

Incoherence and Consequentialism (or Proportionalism)—  
A Rejoinder

by Joseph Boyle, Germain Grisez, and John Finnis

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Robert McKim and Peter Simpson have tried to refute one of our arguments against consequentialism (or proportionalism—distinctions between the two are not relevant here).<sup>1</sup> In this article, we show that their attempt at refutation fails and we clarify our argument.

We have argued that consequentialism cannot do what its proponents think it can do. Its proponents think it can guide morally significant choices by identifying as rationally preferable the alternative which promises more good or less bad. We maintain that, when a practical possibility promises what is an unqualifiedly (or, as we sometimes put it, definitely) greater good or lesser evil than any other possibility under consideration, it is not an alternative available for morally significant (that is, free) choice, but instead is the only possibility which will remain interesting to an agent motivated by reasons.

We argue that consequentialism is incoherent in that it cannot simultaneously meet the two conditions which it would have to satisfy if it were to work as a method of moral judgment between practical possibilities, the choice of either of which would be rationally motivated. The first of these conditions is that the consequentialist norm—like any other moral norm—provide direction for a person facing two alternatives for a free choice. The second condition—peculiar to consequentialist theories of moral judgment—is that the norm indicate which alternative to choose by identifying it as that promising greater good or less evil. As we regularly emphasize, “greater good” and “less evil” here refer to what is *unqualifiedly* (or definitely) a greater good and *unqualifiedly* (or definitely) a lesser evil, not to a good which is greater or an evil which is less only in some specific respect. (The unqualifiedly *greater*, by the very logic of commensuration, includes whatever it is greater than.)

<sup>1</sup>Robert McKim and Peter Simpson, “On the Alleged Incoherence of Consequentialism,” *The New Scholasticism* 62 (1988): 349–52.

Of course, a person who in choosing follows a nonrational motive (“emotion,” “feeling,” “sense appetite”) against a reason thereby chooses what is in a true sense the lesser good or the greater evil. Intelligible goods and evils are superior to sensible ones. But no consequentialist calculation is needed to judge that sensible goods or bads should not prevail over intelligible ones. Hence, both consequentialism and our argument against it come into play only when “greater good” and “less evil” are used in attempts to guide *rationally motivated* choice by making comparisons between alternatives which promise different *benefits*—that is, between alternatives which seem likely to instantiate different *intelligible* goods and bads. In such comparisons, possible nonrational motives for choosing the various alternatives are not even considered, and so the fact that someone might follow such a motive is irrelevant.

So, our claim that consequentialism cannot simultaneously meet the two conditions necessary for it to work as a method of moral judgment includes a qualification concerning nonrationally motivated choices. That qualification—which we sometimes state explicitly and sometimes leave implicit, and which McKim and Simpson overlook—is that, by following a nonrational motive, one might choose an alternative which promised little or no benefit.<sup>2</sup> As the qualification makes plain, our argument

<sup>2</sup>That McKim and Simpson overlook or ignore this qualification is hard to understand, for it is stated and discussed in two paragraphs immediately following sentences they quote (on 350, ending with their note 4) from Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983). Just where McKim and Simpson stop quoting, Grisez goes on to say (on his page 153):

A proportionalist might object that “reason” is ambiguous. In one sense it means a rational ground for choice; in another sense it means an intelligently grasped but nonrational moving cause—for example, the fear of pain which tempts weak-willed people to choose contrary to their better judgment. The objector might argue that there cannot be a reason in the first sense for choosing anything other than the possibility which promises the definitely greater good or lesser bad, but that there can be a reason—a contrary motive—in the second sense. In this way, a proportionalist could claim, immoral choices are made inconsistently with a true moral judgment reached by the proportionalist method.

The objection fails for two reasons. First, it assumes a thesis which is debatable, namely, that one can deliberately choose to follow a nonrational motive without finding some rational ground for adopting it. Second, even granting this thesis for the sake of argument, this sort of choice would be irrelevant to the proportionalist method. This method claims to solve moral problems which arise due to conflicting rational grounds for choices—alternatives which promise diverse proportions of benefit and harm. One does not need proportionalism to support reasons in general against nonrational motives which, by hypothesis, are interesting not for the sake of their promise of benefit and/or mitigation of harm, but somehow without such rational ground. Rather,

concerns a specific kind of choice situation—namely, one in which an agent deliberates about alternative possible actions, each promising diverse benefits. Thus, our argument is that whenever a choice would be made in view of the reasons for the various alternatives, a possibility which promises what is unqualifiedly (or definitely) greater good or less evil than any other by that very fact precludes rationally motivated choice between the alternatives, since in favor of that possibility one has every reason which one would have in favor of any other—and more.

McKim and Simpson begin their argument against us with an example: Jane, an act utilitarian, can choose between spending some money to buy a second house and spending it to help the third-world poor. They imagine that she can and does judge by utilitarian thinking that the greater good would be to give the money to the poor. But she wants to buy the house and chooses to do so. How, they ask, could we be so foolish as to think she could not?

