

The British Utilitarians and the Common Good of Catholic Thought: Is There Any Reconciliation Possible Between John Stuart Mill and CST?

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Abstract

Utilitarianism is frequently thought to be at odds with Christian ethics, due to its hedonistic origins, its apparent godless motivations (Bentham), and its starting point in anthropomorphic desires, along with the fact that the Catechism declares “One may not do evil so that good may result from it (CCC1756)”—something often ascribed to utilitarianism. Yet, it seems utilitarianism may have some potential commonalities with a Catholic view of the common good, in part simply because they both seek a good in common with others, but also because some of the earliest of the modern utilitarians were theologically motivated (John Gay, John Brown, Soame Jenyns, Edmund Law, Abraham Tucker, and William Paley).

This presentation will tease out some of the key differences between a Catholic Common Good view and both the utilitarianisms of Mill and Bentham, then arguing that certain types of utilitarianism, namely those of theological utilitarians like John Gay and William Paley, and even much of the later utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill provides a basis for a Christian utilitarianism, and something not so far from a Catholic view of the Common Good.