

# The Case against Consequentialism: Methodological Issues

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Over the years, consequentialism has been subjected to numerous serious objections. Its adherents, however, have been remarkably successful in fending them off. As I argue in this paper, the reason why the case against consequentialism has not been more successful lies, at least partly, in the methodological approach that critics have commonly used. Their arguments have usually proceeded in two steps. First, a definition of consequentialism is given. Then, objections are put forward based on that definition. This procedure runs into one of two problems. Substantive criticisms of consequentialism can only be formulated, if the posited definition is sufficiently concrete and narrow. In that case, however, consequentialists can defend themselves using a strategy that I call “interpretive divergence”. They can simply point out that the critic’s definition does not accord with their understanding of consequentialism to which criticisms do not apply. If, on the other hand, an all-encompassing definition is used, it is so abstract that it is doubtful whether any substantive criticisms can be formulated. To escape this dilemma, I sketch a methodological approach which drops the assumption that consequentialism should be defined. It assumes, rather, that the term “consequentialism” should be interpreted as a Wittgensteinian family resemblance term.

In recent decades the debate in normative ethics has in large part been a debate about the issue whether consequentialism is a tenable moral view. In this paper, I will not address this question. Rather, I will discuss how we should address it. In particular, I have three aims. I want to describe how the case against consequentialism has commonly been made. I want to explain why this procedure is problematic. And I want to sketch the rough outline of an alternative method that I take to be more fruitful. Throughout, I shall be interested solely in methodological issues. I shall remain agnostic, that is, about the substantive question whether consequentialism is, in fact, a tenable moral view.

The remainder falls into three sections. In the first section, I outline, discuss and reject the conventional approach which I call the Definitional Method (DM). It is based on the assumption that the idea of consequentialism should first be defined in terms of a necessary and sufficient feature shared by all consequentialist moral theories and then criticized. As I will show, this procedure runs into one of two problems. If a narrow definition is posited, substantive criticisms can be formulated; but consequentialists can defend themselves against these criticisms using a strategy that I call interpretive divergence. They can simply point out that the critic’s definition does not accord with their understanding of consequentialism which, they can claim, is immune to these objections. If, on the other hand, the definition is all-encompassing, its abstractness seems to make it impossible to come up with any substantive criticisms. In the second section, I sketch out a new approach which seeks to address the dilemma of the DM. I call it the Family Resemblance Approach (FRA). It assumes that consequentialism should not be defined, but interpreted as a Wittgensteinian family resemblance term. In the third section, finally, I sum up and conclude.

## 1. The Definitional Method

Critics of consequentialism usually use the following method to argue against it.

### **Definitional Method (DM)**

Step 1: Define Consequentialism in terms of a necessary and sufficient feature (or necessary and jointly sufficient set of features) that is shared by all consequentialist moral doctrines.

Step 2: Formulate a decisive objection against all doctrines which possess this definitional feature (or set of features).

In this section, I argue that the DM leads critics of consequentialism into a dilemma: If they choose a sufficiently general definition of consequentialism that envelops all forms of the doctrine, its abstractness makes it impossible to formulate any substantive criticisms. If, on the other hand, they start with an account of consequentialism which allows us to formulate substantive criticisms, then it does not capture all consequentialist moral theories and gives consequentialists the chance to defend themselves rather easily using a strategy that I call “interpretive divergence”. To illustrate the problem at hand, I shall apply the method. To this end, let me introduce a definition of consequentialism, as it is proposed, roughly, by Hooker (2003).

### **Narrow Definition of Consequentialism**

A moral theory is consequentialist if and only if it judges that an act is right if and only if it maximizes the impartial good.

