Moore has assigned a separate moral status to the rules belonging to the category 1 (regulating our universal desires) and category 2 (regulating our non-universal or contingent desires), he has not made any significant difference between them in practice in *Principia Ethica*. He has tried to minimize the gap between these two types of moral rules arguing that due to limitations of human knowledge, finding out the justification of the rules regulating our universal desires in respect to every state of society would be an impossible task. Hence, like the latter type of rules these rules can also be “defended owing to results which they produce only in particular states of society.” (Moore 159) This is because based on their results within limited available circumstances, utility of such rules become more obvious. According to Moore, both the rules fulfil the criterion of a valid moral rule being “generally useful” and “generally practised” and hence, always to be obeyed either in all societies or in a particular society, respectively. As he writes, “the individual... can be confidently recommended always to conform to rules which are both generally useful and generally practised.” (Moore 164)

In *Principia Ethica* in a rule-utilitarian spirit, Moore has argued that generally established moral rules should not be violated even if violation of a such rule particularly in his own case would bring more good than obeying it because violation of any such rule in general would generate bad consequences. Moore has advanced following arguments in support of his stance:

- a) If following any moral rule proves to be useful in most cases, then there remains a large probability that breaking it in the present case will be wrong.
- b) We can predict only feebly the consequences of our action and hence, it is doubtful that an individual’s judgment in favour of violation of an established moral rule in a particular case would be a correct one.
- c) An individual’s decision to break a “generally useful” and “generally practised” in his own case is likely to be biased by his strong desire for “one of the results which we hope to obtain by breaking the rule.” (Moore 162)
- d) Breaking of a “generally useful” and “generally practised” moral rule may destroy stable social order instilling within people the habit of overriding established moral rules, even in cases that are not exceptional, for their own benefit. (Moore 164)

Moore’s stance regarding strict adherence to “generally useful” and “generally practised” moral rules clearly indicate that he has not considered valid moral rules as mere “rules of thumb”.

Besides the above-mentioned valid moral rules, as has been already noted, Moore has talked about more two types of moral rules – “rules which are generally practised but not useful” (Rule 3) and “rules of which the general observance would be useful but does not exist” (Rule 4). Moore has strongly urged that unlike

valid moral rules, of such rules “no such universal recommendations can be made” (Moore 164) It should be noted that though Moore has argued against blind adherence to any and every moral rule that is “generally practised” (Rule 3) in a society, he has noted that in many societies, there is a “strong probability in favour of adherence to an existing custom (i.e. a generally practised rule), even if it be a bad one.” (Moore 164) For example, “in a society where certain kinds of theft are the common rule, the utility of abstinence from such theft on the part of the single individual becomes exceedingly doubtful, even though the common rule is a bad one.” (Moore 164) Though Moore has acknowledged that an individual is justified to violate such rules if his “power of judgment” demands so, he has expressed his doubt over the general usefulness of breaking such rule due to limitations of our knowledge concerning the causal connections regarding human conduct. The utilitarian justification that Moore has offered in defence of his stance is that in case of rules that are bad, but socially recognized, the decision for violation must be taken by making a comparative estimate of the value of the consequences of following the existing rule with the consequences of following a newly proposed rule, replacing the existing one.

So far as rules belonging to the category 4 i.e. newly proposed moral rules are concerned, Moore has been very much against the formation of any such new rules by the moralists or reformers. According to him, these newly proposed rules commonly suffer from at least one of the three possible defects due to which their general utility becomes difficult to establish. The defects, as pointed out by Moore, are:

- The actions required by the newly proposed moral rules are “impossible for most of the individuals to perform by any volition.”
- The conditions under which a newly proposed rule, when followed universally, can produce good effects do not exist.
- The usefulness of any newly proposed moral rule rests on conditions that are likely to alter or more desirable to change rather than observing the proposed rule. Furthermore, general observance of the rule might destroy the conditions on which its utility depends.

