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Introduction¹

Roughly speaking, consequentialism is the theory that the way to tell whether a particular choice is the right choice for an agent to have made is to look at the relevant consequences of the decision: to look at the relevant effects of the decision on the world. In directing us to consequences the theory is teleological in focus; the term comes from the Greek work *telos*, meaning end or goal. It is opposed to any sort of deontological approach; this term comes from the Greek work *deon*, meaning obligation or duty. Where consequentialism would assess a choice by looking at its consequences, a deontological approach would assess it by looking at how the choice measured up to the obligations incumbent on the agent.

Consequentialism has been at the centre of ethical and meta-ethical debate over the past quarter of a century and more. This collection of essays is designed to highlight the questions raised in relation to consequentialism and to provide suitable readings on each question. I distinguish nine major questions that have come up again and again in those debates and I have organized the table of contents around them. Perhaps the best thing for me to do in introducing the volume is to comment in turn on each of these issues.

The first question is the basic one of why one should be a consequentialist rather than a deontologist; these options may not be exhaustive but they are the salient possibilities. Surprisingly, there has been very little discussion of this question in the literature. Consequentialists tend to assume that, if one is to be rational about the enterprise of moral assessment, then there is no alternative to looking at the consequences – the consequences, neutrally or impersonally characterized – of the choices assessed. How could it be rational, they ask, to neglect any such consequences? They assume that, if deontologists think otherwise, that is because of an unquestioning commitment to a theological or a commonsense viewpoint. A theological viewpoint might suggest that human agents ought to fulfil prescribed obligations and let God look after the consequences. And a commonsense viewpoint might support the attitude that the important thing in moral decision making is to look after one's own moral standing, to keep one's own hands clean, and not to worry overmuch, except perhaps in exceptional circumstances, about any bad consequences that may follow on this.

There is also a second reason why consequentialists may not have concerned themselves much with providing a defence of their position. Consequentialists are a mixed bunch, for they differ among themselves on the question of which substantive sorts of consequences are the ones by reference to which choices ought to be assessed. For example, they divide into utilitarians and non-utilitarians, depending on whether or not they accept the view that it is only consequences that bear on the utility of sentient beings which matter: only consequences that affect the happiness or preference-satisfaction of such beings. Being a mixed bunch, consequentialists tend each to be concerned more with arguing for their particular view of what consequences count than with arguing for the shared consequentialist credo that it is indeed consequences that matter, and not the sort of thing on which deontologists focus.

But if consequentialists have not done much by way of arguing for their position, what have been the issues debated between them and deontologists? These have mainly had to do

with how far consequentialism can support firm commonsense intuitions about what is morally right. Deontologists typically object to consequentialism that, in one way or another, it would undermine otherwise compelling moral attitudes. Rather than providing positive reasons for adopting their position, consequentialists have often been content to try to deal with those objections or to try to argue that, while the points made are valid, they are not as important as deontologists make them seem.

The issues between consequentialists and deontologists are often explicated by reference to a distinction between agent-neutrally justified and agent-relatively justified choices. It may be useful to comment briefly on this. As already suggested, the consequentialist counts only neutrally or impersonally characterized consequences as relevant to whether a choice is right. Such consequences will be characterized without reference to particular individuals and therefore without reference back to the person making the choice; it is a relevant consequence that happiness will be increased, or that life will thrive, but not that the chooser will have kept his promise, or that he or his will benefit in some way. Thus the consequentialist holds that a choice is right only if it is neutrally and, in particular, agent-neutrally justified. The deontologist opposes this claim. He sticks by commonsense intuitions that some promises should be kept, come what may; some rights respected, no matter what the results; some loyalties honoured, regardless of the effects; and so on. And in maintaining that a person may be bound to keep a promise, or respect a right, or be loyal to a friend, regardless of the fact that the consequences of that choice are relatively undesirable, he is saying that a choice may be right in virtue of an agent-relative justification: it enables the agent to keep *his* promise, honour this right invoked against *him*, and be loyal to *his* friend, and so on.

Because the first question has not been prominent in recent debate, I have only reprinted one essay relevant to the question. I have selected this essay because it may serve to explain and motivate the consequentialist presumption that there is really no alternative to looking at consequences – neutrally characterized consequences – in the assessment of choice.

