

CONSEQUENTIALISM

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Summary

Consequentialism is the family of theories that holds that acts are morally right, wrong, or indifferent by virtue of their consequences. Less formally and more intuitively, according to consequentialism, right acts are those with good consequences. There are many versions of consequentialism.

Hedonistic act utilitarianism holds that acts are right, wrong, or indifferent by virtue of the pleasure they produce; an action is right if it produces the maximum possible pleasure and wrong if it does not. Satisficing consequentialism holds that an act is right if it produces consequences that are “good enough.” Progressive consequentialism holds that a right action is one whose consequences improve the world.

Rule-consequentialism is the view that an action is right if it is in accord with the set of rules that, if generally or universally accepted, would satisfy the consequentialist principle, while motive consequentialism is the view that an act is right if it issues from the set of motives that would satisfy the consequentialist principle.

Versions of consequentialism vary radically in their plausibility. The objections most frequently deployed against consequentialism are the demandingness objection, the special relations objection, and the rights and justice objection. Very few considerations will count against all versions of consequentialism. In order for a theory to be robust, it must be able to account for new phenomena with which it previously had not been in contact. Consequentialism is better situated than other traditional families of moral theory to account for such emerging problems as population, the value of nature, and the impacts of new technologies. As long as the Enlightenment project of rational reflection on values persists, consequentialism will continue to make its influence felt.

1. Introduction

Consequentialism is the family of theories that holds that acts are morally right, wrong, or indifferent by virtue of their consequences. Less formally and more intuitively, according to consequentialism, right acts are those with good consequences.

While the term “consequentialism” may be recent, the idea is ancient. Scarre in *Utilitarianism* finds consequentialists in China in the fifth century B.C.E. and in Greece in the fourth century B.C.E. He even claims Jesus for the consequentialist camp. Whatever its origins, consequentialism came of age in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it was the dominant philosophy of the mature Enlightenment. Consequentialism was an important intellectual current in pre-revolutionary France, with the writings of Chastellux (1734–1788) and Helvetius (1715–1771) of special significance.

However, consequentialism’s influence has been greatest in the English-speaking world, where it was developed by an extraordinary line of philosophers ranging chronologically from Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) to Peter Singer (1946–), and including such figures as David Hume (1711–1776), Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900), G.E. Moore (1873–1958), J.J.C. Smart (1920–), and R.M. Hare (1919–). In addition to these “secular” consequentialists, “theological” consequentialists such as Richard Cumberland (1632–1718), Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), and William Paley (1743–1805) also made important contributions. Indeed, it was Priestley who converted Bentham to consequentialism. Historically, consequentialism has been associated with social and political movements aimed at broadening political participation, abolishing slavery, securing the rights of women, and improving the treatment of non-human animals.

This article provides a broad, systematic overview that sketches the general character of consequentialism, reveals its structure, characterizes some of its most influential versions, discusses some common objections, and assesses consequentialism’s prospects for future development.

2. The Character of Consequentialism

Consequentialism is a universalistic doctrine. What matters morally is consequences *simpliciter*: not the consequences for me, you, the king, or any individual to the exclusion of the consequences for all. While this conclusion was not explicitly drawn in a completely clear-minded way until Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*, from the beginning it was a powerful tendency in consequentialist thought. Indeed, it was this universalism that led consequentialists to advocate the rights of women and the abolition of slavery, and motivated Jeremy Bentham to write:

The day *may* come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum* are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the

same fate . . . The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?

From its universalism it follows that consequentialism is incompatible with egoism. All of the consequences matter in assessing acts, not just those that affect the actors.

One thorny nest of issues that consequentialists must face concerns the nature of action and the relations between actions and consequences. In this article the terms “act” and “action” are used more or less interchangeably, but there are grounds for distinguishing them. There are also serious philosophical wrangles about how to understand, classify, and individuate acts and actions. More pressing for consequentialists are questions about the relations between actions and consequences.

On the face of it, it would appear that agents cause actions that cause consequences by bringing about states of affairs or events. For example, we might say that Kelly’s black eye was caused by Sean’s punching him. While this may seem obvious, some philosophers would deny that the relationship between agents and actions is in fact causal.

More troubling is the question of whether actions can constitute consequences as well as causing them. If bringing a lie into the world is in fact a consequence of lying, then it would seem that consequentialists can assign value (or disvalue) to acts themselves (e.g. lies), as well as to the events or states of affairs that they causally bring about. This would allow the development of versions of consequentialism (often called ideal-consequentialism) that can occupy much of the terrain that anti-consequentialists (such as deontologists) claim for themselves.