A number of well-known criticisms apply to moral theories that come under this definition. Here are some examples. First, we may argue that consequentialist moral theories are overly demanding.<sup>1</sup> They judge that an act is wrong unless it maximizes the good of all weighted equally (whatever that good consists in). Hence, they condemn it, e.g., if you go to the cinema to see a movie, as there are obviously better ways for you to spend your money and time (Kagan 1998). You should rather, say, donate the money for the movie ticket to a charitable organisation. And you should preferably volunteer in a soup kitchen to help those in need, instead of spending your time in shallow amusement. Doing these things, it seems, would have better consequences, impartially considered. Now suppose you do both of these things. You work in the soup kitchen for two hours instead of seeing the movie and you donate the money that you would have spent on the ticket to a good cause. Are you now free to watch a movie? On consequentialism, as I have just defined it, it seems that the answer is no. Presumably, there is *always* something you could do which would do more impartial good than going to the cinema. So it seems that, on any consequentialist doctrine, you should *never* go to see that movie, because it is very unlikely that this is ever the best thing to do. But this seems absurd. Any doctrine which demands that moral agents constantly forgo the things that make their lives worth living (e.g. watching a movie every now and then) seems overly demanding. Consequentialist doctrines apparently are, then, overly demanding and should, therefore, be rejected.

Second, we may contend that consequentialist moral theories violate moral constraints, e.g. the constraint against killing an innocent person. To see this, consider Thomson’s (1976) case “fat man”. Imagine you are standing on a footbridge over a railway. You see a trolley approaching and can tell that it is out of control. There are five people on the tracks. The trolley will run over them and kill them unless it is stopped. You reason that the only way to stop it at this stage is to drop a heavy object in its path. There is a very fat man standing next to you on the footbridge. You could give him a shove. He would fall, land on the tracks and stop the trolley. This would, of course, kill the guy. But the five would go unharmed. Should you do it? On consequentialism, as I have defined it above, the answer is surely yes. Pushing the guy off the bridge results in less damage. One guy dies, instead of five. Hence, it obviously

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the demandingness objection to consequentialism see, e.g., Hooker (2009) and Mulgan (2001).

maximizes the good (or minimizes the bad), impartially considered. But most of us believe that pushing the guy off the bridge would be immoral, as it would violate a moral constraint against killing an innocent person. Consequentialism seems to give the intuitively wrong answer in this case and should, hence, be rejected.

Thirdly, we may point out that consequentialist moral theories have no place for special obligations (Jeske 2008). This can be illustrated using the following case.<sup>2</sup> Imagine, e.g., that a friend of yours is in danger. She is in a building that has caught on fire and needs help to get out. But she is not the only person in there. Other people are also trapped in the building. And they need help as well. You are in a position to help any one of them. But you only have time to save one person before the building collapses. What should you do? According to consequentialism, as we have defined it above, you should attach the same weight to your friend's well-being as to everyone else's and do what will produce the most good, again impartially considered. If you happen to know, e.g., that there is an excellent surgeon amongst the people in the building, you should save that person instead of your friend who, we may assume, has a comparatively less important job. But this, it seems, would be immoral. In so acting you would fail to recognize the special moral obligation that you owe your friend. So consequentialism seems to lead you astray as to the real obligations that you have in this case. It should, therefore, be rejected.

These, I think, are valid concerns. Nevertheless, consequentialists can easily defend themselves against them using the strategy of "interpretive divergence".<sup>3</sup> All they need to do is to point out that the definition on which objections are premised does not accord with *their* definition of consequentialism.<sup>4</sup> Let us see how this would work in each of the three cases.

Consequentialists can rebut the demandingness objection, e.g., by pointing out that it crucially relies on the premise that all forms of consequentialism require the agent to do the *best* she can. Satisficing consequentialism, they can argue, does not require that (Slote 1984). On this doctrine, an act is right as long as its consequences are *good enough*. Satisficing consequentialism can, therefore, plausibly allow you to go to the cinema and watch a movie. Though doing that may not have the best consequences overall, it arguably has good enough consequences. E.g., you get to see a movie that you enjoy. The cinema turns a profit and can afford to employ people who need a job. They, in turn, can buy stuff from others and so on. That's not too bad, is it? But, then, it should be morally permissible. And this, in turn, means that the demandingness objection is not substantiated by the example.

