

Consequentialism

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Philosophers use the term *consequentialism* to identify a general way of thinking about right and wrong and thereby provide a convenient label for a whole family of theories or possible theories in normative ethics. *Consequentialist* ethical theories maintain that right and wrong are a function of the consequences of our actions – more precisely, that our actions are right or wrong because, and only because, of their consequences. The *only because* is important since almost all ethical theories take consequences into account when assessing actions, and almost all philosophers believe that the consequences of our actions at least sometimes affect their rightness or wrongness. What distinguishes consequentialist from nonconsequentialist ethical theories is the insistence that when it comes to rightness or wrongness, nothing matters but the results of our actions.

When consequentialists affirm that the results or consequences of an action determine whether it is right or wrong, they have in mind, more specifically, the value of those results. That is, it is the goodness or badness of an action's consequences that determines its rightness or wrongness. Different consequentialist theories link the rightness or wrongness of actions to the goodness or badness of their results in different ways. Rather than discuss these different possibilities, I shall focus here on the most familiar and widely discussed form of consequentialism, which I call *standard consequentialism*. It may also be the most attractive form of consequentialism. In any case, it is helpful to concentrate on one reasonably specific version of consequentialism. (Unless otherwise indicated, from now on when

I write “consequentialism,” I shall have “standard consequentialism” in mind.)

Standard Consequentialism

In its standard form, consequentialism asserts that the morally right action for an agent to perform is the one that has the best consequences or that results in the most good. In this sense, it is a maximizing doctrine. We are not merely permitted or encouraged, but morally required, to act so as to bring about as much good as we can. Consequentialists are interested in the consequences not only of one's acting in various positive ways, but also of one's refraining from acting. For example, if I ignore a panhandler's request for rent money, then one result of this may be that his family must sleep outside tonight. If so, then consequentialists will take this fact into account when assessing my conduct.

It could happen that an agent has several actions open to him, each of which will have equally good results. In that case, there is no single best action and, hence, no uniquely right action. The agent acts rightly if he or she performs any one of these actions. Another possibility is that an action might have bad consequences and yet be the right thing to do. This will be the case if all alternative actions have worse results. Finally, when consequentialists refer to the results or consequences of an action, they have in mind the entire upshot of the action, that is, its overall outcome. They are concerned with whether, and to what extent, the

world is better or worse because the agent has elected a given course of conduct. Thus, consequentialists can take into account whatever value, if any, an action has in itself as well as the goodness or badness of its subsequent effects.

The good is agent-neutral and independent of the right

Standard consequentialism assumes that we can sometimes make objective, impartial, and agent-neutral judgments about the comparative goodness or badness of different states of affairs. At least sometimes it will be the case that one outcome is better than another outcome – not better merely from some particular perspective, but better, period. Thus, for example, it is a better outcome (all other things being equal) when eight people have headaches and two people die than when two people have headaches and eight people die. Most people believe this, as do most philosophers, including most nonconsequentialists. However, some nonconsequentialists contend that this idea makes no sense (e.g., Thomson, 2001, pp. 12–19, 41). One state of affairs can be better for Fred or worse for Sarah than another state of affairs, they say, but it can't be said to be just plain better. There is no such thing as being just plain better, only better along some particular dimension or better for someone or better from some perspective. Consequentialists disagree.

They take it for granted not only that the goodness or badness of an action's outcome is an objective, agent-neutral matter, but also that this is something that can be identified prior to, and independently of, the normative assessment of the action. The point, after all, of consequentialism is to use the goodness or badness of an action to determine its rightness or wrongness. And circularity would threaten the theory if our notions of right and wrong infect our assessment of consequences as good or bad. Standard consequentialism thus assumes that we can identify states of affairs as good or bad, better or worse, without reference to normative principles of right and wrong.

