

WHAT IS CONSEQUENTIALISM?

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Elinor Mason explains and contrasts consequentialist and duty-based theories of ethics.

Everyone agrees that the consequences of our actions matter morally – but some people think that *only* the consequences matter. According to consequentialism, we ought to do what has the best consequences, and it doesn't matter if that involves lying, or stealing, or even killing an innocent person. Nothing is forbidden for the consequentialist, all that matters is the consequences of what is done. Can this view be right? Surely there are some things that we should never do no matter what the consequences! We have here one of the fundamental disagreements in the history of moral philosophy, with deontologists, such as Kant, arguing that there are rules that should be followed even when the consequences are very bad, and some things that we must never do even if the consequences are disastrous, and consequentialists, such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, arguing that we should decide what to do on the basis of consequences alone. Contemporary philosophers have not reached agreement on the issue, and a quick look at the contents of any ethics journal will confirm that we are still fighting our corners with gusto. The issue is not merely academic: the debate that is currently going on about the acceptability of torture can be understood as a debate about whether or not there are some things that are morally unjustifiable no matter what the consequences.

We can't sum up consequentialism or deontology with any simple aphorisms – aphorisms are usually ambiguous. Take the dictum, 'the end justifies the means'. It is not clear what is being said here – does it mean that any end

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justifies any means? That would be absurd – imagine that my end is to improve the environmental policies of the corporation I work for. I might be justified in missing my niece's birthday party in order to get extra work done over the weekend, but I am not justified in killing my boss so as to take his place. No consequentialist would say that any end justifies any means – no-one would say that. So perhaps the dictum only means that *sometimes* a good end can make up for some badness in the means. But that isn't saying very much at all. In fact, no-one would disagree with that – the disagreement comes when we try to decide *when* the goodness of the ends can make up for badness in the means! Take another common saying: 'Do as you would be done by', often referred to as the 'golden rule'. Again, it is not at all clear what that means – should I do *exactly* what I want done to me? Should I buy a first edition of Hume's *Treatise* for a starving child in Africa? That would be absurd – the rule must be taken less literally, to mean something like, do unto others what you would want done to you if you were in a similar position. But that's not very clear either – why think that all people would want the same things in similar positions? So we should modify the rule further – and we will end up with something like, treat people as it is appropriate to treat them. Again, we have ended up with something that is not very helpful.

If philosophy has anything to offer the world, it is clarification of the questions that we are interested in. It seems that in order to say anything sensible about the debate between consequentialism and deontology, we need to know what counts as a consequence, what counts as an act, how we measure and compare the value of consequences, and so on. These are complicated questions, and there are many different versions of consequentialism and many different versions of deontology. Some deontologists think that we should never lie, others that we can lie under certain circumstances – some think that we should never kill an innocent person, others that we can kill an innocent person under certain circumstances. Different deontologists

give different accounts of the rationale for the rules: Kant thinks that he can show that the categorical imperative ('act in such a way that your act falls under a universal law') can be deduced using nothing more than logical thought. Contemporary Kantians usually abandon this aspect of Kant's thought, and argue that the basic rationale behind the categorical imperative is something like respect for others. Intuitionists, such as W. D. Ross, think that we see moral truths through a special sort of intuition, and that no more can be said about the rationale for the principles or the way in which they are ordered. Some contemporary deontologists argue, in the tradition of Hobbes and Locke, that the crucial thing is that we should be able to justify our principles to others.

Consequentialists disagree about which consequences are important – the classic utilitarians Bentham and Mill argued that pleasure is the only value, and that we should maximise pleasure. Some contemporary consequentialists think that the classic utilitarians were right about this, but others argue that what matters is the satisfaction of preferences, or a list of objective goods, such as truth and beauty; and some consequentialists are pluralists about the good, arguing that all of these things are good, and it may not be possible to order them precisely. Most consequentialists think that we should aim for the best outcome, but some think that we should aim to bring about an outcome that is 'good enough'. Then there are various complex and more or less technical issues about how we add up the value in consequences: should we look at the average or the total? And how should we deal with probability? (we can't know what the consequences of our actions will be in advance, so we have to use some account of probable consequences in deciding what to do).

So the debate between consequentialism and deontology often gets lost in the debates between different versions of each. Some philosophers think that that is as it should be – that there is no important distinction between consequentialism and deontology. Some philosophers have even

argued that that there is no distinction at all between consequentialism and deontology. But that doesn't seem right – surely there is something important in the distinction: some fundamental difference in the basic picture of morality. Something that we could talk about without talking about the various complex issues arising for particular versions of consequentialism or deontology.