In fact, however, since our view includes the qualification explained above, we see no difficulty in Jane's making that choice: on our account, she could, though having little or even no reason to buy the house, follow an urge to do so and, setting reason aside, choose to buy it. So, we do not, *pace* McKim and Simpson, hold that Jane's choice would be inexplicable (even granting for the sake of argument that it would be immoral). Rather, we hold that Jane, if she could judge that giving the money to the poor would be unqualifiedly better, could not make a *rationally* motivated choice to buy the house rather than to give the money to the poor. ly

Consequently, if McKim and Simpson suppose that Jane is choosing not with a merely emotional motive but on the basis of a reason (and they do seem to suppose that), then they assume precisely what we argue is impossible—namely, that Jane could both know which alternative promises the unqualifiedly greater good and make a rationally motivated choice of the other alternative. But this assumption would be gratuitous, since they do not explain how Jane both can know that giving the money to the poor is an unqualifiedly *greater* good and yet can regard buying the house as an option promising some benefit which will not be *part of* that greater good.

according to proportionalists, one needs proportionalism to decide for possibilities supported by weightier reasons against those supported by less weighty reasons.

We now believe that the first reason Grisez gives is not sound. So, we now concede what he granted *arguendo*.

This qualification also appears in the most recent statement of our argument: John Finnis, Joseph Boyle, and Germain Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 259–60. It is not explicit either in the work of Finnis which McKim and Simpson quote or in the unpublished notes which Boyle gave them.

Most people, of course, would say, "Jane does have a choice," but they also would say, "Buying the house promises her benefits she will forgo if she gives the money away." (In other words, they would say: "Jane expects benefits from buying the house which are not *part of* the benefits promised by giving the money to the poor.") And many people would deny that saving a certain number of strangers from starvation would clearly be the greater good if the benefits of Jane's buying the house included, for instance, family vacations, with a prospect of a better relationship with her husband and closer ties between them and their children. We hold that Jane has a choice precisely because the benefits of giving the money to the poor, however great, do not include the benefits of buying the house, and so the former cannot be judged to be unqualifiedly greater. Rather, they are simply different. To refute our arguments, McKim and Simpson would have to provide an account of how Jane both knows that giving the money to the poor is a greater good and still can choose rationally an intelligibly lesser good—owning the house—that is, choose it on the basis of that good's intelligible appeal. But they never provide such an account.

Instead, McKim and Simpson proceed with their attempt at refutation by constructing an argument, which they claim represents ours, for the conclusion that, given Jane's proportionalism and her judgment that giving the money away is the greater good, "Jane's choice to buy the house is unintelligible." But all three premises of the argument they construct happen to be propositions which we deny, and, as we have explained above, its conclusion is not our position.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, some-

<sup>3</sup>For the conclusion that Jane's buying the house would be unintelligible on proportionalist grounds, they provide ("Alleged Incoherence," 351) these premises:

- a. "What Jane is recognizing when she sees that her proportionalist moral theory requires her not to buy the house but to use the money to feed the famine-victims, is that this course of action promises to yield 'more good'."
- b. "She sees that the alternative, buying the house and neglecting the famine-victims, promises to yield 'less good'."
- c. "But to choose something is to recognize it as involving as much good as, or more than, the alternative. ('How could anyone *choose* an act which he can see yields less good than some alternatives open to him?")"

However, we deny that Jane can see what (a) and (b) say she does (our argument is meant to show that such perception would be incompatible with rationally motivated free choice); we only say that *according to proportionalism* she should be seeing such things. Contrary to (c), we say that according to proportionalism the greater good or lesser evil should be chosen, not that according to it to choose something is to recognize it etc. (For our own part, we deny that to choose is to recognize anything.) The quote from Grisez which McKim and Simpson put in parentheses serves in Grisez as a premise for a conclusion contradictory to the proposition McKim and Simpson want it to support. They misinterpret Grisez in this way because they mistakenly suppose throughout their article that we think

one might think that their refutation of this constructed argument challenges the argument we actually offer, and so their refutation of it is worth considering.

That refutation is based on a distinction between “comparing all goods” and “comparing all goods from all points of view.” McKim and Simpson claim that consequentialism requires only the former and that we must mistakenly suppose that it requires the latter. Consequentialism, they say, can measure all goods, but only from a limited point of view—for example, that of morality or impartial benevolence. But there are other points of view—for example, “the point of view of Jane’s selfishness.” From that other point of view, her buying the house emerges as superior. Jane can choose because there are different points of view which she can adopt.

McKim and Simpson thus treat Jane’s choice as if it were—at least implicitly—a choice between the two incommensurable points of view. Since our central thesis is that wherever there is choice, there is incommensurability between the goodness of alternatives, this account of how Jane could choose to buy the house, far from refuting our position, actually agrees with it.