Expected consequences, not actual consequences, are what count

According to standard consequentialism, then, an action is right if and only if nothing the agent could do would have better results. However, we rarely know ahead of time and for certain what the consequences

will be of each of the possible actions we could perform. Consequentialism therefore says that we should choose the action, the expected value of the outcome of which is at least as great as that of any other action open to us. The notion of expected value is mathematical in origin and conceptualized as follows. Every action that we might perform has a number of possible outcomes. The likelihood of those outcomes varies, but each can be assumed to have a certain probability of happening. In addition, each possible outcome of a given action has a certain value; that is, it is good or bad to some specified degree. Assume for the sake of discussion that we can assign numbers both to probabilities and to values. One would then calculate the expected value of hypothetical action A, with (let us suppose) three possible outcomes, by multiplying the probability of each outcome times its value and summing the three figures. Suppose that the first possible outcome has a probability of 0.7 and a value of 3, the second outcome has a probability of 0.2 and a value of -1 , and the third outcome a probability of 0.1 and a value of 2. The expected value of A is thus $(0.7 \times 3) + (0.2 \times -1) + (0.1 \times 2)$, which equals 2.1. A is the right action to perform if and only if no alternative has a greater expected value than this.

In reality, of course, we never have more than rough estimates of probabilities and values. Indeed, we are likely to be ignorant of some possible outcomes or misjudge their goodness or badness, and we may overlook altogether some possible courses of action. Nevertheless, the point being made is important. Consequentialism instructs the agent to do what is likely to have the best results as judged by what a reasonable and conscientious person in the agent's circumstances could be expected to know. It might turn out, however, that because of untoward circumstances, the action with the greatest expected value ends up producing poor results – worse results, in fact, than several other things the agent could have done instead. Assuming that the agent's original estimate of expected value was correct (or, at least, the most accurate estimate we could reasonably expect one to have arrived at in the circumstances), then this action remains the right thing to have done. Indeed, it is what the agent should do if he or she were faced with the same situation again. On the other hand, an agent might perform an action that has less expected value than several other actions the agent could have performed, and yet, through a fortuitous chain of circumstances, it turns out that the action has better results, brings more good into the world, than

anything else the agent could have done. Nevertheless, consequentialism asserts that the agent acted wrongly.

Some nonstandard consequentialists adopt the rival view that the right action is the one that actually brings about the best results (or would in fact have brought about the best results, had it been performed), regardless of its expected value. How can it be right, they ask, to do what in fact had suboptimal results? Or wrong to do the thing that had the best results? Because these consequentialists still want the agent to act in whatever way is likely to maximize value, they draw a distinction between objective rightness and the action it would have been reasonable (or subjectively right) for the agent to perform. Comparing the actual results of what we did with what the actual results would have been, had we done an alternative action, raises philosophical puzzles. But the main reason for orienting consequentialism toward probable results rather than actual results is that the theory, like other ethical theories, is supposed to be prospective and action guiding. In acting so as to maximize expected value, the agent is doing what the theory wants him to do, and he is not to be blamed, nor is he necessarily to modify his future conduct, if this action does not, in fact, maximize value. Accordingly, standard consequentialism holds that this is not merely the reasonable, but also the morally right, way for the agent to act.

Further comments on the uncertainty of consequences

Critics of consequentialism perennially point to the inevitable uncertainty of our knowledge of future events, arguing that this uncertainty undermines the viability of consequentialism. Although, as was just discussed, we don't have to know what the outcome of an action will be in order to estimate its expected value, in fact we are unlikely to know all the possible outcomes an action might have or to do more than guess at their comparative probabilities. And, depending on the particular theory of value the consequentialist adopts, he or she will have greater or lesser difficulty assigning values to those outcomes. These problems are compounded by the fact that the consequences of our actions continue indefinitely into the future, often in ways that are far from trivial even if they are unknowable.

Consequentialists can concede these points, yet affirm the viability of their theory. First, they can stress that, despite our ignorance, we already know quite a lot

about the likely results of different actions. The human race wasn't born yesterday, and in reflecting on the possible consequences of an action, we do so with a wealth of experience behind us. Although by definition the specific situation in which one finds oneself is always unique, it is unlikely to be the first time human beings have pondered the results of performing actions of type A, B, or C in similar sorts of circumstances. Second, consequentialists can stress that the difficulties we face in identifying the best course of action do not undermine the goal of endeavoring to bring about as much good as we can. Whether we are consequentialists or not, we must act. And even though ignorance and uncertainty plague human action, they don't prevent us from striving to do as much good as we can. Third, and finally, consequentialists can point out that uncertainty about the future is a problem for other normative theories as well. Almost all normative theories take into account the likely consequences of the actions open to the agent and are thus to some extent infected by uncertainty about the future.