So let's go back to the beginning. According to consequentialism, only the consequences of an act are relevant in determining whether it ought to be done. Whereas, according to deontology, whether an action falls under other principles can also be relevant. One way to cash this out might be to say that consequentialists think that morality is about consequences, whereas deontologists think that morality is about rules and principles. However, although there may be something in this, it is not satisfactory. Consequentialists also think that morality is about principles: most importantly the overriding principle that you ought to produce the best consequences. Another way we might capture the difference is to say that for consequentialism, the good is prior to the right, and for deontology, the right is prior to the good. Perhaps there is something in this, but as it stands it is not very helpful – it is no clearer than what we started with.

Consequentialist and deontological theories are moral theories – their purpose is to tell people how to behave. They both tell people how to behave by giving them rules to follow, and so are similar in that respect. The difference between them is not to be found in the account of which particular things are morally important (Animals? Happiness? Equality?), as both are neutral on that topic. The important difference, if there is one, is in *how we think about* what matters – how we structure value. The question here is not about whether there is any such thing as value at all (we have to leave that question aside for now) – the question is, once we have taken for granted that some things are valuable, or matter morally, how should we think about that value? For example, let's agree that (in some

fixed set of circumstances) Bill shouldn't steal Angela's horse. It matters morally that Angela doesn't have her horse taken from her by Bill. But what exactly is doing the mattering here? Is it that Bill is stealing, or that Angela is losing her horse? Your first reaction might be that that's a silly question – both matter. So we can add some variations to the example in order to isolate the two options from each other. In all of the following cases assume that the only relevant differences are the ones I mention. When I say that Bill 'steals', I mean that he takes Angela's horse without her knowledge or prior consent, and with no thought that she would consent if she knew what he was doing.

1. B steals A's horse and gives it to someone much more needy than A.
2. B steals A's horse in order to rescue the horse from A's cruel treatment.
3. B steals A's horse because it is an essential part of the only way that he can save the world.
4. B steals A's horse and keeps it for himself.
5. B steals A's horse in order to trample some noisy local children to death.

The thought experiment is not designed to show that consequentialism and deontology will give different answers to the question of whether 1-5 are permissible – it is quite likely that the most plausible versions of both consequentialism and deontology will both say that and 3 is certainly permissible, and 2 may be permissible, but the others are not.

The point is to focus our thoughts about what's really important here. In each of the examples, Bill steals the horse. However, the cases are all different apart from that, and they are different in various ways. First, it is clear that Bill's intentions differ in the different cases. It might be tempting to think that for the deontologist, Bill's intentions are what matter, whereas for the consequentialist, only the

outcome matters. But that would be a mistake – intentions matter for both consequentialists and deontologists. The very notion of stealing involves an appeal to the intentions of the agent – a *mens rea*. It wouldn't be stealing if Bill sincerely and with good reason thought that Angela had given him permission to take the horse. Intentions are important to consequentialists too. Imagine that Bill has a very good chance of saving the world from some abominable threat, but he needs Angela's horse. He steals it, and sets off to save the world. Unfortunately, Angela has accidentally taken a drug that makes her homicidal, and when she finds out what Bill has done, she gives chase, catching up with Bill and killing both him and the horse. The vast majority of consequentialists agree that Bill did the right thing, and though it ended badly, there is no way that Bill could have or should have foreseen what was going to happen. Bill was following the consequentialist principle, 'act so as to bring about the best outcome', and so according to consequentialism, Bill was acting rightly. So intentions matter to deontologists and consequentialists in exactly the same way – in order to say that an agent followed the rule, whether it is a deontological rule or a consequentialist one, we need to know the *mens* as well as the *actus*, to put it in legal terms. Of course, we don't always know for sure what someone intends when they act, and this is why the legal system employs complex procedures to make the best possible guess about what has happened in a particular case. Luckily we are doing theory here, not practice, so we don't need to worry about whether we can tell what someone's intentions are.

The difference between consequentialism and deontology then, is not that one is concerned with rules and one is not, and it is not that one is concerned with intentions and one is not. Nor is the difference in what those rules and intentions are about – both consequentialist theories and deontological ones could be fundamentally about human happiness, for example. The difference is in the way that value is conceptualised. Look at the list of cases

above. In all the cases there is a theft. In some of the cases, the outcome is good, and in some it is bad. Let's stipulate that in all the cases the outcome is as Bill intends, so we don't have to worry about cases like the accidental drug taking case. The point of the cases is to make us reflect on what *makes* Bill's acts wrong when he acts wrongly. Is it just that there is an act of theft? If the problem is merely that there is an act of theft, all the cases should be equally wrong – but surely no-one would say that. This opens the door to saying that what makes theft wrong when it is wrong is not that it is theft, but that it has (predictable) bad results. Of course, that is precisely what the consequentialist says.

