

3-28-2011

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### Recommended Citation

Rudolph, Jared (2011) "Consequences and Limits: A Critique of Consequentialism," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol17/iss1/12>

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## Consequences and Limits: A Critique of Consequentialism

Jared Rudolph

Consequentialist ethical theories have been an essential part of ethical, political, and legal reasoning since before Jeremy Bentham advanced the theory of utilitarianism.<sup>1</sup> Philosophers such as Peter Singer still utilize the consequences of an action both to determine whether it should or should not be done and as a justification of its rightness or wrongness.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because of its prevalence, the adequacy of this position has long been attacked by ethical theorists. However, many of these critiques have failed to address the feasibility or internal consistency of consequentialism, instead attacking it on moral grounds. For example, when arguing against utilitarianism, such a critic would say, "Consequentialists say act X is right, but act X is wrong, so consequentialism is wrong." Moral attacks on consequentialism amount to nothing other than a weighing of one moral belief over another and ultimately any argument against consequentialism based on moral grounds will result in a shouting match.

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<sup>1</sup> Bentham, Jeremy, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Singer, Peter, "Is Act-Utilitarianism Self-Defeating," *The Philosophical Review* 81 (1972), 94-104.

In this essay, I hope to avoid a shouting match and instead will advance a critique that examines the foundations of consequentialism. I will argue that every act has consequences that are limitless in both the time and the scope of its effects. Therefore, any consequentialist ethic must account for both a limitation of those factors and a justification for this limitation. Otherwise, consequentialism cannot provide imperatives and hence fails to function as an ethical theory. In order to advance this argument, I will provide a definition of consequentialism as well as provide a brief overview of my critiques. I then will more thoroughly explain the two critiques of consequentialism advanced in this essay, that of time and scope of consequences. Finally, I will address two responses to my critiques and outline a possible response from rule consequentialism.

### Defining Consequentialism

In "Consequences of Consequentialism," David Sosa defines consequentialism as follows:

It is right for S to do A (*S ought* to do A or *S should* do A) iff no total state of affairs that would be a consequence of S's doing any alternative to A would be better than the total state of affairs that would be a consequence of S's doing A.<sup>3</sup>

While this definition is dense, the meaning is clear: if an act (A) will provide the best outcome, then it is the right act; it should be done, and it ought to be done.<sup>4</sup> For example, if I

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<sup>3</sup> Sosa, David, "Consequences of Consequentialism," *Mind* 102 (1993), 101-122.

<sup>4</sup> An important result of this conception of a consequentialist ethic is the fusion of responsibility and moral imperative. As moral agents, individuals are responsible for the consequences of their actions and therefore have a moral imperative to choose actions that would affect these consequences most positively. The consequences that a moral agent is responsible for are exactly those which they have an imperative to influence. In previous drafts of this essay, this fusion caused confusion, as distinctions were

were presented a choice between making cookies and playing Minesweeper on my computer, the rightness or wrongness of that choice would be determined by the consequences of the respective choices, rather than any inherent value of the action of making cookies or playing Minesweeper. So, the consequences of making cookies—eating cookies with my friends—are almost always better than any possible consequence of playing Minesweeper, regardless of how you define “better.” Accordingly, making cookies is the right action; it should be done, and it ought to be done.

Often times, beginning students of philosophy conflate consequentialism and utilitarianism, but there is a distinct difference between the two, which is illustrated by Henry West in his essay “Mill’s ‘Proof’ of the Principle of Utility”:

Utilitarianism is a ‘consequentialist’ doctrine: that actions are right or wrong in proportion as they produce good or bad consequences. Mill’s version is also a ‘hedonistic’ doctrine. ***Check this citation*** Consequences are good insofar as they have more happiness or less unhappiness; bad, as they have more unhappiness or less happiness; and by happiness and unhappiness, Mill means pleasure and pain.<sup>5</sup>

According to West, utilitarianism is consequentialism plus hedonism—the difference between utilitarianism and consequentialism is the imposition of the value of pleasure. The arguments in this essay will not be aimed against utilitarianism and instead will address consequentialism and its method of determining morally significant judgments from an evaluation of the consequences of an act. Consequentialism has many subtleties and different

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drawn between the responsibility over consequences of an action and the correct moral actions associated with those consequences. I hope that this explanation helps to clear up those confusions.

<sup>5</sup> West, Henry, “Mill’s ‘Proof’ of the Principle of Utility,” *Blackwell’s Guide to Mill’s Utilitarianism*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 174-183.

instantiations, but these will be discussed later in the essay, as they are employed as responses to my critiques based on time and scope. These critiques will be discussed in the next section.