As far as the second objection is concerned, consequentialists may argue that their theories can, in fact, incorporate moral constraints (Portmore 2005). Initially, this may sound strange. Moral constraints, one might say, apply to actions and not to their consequences. But consequentialists can point out that the line between the act and its consequences is a mere chimera and that the act itself should therefore routinely be included amongst its consequences.<sup>5</sup> This allows consequentialists, e.g., to consider the fact that the agent has to

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<sup>2</sup> The description of the case is based on an example that I used in Mukerji (2013). It is fashioned after an infamous illustration by Godwin (1793) that has come to be known as the "famous fire cause" Barry (1995: 222).

<sup>3</sup> McNaughton & Rawling (1991) and Ridge (2005) call it the "the consequentialist vacuum cleaner".

<sup>4</sup> There are various examples of consequentialists applying this strategy. John Broome, e.g., applies it when he concedes that "[m]any serious doubts have been raised about consequentialism" before hastening to add that "they are not about consequentialism as *I* defined it." (Broome 2004: 42; emphasis added) And Walter Sinnott-Armstrong does so too when he says: "Even if other philosophers mean something else by 'consequentialism', I will be satisfied if my argument supports the view that I labelled 'consequentialism'." (Sinnott-Armstrong 2001: 345; emphasis added)

<sup>5</sup> What I do "may be described variously as making marks on a piece of paper, signing a cheque, paying a bribe, or ensuring the survival of my business." (Sumner 1987: 166) In other words, the boundary between the act and its consequences can be pushed back and forth, depending on the chosen

*kill* one person in order to save five lives as part of her act's "comprehensive outcome" (Sen 2009). In the "fat man" case they can, hence, maintain that the fact that you have to *kill* the fat guy in order to save the five on the tracks is accessible to consequentialist moral evaluation. Moreover, they can take an agent-relative stance on the evaluation of this consequence. Consequentialists can argue, not only that *killings* are worse than mere deaths, but also that killings *done by the agent* are worse, from the moral perspective of the agent, than killings done by other persons. This, in turn, makes it possible for them to say that you may be forbidden, on certain versions of consequentialism, to push the fat man off the bridge. And this is precisely what common sense suggests.

In regards to the third objection, consequentialists can claim that critics falsely assume consequentialist theories to be strictly impartial. As David Brink explains, this need not be so. In fact, consequentialists can adopt a position like C. D. Broad's (1971) "self-referential altruism". It requires a universal concern for all, but allows different weights to be attached to the welfare of different individuals according to "the nature of the relationship in which the agent stands to potential beneficiaries" (Brink 2006: 382). In the case of the burning building you may, then, attach greater weight to the welfare of your friend and save her. Consequentialists can, hence, make room for special obligations.

As it turns out, then, it is easy for consequentialists to dodge objections if they are founded on the narrow definition of consequentialism that I have just used. Of course, this, by itself, does not show that there is no definition which can avoid this problem. Perhaps the problem that I have illustrated is a specific complication of the particular definition that I have chosen. But this seems not to be the case. If there was, in fact, a definitional feature of consequentialist doctrines, we should be able to discover it by examining the characteristics of a paradigmatic consequentialist doctrine, such as classic utilitarianism.

### **Classic Utilitarianism (CU)**

An act is right if and only if it maximizes the sum total of sensory happiness of all sentient creatures.

This doctrine possesses a number of characteristics. We can examine them one by one and ask, in each case, whether it may serve as a defining feature of consequentialism. The first property of CU that leaps to the eye is its maximizing nature. It requires that the agent do the *best* she can. As I have already explained, however, this cannot be regarded as a defining characteristic of consequentialism, because there are also satisficing doctrines.<sup>6</sup>

A further feature of CU is the hedonistic idea that the only intrinsic good is sensory happiness. This, too, cannot be a defining feature of consequentialist doctrines, because there are also non-hedonistic ideas about the ultimate good. Some theorists, e.g., hold the view that the only intrinsic good is desire-satisfaction (e.g. Hare 1981 and Singer 1979/1993). But, perhaps, all consequentialist theories are united by a more general idea about goodness. Both hedonism and desire-satisfactionism are special variants of the notion that the only intrinsic good is individual welfare, a view that goes by the name "welfarism" (Sen 1979). But welfarism cannot be seen as a defining characteristic of consequentialism either, since there are non-welfarist forms of consequentialism which recognize goods other than individual welfare, e.g., knowledge, accomplishments and so on.