The next three questions in my list of nine concern the nature of consequentialism, rather than its rationale. Question two is whether consequentialism should be seen as a theory of the right or a theory of the good. To say that something is good is to hold that it has a certain value, in particular a certain positive value. To say that something is right is to hold that, in some relevant choice, it is what ought to be chosen. Only options or potential options can be right or wrong; any sort of entity, option or not, can be good or bad. And, to complicate things further, rightness and goodness may come apart with options. An option that is wrong may yet be an object of great value; it may be wrong simply because another option is an object of even greater value. An option that is right, on the other hand, may not be something of great value; it may be right, simply because it is the least bad option among a very poor set of alternatives. A theory of good, a theory of value, would enable us to determine the values of different entities, options included. A theory of the right would enable us to determine, for any set of options, or at least for any set of options in a certain category, which alternative or sub-set of alternatives is the right one.

When I speak of what is good, and of what has value, I have in mind an impersonal or agent-neutral conception of goodness and value. Something is agent-neutrally valued just in case the basis on which it is valued can be articulated without reference back to the valuer. Something is agent-relatively valued just in case this is not so. If I value a prospect for the increase of happiness it promises, or even for a particular effect it will have, say on planet

Earth, then I value it agent-neutrally. If I value it for the benefits it will have for me or mine, or for the fact that it will keep my hands clean, or for any reason of that self-referential kind, then I value it agent-relatively. The theory of the good, or the theory of the valuable, refers to the theory of what ought to be agent-neutrally valued.

Does consequentialism present itself as a theory of the good or as a theory of the right, or as something involving commitments in both areas? That is the second question on my list. Consequentialists themselves tend to say that the theory is concerned only with the right, not with the good. But that position has required argument, as consequentialists and deontologists tend to focus on different values and may seem to be in essential conflict here. The majority of consequentialists have been utilitarians who think that something can be of value only so far as it bears on the happiness or preference satisfaction of sentient beings. Many deontologists are unwilling to talk about what is agent-neutrally good; they claim to offer a theory of the right that is independent of any theory of the good. But those who commit themselves explicitly on what is agent-neutrally valuable concentrate on different sorts of goods from most consequentialists: goods to do with honouring promises, for example, keeping faith with friends and respecting people. And even those who do not commit themselves explicitly invite the ascription of similar non-utilitarian commitments: they hold that it is right for this or that person to keep a promise or respect a right and, by universalization, commit themselves to believing that it is right for anyone in such a position to keep that sort of promise or respect that sort of right; they acknowledge as agent-neutrally good or valuable the universal state of affairs in which those promises are kept, those rights respected. This divergence on matters of value has suggested to some that consequentialism and deontology offer different views of what is good, as well as different views on what makes an option right.

The standard consequentialist line is that this suggestion is misleading. From the point of view of consequentialists, the question as to what makes for the value of different states of affairs is quite distinct from the question of what makes for the rightness of a particular option. The consequentialist holds that an option is right just in case it is associated with better relevant consequences than alternatives, however the superiority of those consequences is to be judged: whether by reference to a utilitarian theory of the good, for example, or by reference to some other theory. Henceforth I shall assume in my discussion that this line is defensible and that consequentialism is uncommitted in the theory of the good; it amounts only to a theory of the right.

Question three is the second of the three questions that bear on the nature of consequentialism. This is the question as to whether consequentialism is just a theory for determining which choice is the right one for an agent or agency to have made or whether it is also meant to be a theory whereby the decision maker reaches a conclusion.

There is a long tradition among the opponents of consequentialist doctrines, in particular the opponents of utilitarianism, of suggesting that consequentialists are committed to holding that every choice should be made in a highly calculative, actuarial mode. F.H. Bradley made the point in the last century, writing about the utilitarian approach: 'So far as my lights go, this is to make possible, to justify, and even to encourage, an incessant practical casuistry; and that, it need scarcely be added, is the death of morality.'² Consequentialists have almost always resisted this charge. Thus Henry Sidgwick in the last century, and J.J.C. Smart in this, have argued forcibly that utilitarianism does not require that agents all make their decisions by explicit reference to how the options will do by the promotion of happiness.³ The point

they have wanted to make was nicely summed up early in the nineteenth century by the jurist, John Austin, in defending the utilitarian thinker: 'Though he approves of love because it accords with his principle, he is far from maintaining that the general good ought to be the motive of the lover. It was never contended or conceived by a sound, orthodox utilitarian, that the lover should kiss his mistress with an eye to the common weal.'⁴

As recent consequentialists have almost all taken the view that consequentialism is a theory of the right, not a theory of the good, so they have nearly unanimously argued that it is a theory for assessing the right option for an agent or an agency to have made, not necessarily a useful theory to be applied in decision making. The sort of point which is made in this literature, including the literature selected here, is that making one's decision by reference to which option has the best consequences may be a way of making one's decision that does not itself have the best consequences. Suppose one is concerned with one's own pleasure, for example. It is notorious that the agent who makes her decisions by reference to which option will promote the most pleasure may actually enjoy less pleasure than someone who makes her decisions in a more spontaneous fashion; say, by reference to certain rules of thumb.