### **Two Critiques: Time and Scope of Effects**

Every action has consequences that can be measured in two ways—time and scope. Differentiating between these concepts is difficult because they are so intertwined. However, I will define them separately:

*Time:* For any action to be evaluated based on its consequences, its consequences must be evaluated from a particular time. For example, if an act were to be performed on Sunday, its consequences could be evaluated by the state of affairs that resulted from that act on either Monday or Tuesday. Unfortunately, the act could have caused good consequences on Monday and bad consequences on Tuesday. As a result, the time from when an act is judged greatly determines whether or not it was a good or a bad act. There is no criteria for judging the act on either Monday or Tuesday, so a selection of a time from which to judge is arbitrary unless it establishes a way of determining a time by which to evaluate all acts deemed morally significant.

*Scope of Effects:* For any action to be evaluated based on its consequences, the scope of the effects must be limited. By “scope of the effects,” I mean to say the breadth of the repercussions of a particular action. This breadth can be infinitely large, which is problematic for assessing the rightness or wrongness of a particular action. Indeed, if a butterfly flapping its wings in Europe can result in a tsunami in the Indian Ocean, is the butterfly responsible for the flood deaths? Surely not, but to avoid this problem a consequentialist must limit what can be considered when determining the scope of effects of an action.

I understand the scope of effects may still be vague, but it is not difficult to understand if phrased in concrete terms. Consider the following example: Franny checks out a

book from the library. A month later, Zooey realizes he needs the book and goes to the library, only to find out that there are no copies left. This leads Zooey to walk to the only other library that has the book. Along the way, he is hit by a car and killed. Zooey's death is a consequence of Franny's action, but it seems inappropriate to consider Franny responsible. The scope of the effects, then, is the extent of the repercussions for which someone can be morally responsible.

In the case of Franny and Zooey, we intuitively draw a line—people typically would say that while Franny is *indirectly* responsible for Zooey's death, it is not a *direct* consequence of her action. The division of direct and indirect consequences is a limitation that is placed on the consequences of Franny's actions that Franny should be accountable for. For a consequentialist theory to be sound, it is necessary to first establish a foundation for a limitation on the scope of an action and then rigidly adhere to this limitation when assessing the rightness or wrongness of a particular act.

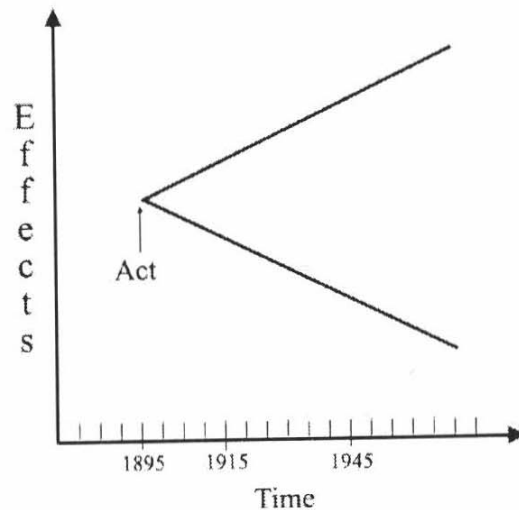
### **Illustrating the Critique: Baby Hitler**

The critique based on time and the critique based on scope of effects are heavily intertwined. Because of the symbiotic nature of their relationship, merely providing brief definitions of these critiques separately will not suffice as an explanation that will account for the weight of the critiques together. Instead, I will provide an illustration that will allow me to draw my final conclusion—that in order for consequentialism to provide moral imperatives, limitations must be placed both on time and the scope with regard to which the consequences are to be evaluated. The illustration that will best allow me to explain the shortcomings of consequentialism is the Baby Hitler scenario, which was first imagined by J.C.C. Smart and goes as follows:

It is a bright summer day in 1895 and you are walking across the bridge that spans the river in Linz, Germany. You notice some

children playing near the mill and take a moment to watch them romp by the water's edge. Just then, one of the smaller boys slips into the water and is taken away by the current. It is clear that he cannot swim and will drown if you do not save him. You jump in the rushing water, grab the boy just as his head dips below the charging surf, and swim him to safety. The next day, you are a city hero, as you have saved the six-year-old son of Klara Hitler, Adolph.<sup>6</sup>

The action of saving Baby Hitler has many consequences, but in order to morally evaluate them, it is necessary to determine both the time and the scope of the consequences. Consider the following graph:



In 1895, the act of saving Baby Hitler's life from drowning was performed. On that sunny summer day, it could be considered a good action, as the consequences for that day were better than had the individual not saved Hitler. At the time, the rescuer would have performed a good action. The consequences radiate outwards from that day. In 1915, the consequences of the action include the entirety of Hitler's twenty-six-year old life, as well as the positive or negative value of the acts performed by Hitler. At this point, it is