In addition to these important issues, there are various other features that serve to distinguish among consequentialist theories. One concerns the distinction between actual versus probable, foreseeable, or intended consequences. This distinction matters in the following sort of case. Suppose that Kelly picks up a hitchhiker, believing that she is a well-meaning, decent person who needs a lift. In fact she is a serial killer on the way to do her work. The actual consequences of Kelly’s act are bad while the probable, foreseeable, or intended consequences may have been good. Whether we classify Kelly’s act as right or wrong depends on whether we think that it is actual (as opposed to probable, foreseeable, or intended) consequences that matter in the assessment of action.

3. The Structure of Consequentialism

A consequentialist theory includes at least the following elements: an account of the property(ies) by virtue of which consequences make actions right, wrong, or indifferent (i.e. a theory of value); a principle that specifies how or to what extent the property(ies) must obtain in order for an action to be right, wrong, or indifferent; and a story about the level at which actions are evaluated. While this is abstract, an example will help to clarify these elements.

Hedonistic act utilitarianism is the version of consequentialism that holds that acts are right, wrong, or indifferent by virtue of the pleasure they produce. An action is right if it

produces the maximum possible pleasure and wrong if it does not. It is the individual acts open to agents that are evaluated.

By modifying these three elements, a wide range of alternative doctrines can be generated. Consider some examples. Ideal act utilitarianism is identical to hedonistic act utilitarianism except that it holds that the properties by virtue of which consequences are right-making are such ideals as honesty, truth-telling, courage, or whatever. On this view someone who tells the truth when lying would contribute most to the welfare of all concerned, would still be doing the right thing if truth-telling is an instance of and promotes honesty, and honesty is the right-making property of consequences. Modifying the maximization principle allows us to generate hedonistic act minimalism, which holds that any act that produces pleasure is right. Kelly can do the right thing either by volunteering at the homeless shelter or by playing his favorite Britney Spears record, since both acts produce pleasure. Finally, by changing the story about the level at which acts are evaluated we can arrive at hedonistic lifetime utilitarianism, which holds that acts are right if they are part of a life that produces more pleasure than any other life that the agent could have led.

It should be obvious that these four variants of consequentialism generate quite different judgments about the same act. Suppose that the following acts are open to Kelly: a night of passion with Sean, an evening at a character-building workshop, or a crime spree with Robin. If the right set of facts obtains, then the four versions of consequentialism that have been sketched would deliver the following judgments. Hedonistic act utilitarianism would declare that Kelly should choose the night of passion since that would be the pleasure-maximizing act. Ideal act utilitarianism would endorse the character-building workshop since Kelly's attendance would do more to contribute to the realization of relevant ideals than any other act. If we suppose that the crime spree happens to be (a perhaps deviant but necessary) part of the possible life history that produces more pleasure overall than any other life open to Kelly, then hedonistic lifetime utilitarianism judges the crime spree to be morally right. Finally, hedonistic act minimalism claims that all of the acts open to Kelly would be right, on the assumption that Kelly would take pleasure in any of them.

This brief discussion of these four versions of consequentialism brings out the following important features. First, the conceptual space that consequentialism describes is vast and largely under-explored. Second, versions of consequentialism vary radically in their plausibility. Finally, very few considerations will count against all versions of consequentialism.

On the last point consider an example. One of the objections most frequently deployed against consequentialism is the demandingness objection. Consequentialism is too demanding to be a plausible moral theory, it is claimed, since it makes us responsible for all the consequences of our actions, however indirect, and thus requires too much of us. True, consequentialism does hold us responsible for all the consequences of our actions, and this may count against those versions of consequentialism that set the standard of rightness very high. But the standard of rightness can also be set very low, and thus consequentialism may demand very little. Even the most committed slacker might turn out to be a moral saint when judged by the standard of hedonistic act

minimalism, which requires us only to produce some amount of pleasure, however small.

It is easy, of course, to invent unmotivated, implausible variants of views that are described by minimally explicated abstract structures. The real action is in identifying and evaluating those views that are both motivated and plausible.

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Biographical Sketch

Dale Jamieson is the Henry R. Luce Professor in Human Dimensions of Global Change at Carleton College, Minnesota, adjunct scientist in the Environmental and Societal Impacts Group (ESIG) at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, Colorado, and adjunct professor at University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. Currently, he is a Laurence S. Rockefeller Fellow in the

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