Moore, furthermore, urges that these newly proposed moral rules are of a conflicting type and since arguments can be found both for and against them, hence there remains extreme improbability that by following any such moral rule, utility of an action can be correctly established. He notes that these newly proposed moral rules that are urged upon us by moralists as universal duties, refer to “actions which for persons of a particular character and in particular circumstances, would and do lead to a balance of good.” Having noted the difficulty of universalizing these moral rules, Moore strongly asserts that even though it is possible to identify the particular circumstances that would render certain kinds of actions for certain kinds of people, it would be difficult to implement these rules as universal moral law, which “would be desirable for everyone, or even for most people to follow”

(Moore 165)

Besides dealing with how a moral agent ought to act with reference to four categories of moral rules in hypothetical situations, Moore has drawn our attention to the situations that are not rule-governed. In such situations, according to Moore, an agent should guide his choice simply “by a direct consideration of the intrinsic value and vileness of the effects which his action may produce.” (Moore 166) In this context, he has suggested us to follow three practical guiding principles to maximize actual good consequences:

- The first principle suggests that more good can be attained if a moral agent acts “by following his natural inclination” instead of neglecting it.
- The second principle tells us that actual good can be maximized if a moral agent while acting according to his choice, limits the range of his moral concern instead of focusing on “more extended beneficence”. This implies that actual good consequences can be maximized if we focus on the immediate and foreseeable effects of actions on us and on those with whom we are intimately connected, rather than on strangers.
- The third principle suggests that actual good consequences can be maximized if a moral agent while acting according to his choice aims at immediate and secured goods instead of striving for a remote, but potentially greater good. The justifications that Moore has offered in favour of following this principle are: 1) Attainment of remote, but potentially greater good is uncertain, 2) Future good does not necessarily imply greater good, likewise, present good does not necessarily imply lesser good, 3) Whatever is considered as good in itself at a particular period would retain its same value as “a thing of the same kind” in future. As Moore writes, “a thing that is really good in itself if it exists now, has precisely the same value as a thing of the same kind which may be caused to exist in the future.” (Moore 167)

According to Moore, the moralists who propose new moral rules, they do so under the presupposition that “in the matter of actions or habits of action, usually recognized as duties or virtues, it is desirable that everyone should be alike” (Moore 165), whereas he himself believes that an individual can act more virtuously if instead of trying to act like others, he tries to act according to his own special capacity. In defence of his stance, Moore argues that just as in case of employment following “the principle of division of labour according to special capacity” would produce better results likewise, while performing duties or acting virtuously, everyone should act according to his special capacity. (Moore 166)

The ongoing discussion notes that on the one hand, Moore has emphasized upon strict rule-conformity, whereas on the other hand he has emphasized upon acting according to one’s natural inclination, desires and interests in situations that are not rule-governed. Based on Moore’s prescriptions regarding how a moral agent ought to act in a rule-governed as well as rule-free atmosphere, an attempt has been made in the subsequent section, to examine if Moore can be designated as a

libertarian or conservative.

### III

There is a controversy among Moore's commentators regarding the interpretation of his stance as a progressive or conservative one. Bertrand Russell, Baldwin, Hutchinson have criticised Moore as a conservative thinker, whereas Tom Regan, William Shaw have tried to defend Moore's stance against moral conservatism. In my observation, tension between conservative and liberal approaches can be noted in Moore's utilitarianism due to his appeal for strict rule-conformity to "generally useful" and "generally practised" moral rules, on the one hand, and his prescriptions for a moral agent to act according to his own natural desire or interests in rule-free situations, on the other. Moore's unbreakable allegiance to moral rules reflects his conservative outlook, whereas his recognition of rule-free situations reflects his liberal outlook. However, based on his answer to the question concerning what we ought to do - to produce the greatest possible amount of the good- an attempt has been made to examine if his ethical stance is more inclined to conservatism or liberalism.

In *Principia Ethica*, while demanding for unbreakable allegiance to certain moral rules, Moore has neither argued for the reformation of existing moral rules nor has he provided appropriate utilitarian justification for following these rules. He has tried to justify strict adherence to moral rules belonging to the categories 1 and 2 on the ground that these rules are "widely practised" and fulfil desires of human beings, universally nurtured either in all conditions of society or in particular conditions of society. But, offering a utilitarian justification for following a moral rule demands taking into consideration impact on the society's well-being ensuing from clinging to that particular moral rule. From the fact that any rule is widely practised in a society, it does not necessarily follow that the rule would prove to be beneficial for the society. Brian Hutchinson has objected to Moore's unconditional compliance to "generally useful" and "generally practised" moral rules arguing that rules belonging to this category, are not followed by all societies in one identical form; different societies observe different versions of the same rule due to varieties of circumstances. Moore's emphasis upon unconditional compliance to these rules has ignored this peculiar factor.