Now we are in a position to make more sense of the claim that consequentialists put the good prior to the right. That just means that for consequentialists, acts are right or wrong because of the amount of good they produce. For deontologists, the rightness or wrongness of acts is, to some extent, independent of the amount of goodness or badness they produce. This formulation of the difference between consequentialism and deontology is common in philosophy, but we might think that it stacks the deck in favour of the consequentialist. For why on earth would anyone accept that there is such a thing as good to be produced, but then claim that sometimes we ought to produce less good even when we could produce more? Deontological rules begin to look like constraints on producing good – and the very idea of a constraint on producing the good seems odd. It's like a constraint on doing what's right – why would we constrain right action?

In some circumstances, it makes sense to say that less of a good thing is better than more of that thing. One cup of coffee in the morning is lovely, but if I have two I will have a headache. This makes sense because coffee is an instrumental good – we drink coffee because it *produces* good, not because it is good in itself. Of course, one things philosophers argue about is which things are good in themselves – happiness? pleasure? And so on. But one thing we cannot dispute

is that *good* is good in itself. That is a conceptual matter. It sounds silly to say that we ought to produce less good than we can, and it sounds silly to say that we ought to act rightly less often than we could. Rightness and goodness are not pursued for the sake of something else – they are final goals. If deontology is the view that there are constraints on producing good, it does not seem compelling. On the other hand, a deontological claim put simply, can seem very compelling. For example, that it is wrong to steal, regardless of the purpose of the theft.

So we are back to the question of what the fundamental difference between consequentialism and deontology is. I suggest, again, that it is a difference in the way that the theories think about the nature of value. The vital point is that it is not the case that consequentialists and deontologists share a picture of value as being divisible into the good and the right. Rather, that is the way consequentialists see value. For the consequentialist, value is found in goods in the world (there could be one, there could be many), and those goods are there more or less independently of us. It is as if I come along and see that there is a certain amount of happiness, or friendship, or love, or whatever we think is good, and I see that I can affect the amount of it. According to the consequentialist, what I ought to do is produce as much good as possible. Indeed, once we accept that that is how value is, it is just *obvious* that we ought to produce as much as possible of it. Deontologists see value differently. For deontologists, moral value is not something that exists in the world independently of our actions, it is not something that we can produce more or less of, it is not quantifiable. In fact, it might be simpler to avoid the terms ‘value’ and ‘good’ altogether, as they have such strong connotations of something that can be quantified. According to deontology, actions are right or wrong because they obey some rule or other. That rule may mention consequences, but it may not. Deontologists see morality, and moral value, as being fundamentally about rule following.

In effect, I am returning to an earlier formulation of the difference between consequentialism and deontology, according to which consequentialists think that morality is about consequences, whereas deontologists think that morality is about rules and principles. I rejected this simple formulation because consequentialists have a rule/principle too – a principle that we ought to produce good consequences. What I hope to have clarified is the deeper sense in which deontology is ‘about’ principles. Deontologists and consequentialists alike have an overarching rule. For the consequentialist, the rule is, ‘produce good consequences’. For the deontologist, the rule is, ‘follow the rules’. The underlying picture of value for consequentialism is that value is to be found in the world in a certain way, and that morality is all about that value. The underlying picture for deontology is that following certain rules is what morality is really all about.

An analogy with a debate in political philosophy may help here. There are two different ways that we might approach the issue of distributive justice. We might think that what matters is the distribution that we end up with. We might think, for example, that a distribution is fair if it is more or less equal – no-one has vastly more than anyone else. On the other hand, we might think that what matters is not how things end up, but what people did in producing a certain distribution. We might think that there are certain rules of conduct that people should follow (do not steal, do not exploit, etc), and if, at least within limits, that results in vast inequality, so be it. These are two different ways of thinking about what matters. On the one hand, it might be thought that what really matters is what people have at the end of the day – the consequentialist view. On the other hand it might be thought that what really matters is what rules people have followed – the deontological view.

I have examined various formulations of the difference between consequentialism and deontology, and argued that many of the rough and ready formulations that philosophers commonly use are misleading. There is a real and

important difference between deontology and consequentialism. It is a difference that goes to the very heart of our conception of morality.

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