A further aspect of CU is that it takes the overall good to be the *sum* of individual parts. This, however, cannot be seen as a defining characteristic of consequentialism either, as G. E.

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description of the events. For this reason consequentialists can simply claim that the act itself should routinely be included amongst its consequences (Scheffler 1982/1994).

<sup>6</sup> Many theorists, however, take the maximization principle to be an essential feature of all consequentialist doctrines and define consequentialism in reference to it. See, e.g., Arneson (2004), Nida-Rümelin (1993), Scheffler (1982/1994), Williams (1973).

Moore's (1903/1959) consequentialist view makes clear. Moore famously opposed the view that the value of a whole is not identical to the sum of the values of its parts. But again, we may suspect that there is a more general idea behind the principle of summation that might be suitable to define consequentialism. Perhaps all consequentialist doctrines share an *aggregative* conception of the good, meaning, roughly, that they allow losses to one individual to be compensated by benefits to another. This idea will not do either, because consequentialism is not tied to aggregation (Hirose 2004). One can be a consequentialist while rejecting aggregation.<sup>7</sup>

Yet another feature of CU that is often emphasized (e.g. by Williams 1981) is its impartiality. This notion can be factorized into two separate views. It involves, firstly, the idea of universalism, *viz.* that the well-being of all sentient beings is to be taken into consideration and, secondly, the idea of equal treatment, *viz.* that everybody's well-being is to be weighted equally (Mukerji 2013). Neither of these ideas, however, can be seen as a defining characteristic of consequentialism generally, as consequentialist moral theories can depart from both of these views. Self-referentially altruistic versions of consequentialism depart from the idea of equal treatment. Egoistic forms of consequentialism deny the principle of universalism.

A further noteworthy property of CU is that the rightness of an act is judged solely on the basis of its objective outcome, *viz.* the happiness that is actually produced. Perhaps this idea may serve as a definitional characteristic. But we should not get our hopes up, because there are, of course, versions of consequentialism which evaluate acts based on their *expected* consequences.<sup>8</sup>

As Sinnott-Armstrong (2011) points out, the only feature that CU seems to share with all other consequentialist theories is the very basic and abstract idea that the only thing which determines whether an act is right or wrong is the (expected or actual) amount of goodness that it brings about. We can, of course, define consequentialism in terms of this idea.

### **Broad Definition of Consequentialism**

A moral theory is consequentialist if and only if it judges whether an act is right only based on the extent to which it *promotes goodness*.

This definition does seem to include all conceivable consequentialist theories.<sup>9</sup> But it gives rise to another problem. It appears to be close to vacuous. It is questionable, therefore, whether one could, in fact, formulate any meaningful criticisms on its basis. I, for one, am at a loss when it comes to thinking of any. This may initially seem implausible. But remember that any criticism formulated on the basis of such a broad definition has to be independent of all ideas that I have ruled out as defining features of consequentialism. We cannot assume, e.g., that consequentialist doctrines require that the agent bring about the *best* consequences. We cannot assume that only individual welfare matters. We cannot assume that the good is aggregative and so on. I do not see how we could conceivably make a case against consequentialism that is independent of all these substantive ideas.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Such a position is held, e.g., by Mendola (2006).

<sup>8</sup> Feldman (2006) calls these forms of consequentialism "expected utility consequentialism".

<sup>9</sup> The only notable exception I know of is Portmore's (2011) moral theory. It does not evaluate actions based on a single measure of goodness. Nevertheless, Portmore claims that it is a form of consequentialism.