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<sup>6</sup> Paraphrased with emendations from Smart, J.J.C., "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1956), 344-354.

necessary to determine the scope of the effects of the action of saving Hitler's life. Which consequences of your act of saving him are you accountable for? Are you responsible for the enjoyment that Hitler experienced while playing on the playground with his elementary school classmate Ludwig Wittgenstein a week after being saved? Or the grateful elation experienced by his mother when you returned her nearly drowned to her? Or the pain he caused to Allied troops during WWI that earned him the Iron Cross? Depending on how you limit the scope of the effects of saving Baby Hitler's life, by 1915 the action could be considered either good or bad. The problem of determining the scope of the effects of your action is even more complicated when considered in 1945. It is for this reason that time and scope of effects must be limited.

Consequentialism as previously stated cannot stand unless it is modified to provide a criterion for selecting which consequences count in the evaluation of an act. It may be possible to determine a method of determining a time or scope of evaluation, but it is important to note that this is a retreat from the previous position of consequentialism. Consequentialism, previously stated, was "it is right for S to do A (S *ought* to do A or S *should* do A) iff no total state of affairs that would be a consequence of S's doing any alternative to A would be better than the total state of affairs that would be a consequence of S's doing A." However, it is clear that an examination of the state of affairs resultant from a particular act must be qualified in regards to time and scope.

The necessity of employing a limit to the scope of an action could also be argued in a more logical fashion that does not rely so strongly on examples. If the scope of the consequences of an act were infinitely broad, each of our acts from birth onward would be evaluated as positive or negative based on the entirety of the state of affairs in the world. Indeed, the consequences of each act are a part of a web of consequences and contingent actions that eventually constitute the state of affairs of the entire universe. However,



if the scope of the consequences of an action were infinitely narrow, there could not possibly be any account of any effects of a cause – good or bad. As a result, we can only assess effects and causes insofar as we have determined a limited yet existent breadth of the effects of any cause.

If a consequentialist ethic fails to provide these limitations and my arguments are sound, then consequentialism will be incapable of providing ethical imperatives, which is to say that if an individual does not have a criteria for determining either the time or the scope of their actions, then they can have no way of determining what the right thing to do in a given situation would be. Imagine that you were in the Baby Hitler situation explained earlier. In order to use consequentialism to decide what you should do—the right thing to do—it is necessary to know by which time you will be evaluated from as well as the scope of the effects that will be evaluated. Indeed, if your actions are evaluated in 1915, based only on the quality of Hitler's life, then your action was good and right. However, if your actions are evaluated in 1945 and the effects of Hitler's actions are taken into consideration, saving Baby Hitler would be horrendously wrong. As a result, one cannot derive ethical imperatives from consequentialism, so consequentialism as stated fails as an ethical theory.

### **Anticipating Responses: Two Defenses**

In response to these criticisms, a defender of consequentialism has a few options. Firstly, they could develop limitations to the consequences of an action. This would be the most direct method of confronting my argument, but this position signals a retreat from the definition of consequentialism offered earlier. Secondly, they could argue that I have mischaracterized consequentialism, which would place the burden on me either to show that my critique applies to the most robust definition of consequentialism or give reasons for rejecting the more robust formulations. There are other ways in which my

critiques could be opposed, but these are the only ones that will be discussed in this essay.

A defender of consequentialism can make a number of arguments that would establish the limitations that are necessary foundations for ethical reasoning in consequentialism. In order to account for time, a strict time limit can be chosen—five years, for example. If an individual were making a decision between two options, the option that would produce the best results in five years would be the right one. Similarly, in order to account for scope, a strict limit of scope can be established—only individuals directly influenced by an act can be taken into account when determining its goodness or badness. While these limitations would absolve my critique, there is no justification for choosing these limits—they are arbitrary.

Less arbitrary limitations could be established. Establishing limitations at the end of the individual's foresight would be much more justified. This is the argument advanced by William H. Shaw when responding to contemporary criticisms of Mill.<sup>7</sup> By limiting an individual's responsibility at the extent to which the actor could have predicted the consequences of an act, they can only be held responsible for that which they could have made an informed decision. This is a much more dynamic response and it is the criteria by which most people intuitively evaluate the rightness or wrongness of an act. Indeed, if you can only act based on the information available to you, then shouldn't you only be held responsible for that information? I see a problem with this, however, as it provides an incentive for knowing less and having less information. Indeed, if you cannot be faulted for decisions made with insufficient information, then there is an incentive for making decisions

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<sup>7</sup> Shaw, William H, "Contemporary Criticism of Utilitarianism: a Response," *Blackwell's Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 201-216.

in ignorance. In response, the consequentialist could claim that the consequences of ignorance provide an ethical incentive for knowledge. However, it is important to impose non-arbitrary limitations to what should be known—the degree to which an individual should be held accountable for ignorance is a limitation that must be accounted for. This limitation indicates a retreat from the previous consequentialist position. A more subtle formulation of consequentialism is developed in response to my critique. There are others who would argue that a more subtle and robust definition of consequentialism already exists as rule-consequentialism.