Apart from lacking utilitarian justification, Moore's appeal for unbreakable compliance to "generally useful and generally practised" moral rules, also reflects his lack of faith in the virtue and intellect of the individual members of the society. A virtuous and intelligent individual has ability to call forth new practices breaking the old ones after thorough scrutiny of the peculiarities of circumstances even under a rule-governed social system. Moore, unlike a progressive thinker has ignored the fact that even well-established moral rules may call for "conflicting courses of action" depending on peculiarities of circumstances. Based on circumstantial differences, rules that has once been recognized as "generally useful

and generally practised” for the preservation of civilization, might turn out as harmful for the civilization itself. For example, the rule against killing, recognized by Moore as a “generally useful and generally practised” moral rule, might prove as a threat to the preservation of civilization under special circumstance. Though strict adherence to moral rules is essential for maintaining harmony, trust and coordination among the members of the society to ensure social well-being, blind adherence to them might cause irreparable damage to the concerned person or humanity at large in certain exceptional cases. Hence, it is desirable that a moral agent must be vigilant both in the cases of following and breaking moral rules. The decision must be taken keeping in view the progressive development of society. Moore’s demand for unbreakable allegiance to “generally practised” and “generally useful” moral rules leaves no scope for application of an individual’s intellect while adhering to any existing moral rule. In *Principia Ethica*, as it has been already noted, Moore has expressed his worry over allowing an exception to “generally established and generally practised” moral rules on the ground that dishonesty and negligence might get into the system. He worries that greater the number of exceptions i.e. more the people are allowed to override established moral rules and act on their own judgment, less frequently the rule will be observed; consequently, the more difficult it would be to maintain a stable social order. Moore’s mistrust over intellect and virtuous character traits of a moral agent has been reflected through his assumption that in breaking a “generally useful” and “generally practised” moral rule, the concerned agent may be guided by his selfish interest. Due to lack of clarity of thought and biased approach, he may fail to take adequate measures to safeguard himself against partiality in decision making. As Moore writes, “[I]t is impossible to keep his intellect and sentiment so clear, but that if he has once approved of a generally wrong action, he will be more likely to approve of it also under other circumstances than those which justified it in the first instance.” (Moore 163)

Tom Regan and William Shaw have tried to defend Moore’s stance against moral conservatism arguing that Moore’s suggestion for unconditional compliance to “generally useful and generally practised” moral rules do not cover all cases. They are few in number. ( Regan, T, *Bloomsbury’s Prophet*, p.236 )<sup>1</sup> Regan argues that Moore’s refusal to accept any new rules proposed by moralists actually reflects his liberal perspective because by discouraging the formation of new moral rules, Moore has intended to ensure individual freedom by lessening the burden of following moral rules. In response to Regan’s interpretation, it can be argued that Moore’s refusal to form any new “generally useful” rules has overlooked that any society’s sense of imperfection always remains associated with the formation of its rules. Hence, liberal utilitarian consideration demands that there should be scope for the reformation, reformulation and replacement of existing moral rules keeping in view progressive development of the society. On the contrary, conservative outlook resists careful scrutiny of the generally practised and established moral rules of the society.

Moreover, if we closely examine Moore's views concerning rules belonging to the category 3 i.e. "generally practised" moral rules, interpretation of Moore as a liberal thinker becomes difficult to accept. Moore has acknowledged in his *Principia Ethica* that from the fact that certain rule is "generally practised" in society, it does not necessarily follow that the rule would be a good one. Hence, if an individual while deliberating on the alternatives notes that instead of following a "generally practised" bad rule, breaking it will produce more good in the universe, he is justified to break the rule. In this context, taking example of a society where the rule of theft is "generally practised", Moore writes, "In a society where certain kinds of theft are common rule, the utility of abstinence from such theft on the part of a single individual becomes exceedingly doubtful, even though the common rule is a bad one. There is, therefore, a strong probability, in favour of adherence to an existing custom, even if it be a bad one. But, we cannot, in this case assert with any confidence that this probability is always greater than that of the individual's power to judge that any exception will be useful; since we are here supposing certain one relevant fact- namely, that the rule, which he proposes to follow would be better than that which he proposes to break, if it were generally observed. Consequently, the effect of his example, so far as it tends to break down the existing custom, will here be for the good." (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 164) (Emphasis added)