<sup>10</sup> It is, of course, possible to object to consequentialism on the ground that it requires – very generally – that moral agents consider only consequences and because it is, hence, incompatible with our conviction that "that there are certain things forbidden whatever consequences threaten." (Anscombe 1958: 10) This criticism relies only on the basic idea behind consequentialism that is captured in the broad definition. The objection is question-begging, though. It merely states that consequentialism is

To sum up, then, it seems that the DM runs into one of two problems. The definition that is used is either too narrow or too wide. If we posit a narrow definition, we can formulate substantive criticisms. But, as I have shown, consequentialists can dodge them using the strategy of interpretive divergence. If, on the other hand, we choose a broad definition that encompasses all forms of consequentialism, it is so abstract that no substantive criticisms apply. Given this dilemma, I would like to suggest a new and more promising alternative method for criticizing consequentialism. Unlike the DM, it does not require us to give a definition of consequentialism.

## 2. The Family Resemblance Approach

It may be hard to understand how a philosophical investigation can get off the ground, if the object to be investigated is not defined.<sup>11</sup> But this resistance seems to be rooted in a warped view of language. It is assumed that there are only two kinds of general terms, *viz.* “basic terms” and “composite terms” (Sluga 2006). The former are used to pick out observable characteristics, while the latter refer to more complex objects and are defined in terms of the former. On this view, it seems to be inexplicable how the term “consequentialism” can be made sense of, if it does not fall into either category. But we do not need to buy into this ontology of language. As Ludwig Wittgenstein has famously suggested, many general terms may fall into a third category. They may be “family resemblance terms”. Recently, some philosophers have suggested that “consequentialism” should be interpreted as such a family resemblance term (Portmore 2007; Sinnott-Armstrong 2011).<sup>12</sup> In what follows, I shall explore this idea and examine how we can use it to devise a methodical approach for criticizing consequentialism.

To start, it is important to get clear on the idea of family resemblance. As Wittgenstein explains, family resemblance obtains between the objects of a given class, if they form “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein 1953/1986: §66), while there is *no single feature* they all share in common which could serve as the basis of a definition.<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, overlapping and criss-crossing are distinct ideas.<sup>14</sup> Consider three objects *a*, *b* and *c*. Each of them possesses three out of six components *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E* and *F*, as the following table shows.

1. Table: An Illustration of Family Resemblance: Criss-Crossing

<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>
<i>ABC</i>	<i>ADE</i>	<i>BDF</i>

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incompatible with an ethic that forbids certain acts categorically. In and of itself, this is not a reason that consequentialists need to accept as speaking against their doctrine.

<sup>11</sup> This view goes back at least to Plato. See, e.g., the dialogue *Euthyphro*. Here, Socrates insists that his interlocutor produce a definition of piety. See also Woodruff (2010), esp. his remarks on Socratic definition and the priority of definition (sec. 3-4).

<sup>12</sup> The notion of family resemblance is usually seen as originating in Wittgenstein’s *Blue Book* (1933-4/1960). An oft-cited discussion can be found in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953/1986: §§66,67).

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein includes further characteristics. He suggests, e.g., that family resemblance terms are also vague, i.e. their extensions are indeterminate. As Michael Forster argues, however, this is a mistake. He says that “it would in principle be quite consistent with Wittgenstein’s core model of family resemblance concepts (...) that it leaves the extension of such a concept perfectly determinate” (Forster 2010: 67). In what follows, I follow Forster’s view.

<sup>14</sup> Both of the following examples are adapted versions of examples used by Forster (2010).

The similarities that are characteristic of the family *abc* criss-cross in this case. That is, the components that the objects share are different throughout pairs. *a* and *b* share component *A*. *b* and *c* share *D*. And *a* and *c* share component *B*. Overlapping, on the other hand, is illustrated by the following example.

2. Table: An Illustration of Family Resemblance: Overlapping

<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>ABC</i>	<i>BCD</i>	<i>CDE</i>	<i>DEF</i>

Here, the similarities between objects extend not only throughout pairs. They overlap – at least in the case of components *C* and *D*. These run through *a, b, c* and *b, c, d*, respectively.

