

Consequentialism

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Philosophical Concept

Consequentialism assesses the rightness or wrongness of actions in terms of the value of their consequences. The most popular version is act-consequentialism, which states that, of all the actions open to the agent, the right one is that which produces the most good.

Act-consequentialism is at odds with ordinary moral thinking in three respects. First, it seems excessively onerous, because the requirement to make the world a better place would demand all our time and effort; second, it leaves no room for the special duties which we take ourselves to have to those close to us: family, friends and fellow citizens; and third, it might require us, on occasion, to do dreadful things in order to bring about a good result.

Consequentialists standardly try to bring their theory more into line with common thinking by amending the theory in one of two ways. Indirect act-consequentialism holds that we should not necessarily aim to do what is right. We may get closer to making the world the best possible place by behaviour which accords more with ordinary moral thought. Rule-consequentialism holds that an action is right if it is in accordance with a set of rules whose general acceptance would best promote the good. Such rules will bear a fairly close resemblance to the moral rules with which we now operate.

1. Simple consequentialism and agent-neutrality

Direct act-, or simple (as we call it), consequentialism is the most straightforward of the various consequentialist moral views. It is a version of act-consequentialism, so it claims that the right act is the best, in the sense of maximizing value. (Where two or more actions come out equal best, then it is right to do any one of them.) And it advocates a direct decision procedure: look at your options, work out which is right (i.e. best), and do it. This section is largely devoted to this simple consequentialism, but some remarks apply to consequentialism more generally, and when this is the case we omit 'simple'.

Which action is right, on any particular simple consequentialist view, will obviously depend on its account of what's good. 'Good' here means good in itself, or intrinsically good, as opposed to good as a means, or extrinsically good (see Good, theories of the §2). A visit to the dentist is extrinsically good, because it leads to the intrinsic goods of healthy teeth and the avoidance of toothache, but the visit is not itself intrinsically good. One influential account of the good within the consequentialist camp is that offered by utilitarianism (see Utilitarianism). On this view,

usually known as hedonism or welfarism, the good is pleasure, happiness or well-being (see Hedonism; Happiness). The act-utilitarian holds, therefore, that the right action is the one that maximizes happiness; and a simple utilitarian adds to this the thought that we should aim directly at this outcome in our actions.

Many consequentialists, however, reject hedonism. A pioneer in this respect was G. E. Moore, whose theory, somewhat confusingly, used to be referred to as ideal utilitarianism, in contrast to the hedonistic variety (see Moore, G. E. §1). Among the things that have been held to be intrinsically good are knowledge, virtue, beauty, justice and the flourishing of the environment. But can we compare the value of, say, bringing about a particular piece of justice with the saving of a beautiful work of art (see Moral pluralism)? If not, then a simple consequentialism that sees both outcomes as good faces a difficulty: their values cannot be compared to determine which act, if either, is right. (Hedonism, of course, may face a problem of comparing pleasures). The term ‘consequentialism’ may be misleading, since it might naturally be taken to imply that an action itself can have no intrinsic value: its value is all to be found in its consequences. Utilitarianism is indeed committed to this view – for what matters on the utilitarian account is not the nature of the act itself but the pleasure which it produces in anyone affected by it – but it is not an essential feature of consequentialism as such. Some consequentialists wish to leave room for the thought that certain kinds of action, such as lying, cheating, and killing the innocent, are intrinsically bad, while other kinds of act, such as generous, loyal, or just ones, are intrinsically good. Consequentialism can take such values into account in calculating which course of action produces the best results. In deciding whether one course of action is preferable to another, a simple consequentialist needs to know the total value that would be produced by taking each course of action, and that will include not only the value of the consequences but the value, if any, of the action itself. Indeed, consequentialists can even take the past into account in assessing the value of an act. For example, they might claim that the value of incarcerating someone depends on their past behaviour.