But, immediately after asserting so, Moore has expressed his doubt over the fact whether replacement of a "generally practised" bad rule by any newly proposed "generally useful" rules would be really better. He has tried to justify his doubt arguing that "The cases where another rule would certainly be better than that generally observed, are ...very rare." (Moore 164) Moore's statements reflect his reluctance to break a bad rule unless it can be replaced by a good one. Breaking a "generally practised" bad rule merely on the ground that it is a bad practice has not received due consideration in his writings. Moore's doubt over finding a better rule replacing the existing bad one, indicates his apprehension of a kind of society, where a bad rule is "generally practised" by all the members and as a result, anyone's unwillingness to stick to that particular rule in that society might prove harmful. (Begam, *Ethics of G.E. Moore: Theory and Practice*, 172) In response to Moore's such an attitude, Hasna Begam has expressed her disappointment urging that Moore's conformity to "generally practised" and "generally useful" rule in a society is understandable, but his conformity to "generally practised" bad rule is really odd. (Begum 172) Moore's above-mentioned statements, suggest that individual initiative has no value unless supported by collective initiative, and thus, he has given primacy to society's judgment over individual judgment.<sup>2</sup>

In my observation, unlike a liberal thinker, Moore has failed to notice that constructive injury to society is essential for its progress and no such injury can be brought to society unless someone, or a group of individual, has taken plunge to break the barrier - existing in the form of bad custom. His reluctance to break a "generally practised" bad rule until a "generally useful" better rule is discovered,

has actually neglected an important factor i.e. importance of constructive individual initiative for the creation of social good. Moore has overlooked long-lasting impact of the individual initiative to follow a newly proposed moral rule, discarding the existing one. Hence, in this context, it can be argued that unlike a progressive thinker, Moore has preferred to maintain status quo, acknowledging uncertainty of the benefit of replacing a “generally practised” bad rule by a newly proposed “generally useful” moral rule.

In defence of Moore’s stance, however, one might argue that since due to our epistemological limitations, we are unable to know with certainty, utility of any rules except those that are “generally useful” and “generally practised”, hence, to abide by rules that are only “generally practised”, and not to follow “newly proposed moral rules” is justified. But such a defence is untenable one because our epistemological limitations can in no way rationally justify clinging to a bad custom.

However, it has also been noted that though Moore has argued for unbreakable allegiance to “generally useful and generally practised” moral rules, moral rules have not been admired by him in a complete rule-utilitarian manner. He has made a significant departure from his rule-oriented approach by accommodating within his utilitarian framework existence of situations not governed by any such moral rule. In such situations, instead of waiting for the new rules to come up and regulate the decision making process, Moore has asked each individual “to guide his judgment” – by directly appealing to the consequences which his action may produce. (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 166) Moreover, in *Principia Ethica*, Moore has contradicted his own rule-oriented approach acknowledging that due to epistemological limitations and variety of circumstances, no moral rule can be established like scientific laws. Formulation of scientific law requires adequate knowledge of possible intervening variables that might intervene. But moral science fails to fulfil such epistemological requirement due to certain limitations. Due to the unique character of each circumstance, what is recognized as a duty in a particular circumstance fails to be recognized so in another. Consequently, at most, it can be argued that following a rule would produce the greatest good “in most cases”, not “in all cases”. As Moore writes, “We can only hope to discover which among a few alternatives, will *generally* produce the greatest balance of good in the immediate future. We can secure no title to assert that obedience to such commands as “Thou shalt not lie” or “Thou shalt do no murder”, is *universally* better than the alternatives of lying and murder.” (Moore 154)