Utilitarianism

Consequentialism is not a complete ethical theory. In its standard form, it tells us to act so as to bring about as much expected good as we can, but it doesn't say what the good is. Thus, depending on one's theory of value, there are different ways of filling out consequentialism and turning it into a complete ethical theory. Utilitarianism represents one way, and it is worth saying a little about it because utilitarianism is the most influential as well as the most widely discussed consequentialist ethical theory. In fact, only a couple of decades ago did philosophers begin to appreciate fully that an ethical theory could retain the consequentialist normative structure of utilitarianism while relinquishing its specific value commitments – that is, that an ethical theory could agree with utilitarianism that our actions should bring about as much good as possible and yet disagree with it about what the good is.

Utilitarianism takes happiness or, more broadly, well-being to be the only thing that is good in itself or valuable for its own sake. We don't need to explore what well-being involves to point out some important features of utilitarianism's value theory. First, the good, as utilitarians understand it, attaches only to particular individuals (that is, to human beings or other sentient creatures). Thus, a state of affairs is good or bad to

some degree (and better or worse than some other state of affairs) only in virtue of the goodness or badness of the lives of particular individuals. There is no good or bad above and beyond that, no good or bad above and beyond the happiness or unhappiness of individuals. Second, utilitarians believe that the good is additive, that is, that total or net happiness is the sum of the happiness or unhappiness of each individual. More happiness here counterbalances less happiness there. Underlying this, of course, is the assumption that in principle we can compare people's levels of happiness or well-being. But one shouldn't interpret this assumption too rigorously. Utilitarians have always granted that interpersonal comparisons of happiness or well-being are difficult, and they can even concede that some issues of comparison and addition may be irresolvable in principle. Utilitarians need believe only that we can rank many states of affairs as better or worse. Finally, utilitarians believe that each person's well-being is equally valuable, and his happiness or unhappiness, her pleasure or pain, carries the same weight as that of any other person. As Bentham put it, each person counts as one, and no one as more than one.

For utilitarians, then, the standard of moral assessment is well-being, and the right course of action is the one that brings about the greatest expected net well-being. Non-utilitarian variants of consequentialism drop this exclusive commitment to well-being, seeing things other than or in addition to it as having intrinsic non-moral value. A utilitarian believes that the things we normally take to be valuable – say close personal bonds, knowledge, autonomy, or beauty – are valuable only because they typically lead, directly or indirectly, to enhanced well-being. Friendship, for instance, usually makes people happier, and human lives almost always go better with it than without it. By contrast, the non-utilitarian consequentialist holds that some things are valuable independently of their impact on well-being. Some of these things, like autonomy, say, may be things that are believed to be an intrinsically valuable component of any human life. They are thought to be good for an individual, to make his or her life better, regardless of whether they promote the individual's well-being. Some non-utilitarian consequentialists go further, however, and cut the link between being good and being good for someone that is characteristic of utilitarianism. They hold that some states of affairs are intrinsically better than others even if they are not better for anyone. For example, a world with more equality or beauty or

biological diversity might be thought intrinsically better than a world with less even if no one is aware of the increased equality, beauty, or diversity, and it makes no individual's life more valuable.

In addition to, or instead of, challenging the unique value placed on well-being, a non-utilitarian consequentialist might deviate from utilitarianism by declining to count equally the well-being of each. For example, the non-utilitarian might believe that enhancing the well-being of those whose current level of well-being is below average is more valuable than enhancing by an equal amount the well-being of those whose current level of well-being is above average. Or the non-utilitarian consequentialist might give up the belief that the good is additive and that the net value of an outcome is a straightforward function of various individual goods and bads. G. E. Moore, for example, famously urged that the value of a state of affairs bears no regular relation to the values of its constituent parts (Moore, 1968). Although the non-utilitarian consequentialist would, in these ways, be challenging the value theory of utilitarianism, he or she would remain committed to the proposition that one is always required to act so as to bring about as much good as possible.

Consequentialism in Practice

According to consequentialism, an action is morally right if, and only if, among the actions that the agent could perform, there is no other action, the outcome of which has greater expected value. To act in any other way is wrong. The consequentialist criterion of rightness is thus pretty straightforward, but the theory's practical implications can be surprisingly subtle.