Perhaps the question most hotly debated about the nature of consequentialism is question four on our list. This is the question as to whether consequentialism is a theory for evaluating any option that an agent or agency faces, or just a theory for evaluating abstract rules with which options may comply or fail to comply. Suppose I consider the choice between two rules of action: say, the rule of always being hospitable to neighbours or the rule of only being hospitable when inclination leads that way. I may decide that, as between these rules, the better one to follow – it will probably be the one that produces the most happiness in my neighbourhood – is the first. But does that mean that any action I perform in compliance to that rule is the right option to have chosen in the particular circumstances on hand? In particular, does it mean this, even if in those circumstances it would have been better to make an exception and infringe the rule?

Rule-consequentialists hold that it is appropriate only to assess abstract rules by reference to consequences – that whether this or that rule is the right one to follow is determined by consequences – and that the rightness of more particular options is determined by whether they comply with the right rules. Act-consequentialists – option-consequentialists, as I prefer to call them – argue that there is no reason to restrict the range of consequentialism in this way. They hold that, if one is a consequentialist, one should in consistency be a consequentialist about assessing, not just abstract rules, but also any option that an agent or agency is likely to face. Sometimes option-consequentialists have argued, not only that their position is the more coherent, but that rule-consequentialism proves on examination not really to be a distinct alternative.⁵ The more or less standard view nowadays is that while option-consequentialism is more uniformly consequentialist in its approach to assessment – in that sense it may be more coherent than rule-consequentialism – rule-consequentialism does represent a real alternative.

I said earlier that I would assume henceforth, as the standard line has it, that consequentialism is a theory of the right, not a theory of the good. I will assume, equally, that it is a theory of evaluation, not a theory of deliberation; and that it is a theory for assessing all options that can face an agent or agency, not just a theory for assessing abstract rules of choice. This takes me to question five. The question is whether consequentialism is a collectively satisfactory theory, and it is closely related to the last issue discussed; indeed it has not always

been sharply distinguished from that issue in the literature. A collectively satisfactory theory is a theory such that it is not forced to evaluate the choices of individuals positively in any case where those choices collectively lead to a result that is worse by the relevant theory of the good than other possible collective outcomes. Suppose we had a society of utilitarians, each of whom acted in a way that utilitarians would approve. Is it possible that the collective result of their so acting might be worse than the collective result of actions that did not individually earn utilitarian approval? Is it possible, in particular, that the collective result might be worse in utilitarian terms: that it might actually lead to less human happiness or preference satisfaction than certain alternatives?⁶

Opinions are divided on the answer to this question. Some are happy to say that a consequentialist theory can be self-defeating in this way; they hold that, if agents try to do what is best by the theory, or succeed in doing what is best by the theory, then the collective results may still be worse in their own terms than it might have been.⁷ Others will want to deny this, arguing that, where that result appears to hold, it usually transpires that one of the options before the individuals is not being taken into account: say, the option of exploring possibilities of cooperation with others, rather than acting unilaterally, or the option of seeking further information on the prospects facing the agent.⁸ Among those who admit the possibility that a consequentialist theory may be collectively unsatisfactory, opinions are equally divided on how far this is damaging to consequentialism. The prisoner's dilemma is often taken to show that what is individually rational may not be collectively rational: each of two prisoners confesses to a crime because, whatever the other does, confessing promises a better result than refusing to confess; yet each would be better off by both refusing to confess than they are by both confessing. Why should it not be the case, so these thinkers will argue, that what is individually right may not be collectively right; that what individuals unilaterally combine to do is not what it would be right for the collectivity, did the collectivity have the status of an agent, to do?

Questions six, seven and eight bear on matters of some detail that are discussed within the ranks of consequentialists. They are important matters, as the essays selected should indicate, but they are matters of in-house debate.