Consequentialism is sometimes described as a teleological theory, because it conceives of a moral theory as setting a goal that we should strive to achieve (see Teleological ethics). The goal that consequentialism sets is to bring about a world containing the greatest balance of good over bad. Such a classification risks confusion, however, since a virtue ethics, such as Aristotle’s, is also usually classified as teleological, yet Aristotle’s theory differs from consequentialism in at least two crucial respects. First, the good at which agents aim, on Aristotle’s view (outlined in *Nicomachean Ethics*, c.mid-4th centuryBCE), is not the best state of the world, but the good life for humans; agents are to seek to realize distinctively human goods in their own lives. Second, Aristotle’s theory, unlike consequentialism, does not define the right in terms of the good. On the contrary, a full understanding of the good life rests on a prior conception of the right, for an important part of the good life consists in acting rightly (see Aristotle §§21–6; Right and good §2; Virtue ethics).

We also need to distinguish consequentialism from ethical egoism, which is also sometimes classified as a consequentialist theory (see Egoism and altruism). It holds that the right action is the one which would best promote the agent's own interests, and is thus structurally similar to simple consequentialism in that the right action is the one which maximizes a good, namely the agent's own. One way of distinguishing these theories is by appeal to the contemporary distinction between agent-relativity and agent-neutrality. This distinction may be introduced by reference to reasons for acting. Roughly, someone's reason is agent-relative if, at base, there is reference within it to the agent. Egoists hold that each of us has reason to promote only *their own* good, whereas simple consequentialists (if they speak of reasons) believe each of us has reason to promote the general good. Note that each theory offers reasons that apply to all agents, but agent-neutral reasons incorporate an added element of universality: to say that each of us has reason to promote the general good is to say that each of us has reason to pursue the *common* aim of promoting the general good (and this requires that any person sacrifice their own good if that will increase the general total), whereas according to egoism, each of us has reason to pursue a *distinct* aim: I have reason to pursue my good, you yours.

According to simple consequentialism, then, we each have reason to maximize the good, and morally speaking this is all we have reason to do. We have one common moral aim: that things go as well as possible. Someone may object that we have distinct aims because my aim is that *I* maximize the good, and your aim is that *you* do so. Perhaps there are circumstances in which *my* maximizing the good does not result in the good being maximized. But this is to misread simple consequentialism. Suppose I can directly produce ten units of good or five, and in the former case you will directly produce zero whereas in the latter you will produce six. Simple consequentialism prescribes that I directly produce the five, since the total produced will then be greater. Simple consequentialism cares not about who produces what directly, but about what is produced overall.

Another way of distinguishing egoism from simple consequentialism appeals to impartiality (see Impartiality). Egoism is said to be a partial theory, whereas simple consequentialism is impartial. But care must be taken with these notions. It might be claimed, for instance, that whereas the simple consequentialist views people impartially and sees no one as more valuable than anyone else, the ethical egoist is partial: they view themselves as more valuable than everyone else. But this is an inadequate characterization of both positions. The simple consequentialist can countenance some people as being more valuable than others. And the egoist needn't think they are more valuable than you; it is just that they do not see themselves as having any reason to promote your good. One way to clarify matters is to distinguish sharply between benefits and value: benefits accrue to individuals; states of affairs are the bearers of value. Both are equally visible from the impartial perspective. But simple consequentialism is an impartial theory in the sense that it tells each of us to ensure that benefits be distributed in such a

way as to produce the most valuable state of affairs – no one has special reason to pursue their own benefit. Ethical egoism, by contrast, tells each of us that all we have reason to do is pursue our own benefit; and it need have no view on what states of affairs are valuable.

2. Criticisms of simple consequentialism

First, simple consequentialism faces a calculation difficulty. Given lack of time and knowledge, how are you ever to work out what would maximize the good?