Praise and blame

For consequentialists whether an agent acted wrongly is distinct from the question whether he or she should be blamed or criticized for so acting (and, if so, how severely). Consequentialists apply their normative standard to questions of blame or praise just as they do to other questions. In particular, they will ask whether it will maximize expected good to criticize someone for failing to maximize expected good. Blame, criticism, and rebuke, although hurtful, can have good results by encouraging both the agent and other people to do better in the future, whereas neglecting to reproach misconduct increases

the likelihood that the agent (or others) will act in the same unsatisfactory way the next time around. However, in some circumstances to blame or criticize someone for acting wrongly would be pointless or even counterproductive – for example, if the person did so accidentally, was innocently misinformed, or was suffering from emotional distress. In such circumstances, chastising the person for not living up to the consequentialist standard might do more harm than good.

Suppose that a well-intentioned agent acted in a beneficial way, but that she could have produced even more (expected) good had she acted in some other way. Should consequentialists criticize her? Depending on the circumstances, the answer may well be no. Suppose she acted spontaneously but in a way that was unselfish and showed genuine regard for others, or suppose that she could have produced more good only by violating a generally accepted rule, the following of which usually produces good results. Or imagine that pursuing the other, even better course of conduct would have required a disregard for self-interest or for the interests of those who are near and dear to her that is more than we normally (or, perhaps, can reasonably) expect from human beings. In these cases, blame would seem to have little or no point. Indeed, if the agent brought about more good than most people do in similar situations, we may want to encourage others to follow her example. Praising an agent for an action that fails to live all the way up to the consequentialist standard can sometimes be right. Consequentialists applaud instances of act-types they want to encourage, and they commend motivations, dispositions, and character traits they want to reinforce.

Motives, dispositions, and character traits

Consequentialists generally take an instrumental approach to motives. Good motives are those that tend to produce right conduct whereas bad motives are those that tend to produce wrongful conduct. Consequentialists generally assess dispositions, behavioral patterns, and character traits in the same instrumental way: One determines which ones are good, and how good they are, by looking at the actions they typically lead to. According to some value theories, however, certain motives are intrinsically, not just instrumentally, good or bad; likewise, the exercise of certain dispositions or character traits might be judged intrinsically good or bad. If so, then the presence or absence of these factors will affect the overall goodness or badness of an outcome.

Even if a consequentialist adopts, as most of them do, an entirely instrumental approach to the assessment of motives, dispositions, and character traits, it doesn't follow that the agent's only concern ought to be the impartial maximization of good. To the contrary, the consequentialist tradition has long urged that more good may come from people acting from other, more particular motivations, commitments, and dispositions than from their acting only and always from a desire to promote the general good. For one thing, a consequentialist should not try to compute the probabilities of all possible outcomes before each and every action. Even if this were humanly possible, it would be absurd and counterproductive. At least in trivial matters and routine situations, stopping and calculating will generally lead to poor results. One does better to act from certain motives or habits or to do what has usually proved right in similar situations. Consequentialism thus implies that one should not always reason as a consequentialist or, at least, that one should not always reason in a fully and directly consequentialist way. Better results may come from people acting in accord with principles, procedures, or motives other than the basic consequentialist one.

This last statement may sound paradoxical, but the consequentialist standard itself determines in what circumstances we should employ that standard as our direct guide to acting. The proper criterion for assessing actions is one matter; in what ways we should deliberate, reason, or otherwise decide what to do (so as to meet that criterion as best we can) is another issue altogether. Consequentialists will naturally want to guide their lives, make decisions, and base their actions on principles, procedures, and motives, the following of which will produce the best results over the long run. Which principles, procedures, and motives produce the best results is a contingent matter, which depends in part on one's value theory. But a consequentialist will approve of people's acting out of a concern for things other than the general good or on the basis of values that his theory does not believe to be basic if the consequentialist believes that people's so acting is likely to bring about more good in the long run.