Hence, in his view, at best we can formulate moral laws like scientific predictions that are never more than probable. (Moore 155) Though in *Principia Ethica* Moore has demanded unconditional compliance to moral rules that are recognized as both “generally useful” and “generally practised”, in *Ethics* he has refrained from talking about rule-conformity. In the latter work, he has discarded his strict allegiance to moral rules arguing that it is extremely unlikely that any moral rule can be either “absolutely *always* be right or absolutely *always* wrong.” Moreover,

he criticized an old said dictum “justice ought to be done, even though the heavens should fall” arguing that “generalization which is true for (one state of society) will not be true of another.” (Moore, *Ethics*, 22) Thus, Moore stands against any such assertion that there are certain *kinds* of action which ought absolutely always and quite unconditionally to be performed or avoided. He has adopted such stance regarding all moral rules without mentioning any category. As he writes, “[I]n the case of most of the ordinary moral rules, it seems extremely unlikely that obedience to them will absolutely always produce the best possible results. And most persons who realize this would...be content to accept them as general rules, to which there are few exceptions, without pretending that they are absolutely universal.” (Moore 92-93)

As a utilitarian, Moore has thus acknowledged in his *Ethics* that moral rules are not unfailing, inviolable directives. That means, it would be too much to claim that all the effects of following a moral rule would be good always. At most, it can be argued that the rules should be always obeyed for the greatest general good unless the general obedience to the rule is likely to generate wrong consequences. (Moore 94)

The ongoing discussion reflects prevalence of tension between liberal and conservative approaches in Moore’s views concerning ethics of human conduct. However, if Moore’s stance is minutely examined, his conservative approach seems to be more prominent. In this context, it should be noted that though Moore has accepted “generally useful” and “generally practised” as two criteria of valid moral rules, the latter criterion has received more importance in his writings than the former. He has clearly expressed his worry over violation of any well-established or “generally practised” moral rules even if the rule is recognized as a bad custom, whereas he has refused to accommodate any newly proposed moral rules within his system even though moral reformers claim these rules to be “generally useful”.

Moore’s commitment to agent-neutrality though apparently exhibits a liberal approach, in the ultimate analysis it poses difficulty in interpreting Moore as a liberal thinker. Moore’s agent-neutrality argues that unlike the rightness of action, “the good” once so recognized, should be considered so always for all recipients, irrespective of their nature and circumstances. (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 166) But his refusal to attach any personal sense to “the good” or “bad” has given rise to certain theoretical and practical difficulties. Hutchinson notes that Moore’s refusal to accept any individual or a group of individual as “beneficiary” of “the good” fails to explain satisfactorily benefit as well as harm experienced by individual moral agents having different dispositions. (Hutchinson, *G.E. Moore’s Ethical Theory: Resistance and Reconciliation*, 139) Though in *Principia Ethica* Moore has acknowledged that there are dispositional differences among moral agents, (Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 166) his agent-neutrality has overlooked that individual with different dispositions will not be moved by similar instances of good and bad. Moore’s commitment to agent-neutrality, therefore, stands against

any interpretation of him as a liberal thinker because while a liberal social approach encourages diversity in thoughts, actions, and goals, conservative social approach demands uniformity in our action and pursuits.

### Conclusion

To conclude, it can be argued that though both conservative and liberal trends are present in Moore's writings, his approach regarding the observance of moral rules concerning ethics of human conduct has been conservative in character. Though Moore has acknowledged importance of acting according to one's natural inclination and interests - in cases that are not rule-governed, unlike a progressive thinker he has not considered exercise of intellect as an essential requirement for adhering to any moral rule. Rather, he has emphasized upon unbreakable allegiance to moral rules and allowed for exercising one's intellect only in the situations that are not governed by any valid moral rule. Furthermore, though Moore's commitment to agent-neutrality and rejection of subjectivism as well as Divine Command theory to retain objectivity of rightness of action reflects his rational outlook, Moore's worry over replacing an existing moral rule by introducing a newly proposed one, reflects his reluctance for moral reformation and thereby represents his eagerness to maintain status quo.

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<sup>1</sup> William Shaw has also argued in this line. Shaw, *Moore on Right and Wrong: The Normative Ethics of G.E. Moore*, pp. 86-187.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Hardin and William Shaw have noted this point. Shaw, *Moore on Right and Wrong: The Normative Ethics of G.E. Moore*, p.151; Hardin, *Morality within the Limits of Reason*, p.16.

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