Question six bears on how we should identify the alternatives to be evaluated in any decision. Should an agent do A or B, we ask. A, we answer, because its consequences do better on the relevant theory of the good. But what if there is some other option C which the agent might have chosen instead and which would have itself been better than A? This sort of example alerts us to the fact that in the consequentialist assessment of any choice we have to be clear about what are the relevant alternatives to bring into consideration. The question about alternatives has not received as much attention as it deserves in the literature but I include two essays relevant to the matter, on the grounds of its inherent importance.⁹

Question seven has been more widely debated in consequentialist circles. This is the issue as to whether, in looking at the decision an agent or agency ought to have made, we consider the actual consequences of the option chosen and the consequences that would have followed on alternatives; or whether, rather, we look at the expected consequences at the time of choice.¹⁰ If the answer is that we should look at expected rather than actual consequences, then the question is whether we should look at the subjectively expected consequences – in the manner of decision theory – or whether we should look at the consequences that were in some sense objectively expected.

Suppose that a doctor prescribes a drug for a non-fatal skin condition, which has the following features: there is a 10 per cent chance that it will kill the patient, an 80 per cent chance that it will make no difference, and a 10 per cent chance that it will cure her complaint. Imagine that the drug works and the complaint is cured. Does consequentialism take its cue from actual consequences and say that the doctor made the right choice? Or does it look to expected consequences, whether subjectively or objectively expected, and say that the doctor made the wrong choice? That is the issue here.

The third more or less in-house issue, question eight, is whether consequentialism should hold that the right option is that which does best by relevant consequences – that which is optimific – or whether it is sufficient for an option to be right that it does well enough, as we might say, by the relevant consequences. Some theories of rationality are maximizing theories, requiring rational agents to maximize some function, whereas others are satisficing theories: these require rational agents just to perform satisfactorily by some relevant criterion. The question here is whether consequentialism should not take the softer, satisficing line, rather than the stern, maximizing one.¹¹

This takes us, finally, to the last question, whether consequentialism conflicts with commonsense morality. This issue, in one form or another, is at the core of much of the consequentialist literature of the past quarter of a century and many of the essays included under the other questions are concerned with it; in particular, they are concerned to argue that consequentialism does not run into any damaging conflict with common sense. For that reason, the essays that I have selected on this question mainly represent the opposition line. They all suggest, in one way or another, that consequentialism fails to preserve important commonsense intuitions: intuitions, it is alleged, which few of us would be prepared to give up.

The intuitions involved come in three broad categories.¹² First of all, there is an intuition that we are not always obliged to do what is best: that, in some cases, it is perfectly all right to do less than the best, though it would be an act of heroism to do the best. Second, there is an intuition that, if we are to be virtuous, then often we must act without regard to overall, impersonal goals: we must act in a way that shows us to be a friend, a person of integrity, a keeper of promises, or whatever. Third, perhaps most tellingly, there is an intuition that the rights of other people bind us in certain ineluctable ways: there are certain harms we may not cause them, regardless of the good that would come of it. The essays selected raise these and other, related, matters.

The debate between consequentialism and deontology goes on. But the discussions of the last quarter-century or so have made for real gains and, while there has not been much convergence in the field, there is at least a greater degree of clarity about the issues involved. I hope that the essays selected for reprinting here will bear out my belief that in this regard the philosophical debate about consequentialism has generated real progress.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful for comments received from Ian Ravenscroft, Michael Smith and John Skorupski.
- 2 F.H. Bradley (1876) (1962), *Ethical Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 3 See Henry Sidgwick (1956), *The Methods of Ethics*, New York: Don Press; J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams (1973), *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 4 John Austin (1832) (1954), *The Province of Jurisprudence*, ed. H.L.A. Hart, London: Weidenfeld, p. 108.
- 5 See David Lyons (1965), *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 6 See D.H. Hodgson (1967), *Consequences of Utilitarianism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 7 See Derek Parfit (1984), *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 8 See D.H. Regan (1980), *Utilitarianism and Cooperation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 9 See Lars Bergstrom (1966), *The Alternatives and Consequences of Actions*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.
- 10 See C.I. Lewis (1969), *Values and Intentions*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- 11 See Michael Slote (1985), *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism*, London: Routledge, and (1989), *Beyond Optimizing: A Study of Rational Choice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- 12 See Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (eds) (1982), *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sam Scheffler (1982), *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; R.G. Frey (ed.) (1984), *Utility and Rights*, Oxford: Blackwell; and Sam Scheffler (ed.) (1988), *Consequentialism and its Critics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.