Following moral rules

Although consequentialism bases morality on one fundamental principle, it also stresses the importance in ordinary circumstances of following certain well-established rules or guidelines that can generally be relied upon to produce

good results. Utilitarians, for example, believe that we should make it a practice to tell the truth and keep our promises, rather than try to calculate possible pleasures and pains in every routine case, because we know that in general telling the truth and keeping our promises result in more good than lying and breaking promises. Relying on secondary rules helps consequentialists deal with the no-time-to-calculate problem and the future-consequences-are-hard-to-foresee problem. It can also counteract the fact that even conscientious agents can err in estimating the likelihood of a particular result and thus the expected value of a given action. In particular, when our interests are engaged or when something we care about is at stake, bias can unconsciously skew our deliberations. For this reason, we are generally less likely to go wrong and more likely to promote good by cleaving to well-established secondary rules. Finally, when secondary rules are well known and generally followed, then people know what others are going to do in certain routine and easily recognizable situations, and they can rely on this knowledge. This improves social coordination and makes society more stable and secure.

An analogy with traffic laws and regulations illuminates these points. Society's goal, let's assume, is that the overall flow of automobile traffic maximize benefit by getting everyone to his or her destination as safely and promptly as possible. Now imagine a traffic system with just one law or rule: Drive your car so as to maximize benefit. It's easy to see that such a one-rule traffic system would be far from ideal and that we do much better with a variety of more specific traffic regulations. Without secondary rules telling them, for example, to drive on the right side of the road and obey traffic signals, drivers would be left to do whatever they thought best at any given moment depending on their interpretation of the traffic situation and their calculation of the probable results of alternative actions. The results of this would clearly be chaotic and deadly.

For the reasons just canvassed, consequentialists of all stripes agree that to promote the good effectively, we should, at least sometimes, rely and encourage others to rely on secondary rules, precepts, and guidelines. Moreover, it is widely agreed among consequentialists that the full benefit of secondary rules can only be reaped when they are treated as moral rules and not merely as rules of thumb or practical aids to decision making. Having people strongly inclined to act in certain rule-designated ways, to feel guilty about failing to do so, and to use those rules to assess the conduct of others can have enormous utility. This is because it produces good results to have

people strongly disposed to act in certain predictable ways, ways that generally (but perhaps not always) maximize expected benefit.

In practice, then, consequentialists approach issues of character and conduct from several distinct angles. First, about any action they can ask whether it was right in the sense of maximizing expected value. Second, they can ask whether it was an action the agent should have performed, knowing what she knew (or should have known) and feeling the obligation she should have felt to adhere to the rules that consequentialists would want people in her society to stick to. Third, if the action fell short in this respect, consequentialists can ask whether the agent should be criticized and, if so, how much. This will involve taking into account, among other things, how far the agent fell short, whether there were extenuating factors, what the alternatives were, and what could reasonably have been expected of someone in the agent's shoes, as well as the likely effects of criticizing the agent (and others like her) for the conduct in question. Finally, consequentialists can ask whether the agent's motivations are ones that should be reinforced and strengthened, or weakened and discouraged, and they can ask the same question about the broader character traits of which these motivations are an aspect. Looking at the matter from these various angles produces a nuanced, multidimensional assessment, but one that reflects the complicated reality of our moral lives.

The Appeal of Consequentialism

As we have seen, consequentialists share the conviction that the morality of our actions must be a function of the goodness or badness of their outcomes and, more specifically, that an action is right if and only if it brings about the best outcome the agent could have brought about. True, consequentialism may tell us not to guide ourselves directly by the consequential standard of right in our day-to-day actions, but the correctness of that basic standard has struck most thinkers in the consequentialist tradition as obvious. They find it difficult to see what the point of morality could be, if it is not about acting in ways that directly or indirectly bring about as much good as possible. As John Stuart Mill wrote:

Whether happiness be or be not the end to which morality should be referred – that it be referred to an *end* of some sort, and not left in the dominion of vague feeling or inexplicable internal conviction, that it be made a matter of reason and calculation, and not merely of sentiment, is essential to the

very idea of moral philosophy; is, in fact, what renders argument or discussion on moral questions possible. That the morality of actions depends on the consequences which they tend to produce, is the doctrine of rational persons of all schools; that the good or evil of those consequences is measured solely by pleasure and pain, is all of the doctrine of the school of utility, which is peculiar to it (2003, p. 83).

Consequentialism's goal-oriented, maximizing approach to ethics coheres with what we implicitly believe to be rational conduct in other contexts, in particular, when it comes to assessing prudential behavior. When seeking to advance our personal interests, we take for granted that practical rationality requires us to weigh, balance, and make trade-offs among the things we seek in order to maximize the net amount of good we obtain. Only a consequentialist approach tallies with that.