Second, simple consequentialism seems excessively demanding. Given all the bad things in the world, and the fact that few of us do much to improve them, it is clear that in order to maximize the good I would have to devote virtually all my energy and resources to making the world a better place (see Help and beneficence §2). This would give me no time or money to pursue my own interests, or even to relax, except to refresh myself ready to redouble my moral efforts on the morrow. The degree of self-sacrifice required would make the lives of the saints look self-indulgent. Simple consequentialism, then, would seem to be in the position of advocating a radical reform of ordinary morality, which is not as demanding as this, permitting us, as it does, to pursue our own goals provided we do not breach any of our duties. Some have proposed, in order to meet this point, that the theory be modified so that an act is right if its consequences are good, or good enough, even if they are not the best. This suggestion has not been widely adopted, for it is usually held that a rational agent will always prefer the greater good to the lesser.

Third, simple consequentialism appears to leave no place for the duties we take ourselves to have to our family and friends (see Deontological ethics; Family, ethics and the; Friendship). Such duties are agent-relative: each of us has special moral reason to help our own family and friends, so that the persons to whom the duties are owed vary from agent to agent. Simple consequentialism, however, is an agent-neutral moral theory. Even if it places special value on the cultivation of certain relationships, such as friendship, this will still not yield a duty of friendship, as traditionally understood – if friendship is a great good, then my duty as a simple consequentialist is to promote friendship in general between all persons, and this will not necessarily require me to give special attention to my friends, as distinct from helping others to give special attention to their friends. (Note that, as with the discussion of egoism above, the claim that you have an agent-relative duty toward your friends does not require that you see your friends and friendships as more valuable than mine - it is just that you have special reason to benefit your friends just as I have special reason to benefit mine.)

Fourth, simple consequentialism leaves no room for the thought, central to much ordinary moral thinking, that we must not harm people in various ways – we must not violate their rights – regardless of how much good it would do. Indeed, the term ‘consequentialism’ appears to have been coined as a pejorative by Anscombe (1958) precisely to highlight this feature. She opposed

consequentialist reasoning on the grounds that, for example, it could be used to justify the execution of an innocent person: in some circumstances, the bad of such an execution might be outweighed by its good consequences. Anscombe's view is that such an execution is never justified, regardless of the consequences: justice always trumps promotion of good consequences.

These sorts of prohibitions – that do not stem from special relationships but may, like duties of special relationship, require us not to maximize the good – are known in contemporary parlance as 'constraints'. The simple consequentialist, however, views constraints as irrational. Suppose that by executing one innocent, you could thereby prevent several others being executed. Surely, the simple consequentialist claims, you should execute the one. This example brings out the agent-relativity of constraints. According to the advocate of a constraint against executing the innocent, I should have the aim that I not perform such executions, and you should have the distinct aim that you not perform any. By contrast the simple consequentialist claims that we should have the common aim of minimizing the number of innocents executed.

Fifth, consider the following example (see Regan 1980: 264–65). You must choose between acts *f* and *g*, where *f* will either produce zero or ten (objective) units of good, you know not which, and *g* is sure to produce nine. Unbeknownst to you, *f* will actually produce ten units, and is thus best, and hence the right act by simple consequentialism's criterion. But surely you ought to do *g*. This sort of example has led to modifications of consequentialism that, for example, advocate the maximization of *expected* value rather than value simpliciter.

We turn now to discuss two other alternatives to simple consequentialism. Both deny that agents should decide what to do by considering what will produce the best results.

3. Sophisticated consequentialism

The first of these, indirect act- or sophisticated consequentialism, retains the claim that only the act that produces the most good is right, but denies that the virtuous agent need be guided directly by thoughts about what will achieve this when deciding how to act.

Sophisticated consequentialism builds on the thought that we do not necessarily hit the target if we aim directly at it. Just as the sniper must make allowances for wind, so the moralist may have to direct our thoughts away from the goal of maximizing value if we are to achieve it. This goal is not itself a good guide to action for a number of reasons: the calculations are tricky and time-consuming; we may be tempted to skew the results in our favour; and doing the right action may require us to go against dispositions that are both deeply rooted and generally useful. So we may actually come closer to doing the right thing (namely, maximizing value) if we follow a few fairly simple moral rules of the traditional type, or encourage within ourselves the development of dispositions, such as kindness and loyalty, which will normally lead us to act in beneficial

ways. In adopting such rules, or developing such dispositions, we know that we will sometimes act wrongly when we could, perhaps, have acted rightly. Yet we may still get closer, in the long run, to achieving the goal of maximization of good than we would have if we had attempted to aim at it directly.