Until this point in the essay, the arguments that I have advanced are intended to debase the foundations of act-consequentialism. However the other formulation of consequentialism, rule-consequentialism, may avoid the critiques of time and scope. Rule-consequentialism is a more nuanced ethical theory that was discussed in academic circles after 1953, when J.O. Urmson published “The Interpretation of the Moral Philosophy of J.S. Mill.” Urmson’s reformulation is as follows:

- A. A particular action is justified as being right by showing that it is in accord with some moral rule. It is shown to be wrong by showing that it transgresses some moral rule.
- B. A moral rule is shown to be correct by showing that the recognition of that rule promotes the ultimate end.
- C. Moral rules can be justified only in regard to matters in which the general welfare is more than negligibly affected.
- D. Where no moral rule is applicable the question of the rightness or wrongness of particular acts does not arise, though the worth of the actions can be estimated in other ways.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Urmson, J.O., “The Interpretation of the Moral Philosophy of J.S. Mill,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1953), 33-39.

In the ensuing debate, act-utilitarian J.C.C. Smart's essay "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism" characterized the difference between act-consequentialism and rule-consequentialism as follows:

Utilitarianism is the doctrine that the rightness of actions is to be judged by their consequences. What do we mean by 'actions' here? . . . If by 'actions' we mean particular individual actions, we get the sort of doctrine held by Bentham, Sidgwick, and Moore. According to this doctrine we test individual actions by their consequences. . . The rightness or wrongness of keeping a promise on a particular occasion depends only on the goodness or badness of the consequences of keeping or of breaking the promise on that particular occasion. . . [Rule utilitarians] hold, or seem to hold, that moral rules are no more than rules of thumb. In general the rightness or wrongness of an action is *not* to be tested by evaluating its consequences, but only by considering whether or not it falls under a certain rule.<sup>9</sup>

Smart's discussion of these different types of utilitarianisms can be applied to consequentialism, as utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism. In the above quotation, he argues that act-based consequentialists determine the rightness or wrongness of particular acts while rule-based consequentialists group acts into sets of acts, or types, in order to determine whether or not they are the right type of action. If a type of action is generally right, then an imperative rule is established. It is important to pay attention to the structural differences between rule-consequentialism and act-consequentialism, as a conflation of these differences has caused some confusion in the literature.

The structural difference between rule-consequentialism and act-consequentialism is the perspective that is required to develop grounds for an imperative. Act-consequentialism employs the anticipated future consequences in order to determine the correct acts. Rule-

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<sup>9</sup> Smart, 344-354.

consequentialism relies on hindsight. By evaluating past acts and the consequences of those acts, rules are established that generally have good effects. An example would be the moral imperative "do not kill." According to Urmson, moral rules are established if it "promotes the ultimate end." By analyzing the consequences of killing, it is evident to the rule consequentialist that avoiding homicide generally promotes the ultimate end.

This rule is formed by establishing the type of action called "killing" and analyzing the effects of this sort of action. If the general welfare is "more than negligibly affected," a rule is established. However, this formulation of rule-consequentialism creates new problems. Indeed, just as critics of Kant's categorical imperative claim that an individual can "define themselves out of a moral problem," the rule-consequentialist can create their rules to suit their circumstances. Imagine a situation when relatives are discussing what to do with their dying grandfather. The rule-consequentialist may insist that they are not "killing" in this particular situation, but rather are "performing euthanasia," or vice versa. This critique is much like the critique based on the scope of the effects, but now the morally relevant factors are determined by the circumstances that are used to categorize a particular act as a general rule. In order to do so, the scope of the circumstances that can be employed as morally relevant factors must be limited, and limitations cannot be placed non-arbitrarily. As a result of this ambiguity, this formulation of rule-consequentialism fails to function internally. More recent formulations of rule-consequentialism, notably the formulation advanced by Brad Hooker, also fall to this problem of ambiguity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hooker, Brad, "Rule-Consequentialism" *Mind* 99 (1990), 67-77.

## Conclusion

The critiques advanced on this essay are damaging to the consequentialist position and must be accounted for in order for consequentialism to function as an ethical system. By attacking the structure of consequentialism rather than employing moral arguments against the conclusions drawn by consequentialism, I have avoided the most common error made by ethical theorists and have advanced a critique against consequentialism that must be accounted for.

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