The conviction that moral assessment turns on consequences and that the promotion of what ultimately matters ought to be the guiding principle of ethics lies at the heart of consequentialism. Rival normative theories, of course, rely on other moral assumptions and appeal to different judgments and values. Compared to most nonconsequentialist approaches, however, consequentialism requires a very small number of ethical assumptions, and these yield, or so consequentialists believe, a powerful but structurally simple normative theory, capable of unifying our understanding of a diverse range of ethical phenomena. By contrast, nonconsequentialist approaches to ethics (such as the popular reflective equilibrium method of Rawls (1971) or the commonsense pluralism of Ross (1930)) typically depend on a wide and diverse range of moral intuitions and ethical judgments. Moreover, the ethical assumptions on which consequentialists rely are not only few in number, but also very general in character, whereas nonconsequentialist theorists typically appeal to a variety of more specific lower-level normative intuitions. These intuitions – about the rightness or wrongness of specific types of conduct or the correctness of certain normative rules – seem more likely to be distorted by the authority of cultural tradition and the influence of customary practice than are the more abstract, high-level intuitions upon which consequentialism relies.

Objections to Consequentialism

Many critics of consequentialism object to it on the ground that the theory will sometimes condone or even require immoral conduct. They believe that it is wrong to do certain things even if our doing so would

bring about the most good. They also argue that consequentialism demands too much of us and that morality does not command us to be always and continually doing as much good as we can. In contrast to consequentialists, then, these critics affirm certain deontological restrictions on our conduct and embrace certain deontological permissions to act without regard to the greater good.

Deontological restrictions

Because consequentialism entails that an action's rightness or wrongness depends on its expected consequences in the particular circumstances facing the agent, it follows that almost anything – telling a lie, for instance, or breaking a promise – might be right if it brought about more good than anything else the agent could have done. Indeed, critics of consequentialism contend that it is possible that the theory might require one to do something seriously and shockingly immoral, such as to kill an innocent person, torture a small child, or frame someone for a crime he didn't commit, if doing so brought about the most good.

The likelihood that a consequentialist theory will require conduct that conflicts with the injunctions of everyday morality will depend in part on its particular value theory. Most consequentialists, however, concede that in unusual circumstances their theory could require us to do something, such as, breaking a promise, than it is normally wrong to do. However, they will insist that in the real world it is extremely unlikely – almost impossible – that the theory would require us to do something that is truly evil or horrible, such as torturing a small child. Moreover, the priority consequentialists give to promoting rules, motives, and dispositions that typically produce good results implies that they will endorse most of the normative restrictions that commonsense morality places on our conduct because adhering to them tends to maximize expected benefit.

Even if a consequentialist theory entails that in the abstract it could be right, if the circumstances were bizarre enough, to torture an innocent child, in practice it makes for a much better world if people's characters are such that they would never even entertain the idea of doing so, regardless of the circumstances. True, if placed in the imaginary world where torturing the child maximizes good, such people will do the wrong thing (as judged by the consequentialist standard) by refraining from torturing the child. But the real world in which we live is certainly better the more widespread the inhibition on harming children is and the more deeply entrenched it is in people's psychology. Consequentialists

prefer people to have the moral motivations that bring the best results in the world they actually live in, even if these motivations might lead them to behave suboptimally in fanciful situations.

To this, nonconsequentialists often reply that the consequentialist gets the right answer but for the wrong reason. Consequentialists, it is alleged, overlook the intrinsic wrongness of torturing. But consequentialists can explain perfectly well why torture is evil. And unless the nonconsequentialist is an absolutist, he cannot say that it is absolutely forbidden ever to torture an innocent child. What if doing so were, somehow or other, the only way to stop a war of aggression? So, the nonconsequentialist is reduced to saying that the consequentialist takes the possibility of torturing the child too lightly or is too ready to do it. But these allegations seem specious.

