ABSTRACT. Two ideas have dominated ethical thought since the time of Bentham and Kant. One is utilitarianism, the other is an idea of moral agency as self-governance. Utilitarianism says that morality must somehow subserve welfare, self-governance says that it must be graspable directly by individual moral insight. But these ideas seem to war with one another. Can we eliminate the apparent conflict by a careful review of what is plausible in the two ideas? In seeking an answer to this question I examine (1) the implications of welfarism, (2) the nature of moral obligation (3) the nature of our moral knowledge.

KEY WORDS: blame, moral obligation, moral knowledge, self-governance, utilitarianism, welfarism

1. INTRODUCTORY: WELFARISM AND SELF-GOVERNANCE

Two ideas have dominated ethical thought since the time of Bentham and Kant. One is utilitarianism, the other is an idea of moral agency as self-governance. Utilitarianism says that morality must somehow subserve welfare, self-governance says that it must be graspable directly by individual moral insight. But these ideas seem to war with one another.

The conflict is obvious if one takes utilitarianism in its objective and act interpretation. For, on the one hand, the self-governance idea says that moral agents are able, through their own conscientious reflection in any situation in which they find themselves, to work out their concrete moral obligations. By a concrete moral obligation I mean one so presented as to give practical guidance to the agent – presented in a way that can prompt action. The capacity for personal and practical knowledge of one’s concrete moral obligation is fundamental to the idea of self-governance. On the other hand, the thesis of objective act utilitarianism says only that it is always obligatory to do an action that has the best outcome for welfare. On that view you can know in general terms that your obligation is to maximise welfare, but in most specific cases you cannot know which of your possible actions actually do that. You cannot know your concrete moral obligation: knowing that you ought to maximise welfare you still do not know what to do.
Thus the self-governance conception seems to lead rather quickly to the conclusion that the right cannot subserve the good. If I can know in concrete terms what the right thing to do is, while not knowing whether doing the right thing will have the best outcome, then at any rate it cannot be through any derivation of the right from the good that I acquire my knowledge of the right.

Can we eliminate the apparent conflict by a careful review of what is plausible in the two ideas?

The most persuasive element in utilitarianism is its theory of what outcomes are ultimately good. But to be persuasive it must be put broadly. So understood, it says that

1. the welfare of all individuals capable of faring well is ultimately good,
2. nothing else is ultimately good, and
3. in reckoning the goodness of outcomes the welfare of all such individuals is to be taken into account in some impartial positive way.

Note the scope of this theory: it applies to the outcomes of actions. It does not apply (in the absence of further argument) to the goodness of agents or to many other kinds of goodness. However we can assess in the same way the goodness of outcomes that do not result from any agent’s action. We can say, for example, that the situation or state of affairs, or whatever you want to call it, would have been much better if there had been no earthquake, for then no lives would have been lost. And we make such assessments to decide on policies for action; for example, about how worthwhile it is to take precautions against the possibility of an earthquake.

This plausible element in utilitarianism is highly generic. It does not entail the more specific doctrines associated with classical utilitarianism, about the content of individual welfare or the distributive structure of the good. One of the ways in which teleological ethics has undoubtedly progressed is that we are much more aware of the variety of plausible options that exist in both these respects – the content and structure of the good. Thus, as regards content, philosophers influenced by utilitarianism nevertheless debate whether individual welfare consists solely in pleasure and the absence of suffering. Various pluralistic doctrines about the content of individual welfare have been advanced as alternatives. As regards distribution, a variety of distributive constraints or weightings have been proposed. In comparison to these, the simple sum-total view looks very unconvincing. Nor does any simple alternative look right. Questions about both the content and the distributive structure of the good have come to look far more

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1 including the actions themselves among the outcomes, of course.