

Utilitarianism and religion: notes

Michael Lacewing

Three basic ideas of utilitarianism

1. Actions are to be judged solely by their consequences.
2. In looking at the consequences, only happiness is relevant.
3. No one's happiness counts more than anyone else's.

But what is happiness?

1. Bentham: (any) pleasure; the amount of happiness is the sum of pleasure over pain.
2. Mill: Not all pleasures are equal – 'higher' pleasures, which relate to our faculties of intellect, feeling, and imagination, are much more important. The development of these faculties is central to happiness.
3. Preference utilitarianism: the satisfaction of preferences (getting what you want).

The first big objection

1. Not all pleasures or preferences count equally. Some are immoral. Some do not make us 'truly' happy.
2. Religion: happiness that does not take account of the spiritual dimension of human beings, their relationship to God, is not a good theory of happiness.
3. Can utilitarianism work if we use a better theory of happiness?

The second big objection

1. A consequence of utilitarianism is that individuals are replaceable; and the ends justify the means
2. Utilitarian response: it is important to human happiness that individuals are treated as individuals. So actions which ignore this cause unhappiness.
3. But this misses the point: it is not happiness that has worth, but individuals. Making one person unhappy to make other people happy isn't wrong because it doesn't succeed in creating the greatest happiness. It is wrong because of how it treats the individual.

Religious ethics

1. There are clear connections between utilitarianism and religious ethics. For example, loving someone involves wanting them to be happy. And both "Love others as you love yourself" and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is an exhortation to count other people's happiness equal to your own.
2. However, religion has also tended to concentrate on some people, e.g. the poor and disenfranchised, more than others. The weak come first. Not everyone is equal.
3. Religious ethics also places much more stress on the motives and psychological state of the moral agent (Matthew 5.28, 16.26). And it places more worth on individuals as individuals. As a result, it is traditionally connected more to deontology and virtue ethics.