There are difficulties with this approach, however. For instance, suppose you are a conscientious sophisticated consequentialist, and it is clear on this occasion that following your disposition, say, to favour your child will not maximize the good. You will surely be torn as to what to do. One way around this is to argue that agents will do better, in consequentialist terms, if they are not taught the truth of consequentialism but are, rather, brought up to believe some other moral theory. Opponents see this position, sometimes known as self-effacing or government-house consequentialism, as incoherent. If the adoption of consequentialism demands its suppression then in what sense can we adopt it?

4. Rule-consequentialism

The second alternative to simple consequentialism is rule-consequentialism, which offers a more substantive role for moral rules or principles. Individual acts are judged right or wrong by reference to the rules; the rules, but not the individual acts, are judged by their value. The right action is the one that conforms to what we will call 'the best rules' – these are, roughly, the set of moral rules whose general acceptance would produce better results than the acceptance of any other set. Given human limitations, the best rules will be clear, reasonably simple, and not too onerous. If they meet these requirements it may be that such rules will not lead us to depart much from ordinary morality.

Rule-consequentialism differs from sophisticated consequentialism in two ways. First, sophisticated consequentialism rejects, but rule-consequentialism endorses, the claim that our actions should be guided by thoughts of what is right. Second, the two theories differ in their account of rightness. Acting rightly by rule-consequentialism's lights – that is, acting in accord with the best rules – might not maximize the good.

This divergence from good-maximization has led some to challenge whether rule-consequentialism is really a form of consequentialism. And it certainly raises difficulties for the view. If the criterion for selecting the rules is that their general acceptance produces the best results, then what is the rule-consequentialist to do when faced with circumstances in which following the best rules will clearly not maximize the good?

For instance, it might be that the best rules dictate that you give 10% of your income to charity. But, given that the best rules are not, in fact, generally accepted, it may well be that you would do more good by giving 20%. Or, to take another example, perhaps the best rules tell teachers to be honest in their appraisals of students. But as things stand most teachers inflate their

evaluations. Those who remain honest are arguably not only not doing as much good as they could, but are actually making things worse. For one thing, distributing benefits in accord with desert is a component of the good for many consequentialists, and honest appraisers are unfairly disadvantaging their students.

Further, even if the rules were generally accepted, could you not face a circumstance in which you could clearly do more good by flouting them? It is very unlikely that any set of rules can anticipate how to do best in every nuanced circumstance (and if they did manage this, then rule-consequentialism would collapse into the simple form of the doctrine).

References and further reading

Adams, R. M. (1976) 'Motive Utilitarianism', *Journal of Philosophy* 73: 467–481.

(Explores the idea that the right action is the one performed from the set of motives whose internalization would have the best consequences.)

Anscombe, G. E. M. (1958) 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33: 1–19.

(A vigorous rebuttal, among other things, of what she saw as the pervasive strand of consequentialism in recent British moral philosophy.)

Aristotle (c. mid-4th century BCE) *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

(Arguably the greatest work on ethics in Western thought; considers what is required to live a full and satisfying life, in which the finest human capacities are exercised properly.)

Brink, D. (2006) 'Some Forms and Limits of Consequentialism', in D. Copp (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 380–423.

(Explains the basic structure of consequentialist theories and explores and assesses a number of objections. Argues that we have duties to those to whom we stand in special relationships which consequentialism cannot accommodate. Note that Brink classes egoism as a consequentialist theory, and that his use of the term 'direct consequentialism' differs from ours.)