Of course, they might claim that the two points of view really are commensurable, that their commensurability precisely is of reasons for action, and yet that these reasons motivate the choice of one of the two points of view. But if they make that claim, McKim and Simpson must explain why the commensurability of the two points of view does not make the one which promises the greater good so intelligibly appealing that no rationally motivated choice is possible. Once again, if they do not explain this, but simply take it for granted, they beg the precise question at issue.

If the moral point of view identifies the unqualifiedly greater good, how can the selfish point of view promise a benefit not promised by the moral point of view? If the selfish point of view does not offer some noncommensurable benefit, how can there remain a reason to choose it? And if there cannot remain a reason to choose it, how can Jane’s choice of it be anything other than following a merely emotional motive? Unfortunately, since McKim and Simpson have substituted their own construct for both our position and our argument for it, they fail to deal with these questions.

But perhaps McKim and Simpson have something else in mind. They might say that the two points of view are incommensurable in terms of

that choice necessarily is of the logical complement to the less good—namely, the more or at least equally good. We have never said that; indeed, our argument makes it clear that we deny it.

the goods which can be considered from within them, yet sufficiently comparable that one can rationally prefer one point of view—that of morality—to the other. In other words, perhaps they think that there is a reason for judging the moral point of view preferable even though, in terms of all the goods which can be considered from both points of view, it is incommensurable with the selfish point of view.

If that is what McKim and Simpson have in mind, however, they face a more profound difficulty. For if there is a rational ground for preferring the moral point of view, the ground must be either consequentialist or not. If it is consequentialist, its normative force—on McKim's and Simpson's assumptions—will be recognized only from *within* the moral point of view. Thus, it can offer no reason whatsoever in favor of accepting and entering into this point of view. But if the ground is not consequentialist, the very choice of the supposedly moral (consequentialist) point of view (assuming that choice itself is not simply emotionally motivated!) is rationally guided by some nonconsequentialist norm.

In either case, McKim and Simpson must explain a very basic choice for which, by their own account, consequentialism (granting, for the moment, its coherence) cannot provide any norm. It follows that consequentialism cannot be a general theory of rational moral judgment. Rather (granting, for the moment, its coherence), it is a clarification of the conditions for achieving goals in which people may or may not be interested, depending on whether they choose in accord with some nonconsequentialist norm to adopt consequentialism.

This reading of McKim and Simpson probably goes beyond anything they have in mind. But it is supported by their strategy of treating consequentialism as the method of a particular point of view—the moral point of view as conceived by utilitarians. If McKim and Simpson accepted this interpretation, however, they plainly would still need to show how consequentialism could work even within the “moral” point of view. For it still seems clear that the moral point of view, as they conceive it, must evaluate alternatives supported by reasons, determine which promises the greater good, rationally prescribe that alternative, yet leave open the possibility that one might have reason to choose the lesser good. But our argument is that knowing the greater good in the way consequentialism requires and being able to make a rationally motivated choice of the lesser are incompatible. Once more, then: short of explaining what they do not even try to explain, McKim's and Simpson's attempt to respond to our argument merely begs the question against it.

Someone might suppose that McKim and Simpson have another way out. What if consequentialism is useful as a method for clarifying

practical possibilities in order to identify the single possibility which promises all the benefits promised by others and then some, so that only the dominant possibility retains rational appeal, and choice of any other would be made only by following some nonrational motive?

But McKim and Simpson are hardly likely to take this way out. If consequentialism were no more than a method of clarification which, when successful, forestalled the need for rationally motivated choice, it hardly would be as controversial as it is. For everyone can accept such reasoning—and we explicitly do accept it<sup>4</sup>—as a preliminary step in deliberation, a step which disposes of possibilities commensurable with and less rationally appealing than others.

However, consequentialists attempt more than that. They propose to identify options which ought to be chosen in order to direct morally significant choices. For example, some consequentialists offer arguments to show that the United States' policy of nuclear deterrence is morally right and others to show that it is morally wrong. Both sets of arguments proceed by offering reasons for one alternative, considering the reasons for the other alternative outweighed by a commensuration of the prospective good and bad consequences of carrying out either of the policy options, and concluding that one promises more good (in this case, actually, less bad) and so *ought to be chosen* or has been *morally rightly chosen*.

In sum. We think emotional motives make it possible to choose contrary to reason. But that is irrelevant to the defense of a theory of morality which supposedly reaches moral judgments by commensurating intelligible goods and bads promised by possibilities for choice. Our argument is that a moral agent cannot possibly have a rational motive for making a choice if deliberation has identified the unqualifiedly greater good, because in that case no reason remains to choose any alternative. McKim and Simpson fail to refute our argument. They never challenge its major contention, but instead either simply assert what we deny or perhaps—strange as it may seem—actually agree with us. Their attempt gains whatever plausibility it has from their overlooking our distinction between emotional and rational motivation.

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<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, 150, paragraphs numbered 1–4; Finnis, Boyle, and Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence*, 258 (the house-hunting example).