

13.3 Rights and Wrongs (a) (p. 330)

More Bad Promises

PLATO CONSIDERS THIS EXAMPLE: a friend has left his weapons with you (and we could imagine, though Plato does not add this, that you've promised to return them when he asks for them); but later on, when he has clearly gone insane, he asks for them back. Should you give them back?¹

The Strange Case of Admiral Byng

HERE'S A CASE IN which utilitarianism seems to give us the wrong answer. It's a real case from history:

In 1756, the French, under the Duc de Richelieu, took Minorca from the English—the English fleet, under Admiral Byng, retiring before the French. Paris went mad with joy. Britain forgot her traditional love of fair play, and wreaked her bitterness at being beaten on her native element, not on the blundering ministry who had commanded him impossibilities, but on Admiral Byng himself ... [who was] arraigned on a charge of treason and cowardice.... Byng was shot on March 14, 1757, and his defender, the author Voltaire, added to his novel *Candide* an immortal phrase, “In this country [England] it is as well to put an admiral to death now and then, to encourage the others.”²

Executing poor Admiral Byng may well have led to an overall increase in the general welfare by “encouraging” the other admirals. Maybe they tried harder as a result, and England fared well. But you probably agree with Voltaire, who is of course being ironic in his assessment of the English policy: the English here acted grossly immorally.

A QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT: Can you see how Rule Utilitarianism might come to the conclusion that this execution was wrong?

FOR FURTHER READING: A consideration of what the case of Admiral Byng might show about utilitarianism can be found in “Professor Stevenson, Voltaire, and the Case of Admiral Byng,” by David Braybrooke, *Journal of Philosophy* 53 (1956): 787–95.

¹ *Republic*, Book I.

² S.G. Tallentyre, *Voltaire in His Letters, Being a Selection from His Correspondence* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1919).