Darwall, S. (2003) *Consequentialism*, Oxford: Blackwell.

(A very useful collection of classical and contemporary discussions of the theory. Includes extracts from Sidgwick, Moore, Scheffler and Parfit, as well as the papers of Adams, Railton and Pettit.)

Hooker, B. (2000) *Ideal Code, Real World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(A clear exposition and defence of rule-consequentialism.)

Hooker, B. (1994) 'Is Rule-Consequentialism a Rubber Duck?', *Analysis* 54: 62–67.

(A rule-consequentialist reply to Howard-Snyder.)

Howard-Snyder, F. (1993) 'Rule Consequentialism Is a Rubber Duck', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30: 271–278.

(Argues that, just as a rubber duck is not really a duck, rule-consequentialism is not really a consequentialist theory.)

Kagan, S. (1989) *The Limits of Morality*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(A vigorous defence of an uncompromising version of simple consequentialism. Contains some brisk arguments against constraints.)

McNaughton, D. and Rawling, P. (1991) 'Agent-relativity and the Doing–Happening Distinction', *Philosophical Studies* 63: 167–185.

(Discusses some difficulties in defining the difference between agent-neutrality and agent-relativity in terms of reasons. Suggests a formal way of making that distinction and then argues that consequentialism is an agent-neutral theory and deontology an agent-relative one. Slightly technical in parts.)

Moore, G. E. (1903) *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, esp. ch. 5.

(Argues that to say that an act is right is equivalent to saying that its total results will be the best possible, and claims that by far the most valuable things are personal relationships and the appreciation of beauty. Rather difficult in parts.)

Parfit, D. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, esp. §§10–14, 37, 41–44.

(Contains one of the most sophisticated recent discussions and defences of consequentialism. Parfit distinguishes consequentialism from deontology in terms of whether the theory gives us one common aim, or gives each of us distinct aims. Moderately hard.)

Pettit, P. (1993) 'Consequentialism', in P. Singer (ed.) *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 230–240.

(A clear introduction to the topic.)

Portmore, D. (2001) 'Can an Act-consequentialist Theory Be Agent-Relative?', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 363–377.

(Argues that act-consequentialism can accommodate many of our common-sense moral beliefs by allowing that there can be agent-relative value.)

Railton, P. (1984) 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13: 134–171.

(Develops a sophisticated version of consequentialism which, he claims, avoids objections to simpler varieties.)

Regan, D. (1980) *Utilitarianism and Co-operation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(Identifies and defines the features of traditional utilitarian theories which account for their appeal, demonstrates that no theory which is 'exclusively act-oriented' can have all the properties that utilitarians have attempted to build into their theories, and develops a new theory 'co-operative utilitarianism', which is radically different from traditional theories. An advanced and complex book.)

Scheffler, S. (1982) *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(Argues for a 'hybrid' theory in which agents are permitted, but cannot be required, not to maximize the good.)

Scheffler, S. (1988) *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(A very useful collection of seminal papers, including Railton's article and extracts from Parfit and Williams.)

Sidgwick, H. (1922) *The Methods of Ethics*, London: Macmillan, esp. bk I, ch. 9; bk II, ch. 1; bk III, chs 11, 13; bk IV, chs 2–5.

(The classic source of many of the strategies now discussed by consequentialists and their opponents, including making consequentialism self-effacing. Long, complex, but clear.)

Singer, P. (1972) 'Famine, affluence, and morality', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1: 229–243.

(Famously argues that plausible consequentialist principles require us to make great sacrifices to help those worse off than ourselves. A clear and accessible paper.)

Smart, J. and Williams, B. (1973) *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Two fine essays. Williams' piece introduces many of the objections to consequentialism that have figured in subsequent debate, including the notorious example of Jim and the Indians, which is relevant to the issue of constraints and permissions. In addition, Williams takes moral systems to be intended for the guidance of agents, and so denies that a moral theory can go self-effacing, and still be a genuine moral theory.)

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