Nonconsequentialists believe that there are certain deontological restrictions on our conduct, that is, that an action can sometimes be wrong even though its outcome would be better than that of any alternative action. But this belief is vulnerable to consequentialist counter-attack. Suppose that somehow your violating a certain deontological restriction (call it R) would result in there being fewer violations of R overall. According to the deontologist, it would still be wrong for you to violate R. This is puzzling, and it is natural to ask, "If nonviolation of R is so important, shouldn't that be the goal? How can a concern for the nonviolation of R lead to the refusal to violate R when this would prevent more extensive violations of R?" (Nozick, 1974, p. 30, slightly modified).

Admittedly, these are abstract questions, but one can imagine circumstances in which only by telling a lie (breaking a promise, killing an innocent person) can one prevent several other people from telling lies (breaking promises, killing innocent people). Faced with such situations, deontological theories will, at least sometimes, forbid an action of a certain type even when performing it would lead to there being fewer actions of the forbidden type. This fact leads consequentialists to argue that deontological restrictions are paradoxical or even irrational. For how can a normative theory plausibly say that it is wrong to act so as to decrease immoral conduct (that is, conduct that the theory itself identifies as immoral)? It seems illogical for a theory to forbid the performance of a morally objectionable act when doing so would reduce the total number of such actions and would have no other relevant consequences.

In practice consequentialists are likely to endorse many of the restrictions that deontologists insist upon. But these restrictions will be part of the moral code that consequentialists uphold in order to promote the good in the most effective way they can. However strongly agents are encouraged to adhere to these rules and to internalize a commitment to them, these restrictions are not, for the consequentialist, foundational, but derive from a more basic principle of morality.

Deontological permissions

Critics of consequentialism also claim that it sets too high a standard and demands too much of us. Their argument goes like this. At many points in our day, when we are innocently relaxing, talking with friends, or simply at work doing our jobs, we could probably be doing something else instead that would create more good. Instead of watching television tonight, we could visit a nursing home to chat and play cards with its elderly residents. Instead of going to the beach with friends, we could work with the homeless. Instead of buying a new car, we could make do with our old one and give the rest of the money to charity. And so on: Our lives are rarely so productive of good that it would be impossible for us to do more. In principle, or so the critics contend, consequentialism requires us to work around the clock for the general good.

How much sacrifice consequentialism demands of us will, again, depend on the values the consequentialist wants to see maximized. Furthermore, we must bear in mind the good that (on almost any plausible value theory) is likely to come from permitting people to pursue, as much as possible, their own goals and plans, as well as the possibility that it may bring better results "for a man to aim rather at goods affecting himself and those in whom he has a strong personal interest, than to attempt a more extended beneficence" (Moore, 1968, pp. 166–7). Suppose, however, that when conjoined with our most plausible theory of good, consequentialism entails that morality demands much, much more of us than people ordinarily think. It doesn't follow from this that consequentialism is mistaken. Intuitions about these matters, in particular, intuitions about how much effort, time, or money morality obliges us to expend to assist those who need our assistance, are an unreliable foundation for normative theorizing because those intuitions reflect social expectations and customary practice in a socioeconomic system, the norms of which are themselves open to assessment.

There are, however, compelling reasons for believing that consequentialists will not advocate a norm requiring (for example) that people give away most of what they have to help those in other parts of the world who need it more. Instead, they will uphold the less demanding norm that we should aid strangers when the benefit to them is great and the cost to ourselves comparatively minor. Trying to instill the more demanding norm would be difficult, and the psychological and other costs of doing so (that is, of getting people to feel guilty about not giving away most of what they have) would be high. It is doubtful whether we could ever succeed in motivating people to comply with such a norm – at least not over the long run. In addressing problems such as hunger and disease in the Third World, consequentialists will arguably do more good by upholding a less demanding norm and by supporting the institutions necessary to take on these tasks, thereby reducing the

burden on individual beneficence. (For more on these issues, see Shaw, 1999, pp. 129–132, 261–287.)

Conclusion

This essay has explained the consequentialist approach to ethics, sketched the rich normative resources at its disposal, given reasons for finding the theory appealing, and defended it against some common criticisms. In this way, I hope to have shown that consequentialism provides an account of right and wrong that is morally attractive, philosophically respectable, and viable in practice. However, a full explication and defense of consequentialism would require further discussion of many matters. Among other things, it would require us to say more about the good and to assess in more detail rival normative approaches.

Note

This essay is a revised and abridged version of “The Consequentialist Perspective,” in James Dreier, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 5–20.

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