Having characterized the idea of family resemblance, we should ask, then, whether it may be adequate to interpret the class of consequentialist doctrines as a family. There may, of course, be doubts. In the previous section, I said that there is, in fact, a basic idea that lies behind *all* variants of consequentialism, *viz.* that the moral status of an act depends only on the extent to which it promotes goodness. This seems to make it problematic to interpret “consequentialism” as a family resemblance term. For if there is one basic idea that lies behind *all* consequentialist moral doctrines, these doctrines apparently *do* share one characteristic in common. This, in turn, seems to rule out that we can think of them as being related *via* family resemblance which would imply that there is no such feature.

At this point, it seems to be instructive to introduce the distinction between the substantive *content* of a moral theory and its *structure*, as it is drawn, e.g., by (Hurka 1992). To this end, let us go back to the first example of family resemblance which illustrates criss-crossing. We can interpret *a, b*, and *c* as moral theories and *A, B, C, D, E* and *F* as their logical components. Consider the statement:

- (1) \_ contains components *A, B* and *C*.

The placeholder \_ stands for a moral doctrine. If we plug in *a* for \_ in (1), we get a true statement about the *content* of *a*, *viz.*:

- (2) *a* contains components *A, B* and *C*.

If we plug in *b* for \_ in (1), however, we get a false statement, *viz.*

- (3) *b* contains components *A, B* and *C*.

In contrast, consider

- (4) \_ contains three out of six components *A, B, C, D, E* and *F*.

If we substitute *a* for \_, we get a true statement about *a* again, *viz.* a true statement about the structure of *a*.

- (5) *a* contains three out of six components *A, B, C, D, E* and *F*.

But we can also plug *b* in for \_ and get a true statement.

- (6) *b* contains three out of six components *A, B, C, D, E* and *F*.

The fact that (2) and (3) are true and false, respectively, though (5) and (6) are both true, suggests that the members of a family of moral doctrines *a, b, c, ...* may share a given *structural* feature, even though there is no *substantive* feature that all of them share. If the basic idea behind consequentialism relates, then, to the structure of consequentialist doctrines rather than to their content, it is not ruled out that consequentialism can be construed as a family of moral doctrines. This condition seems, indeed, to be fulfilled. The basic idea behind consequentialism that is captured in the broad definition that I have

introduced towards the end of the previous section says merely that the rightness of an act depends only on the extent to which that act promotes goodness. This, in effect, says only that every consequentialist doctrine has to possess certain *kinds* of components – *viz.* a theory that explains how goodness is measured and a theory that explains precisely how the goodness of an act relates to its moral status.<sup>15</sup> The definition is, hence, analogous to proposition (4). It only concerns the structure of consequentialist doctrines which is compatible with the idea that consequentialist moral theories form a family.

It seems, therefore, that consequentialism can be characterized as a family of moral doctrines. Now how can we use this result to devise a methodological approach for the case against consequentialism? We need, it seems, a clearer idea as to how the consequentialist family can be delimited. As a first step, it should hence be useful to conduct an inquiry into the logical structure of consequentialist doctrines. To this end, we should look towards a doctrine that is undoubtedly a version of consequentialism, *viz.* CU. The first step is, then, to

- (i) Factorize classic utilitarianism into logically independent components,  $C_{11}, \dots, C_{n1}$ .

This first step will reveal a number of claims,  $C_{11}, \dots, C_{n1}$ , that are *typically* involved in a consequentialist doctrine. This will *ipso facto* reveal the logical structure that is common to all consequentialist doctrines. That is, it will tell us the precise *number*,  $n$ , of components that is involved in a consequentialist doctrine. And it will tell us which *kinds* of components are contained in a consequentialist theory, *viz.* components that are of the same kind as  $C_{11}, \dots, C_{n1}$ , respectively.

In a next step, we can make use of a logical consequence of our assumption that consequentialism is a *family*. It implies that there have to be alternatives to every paradigmatic component. That is, for each component of CU,  $C_{i1}$ , there has to be at least one alternative component,  $C_{i2}$ . In order to understand the range of possibilities that consequentialism allows we should, therefore, investigate which non-standard alternatives there are to each of the paradigmatic components  $C_{11}, \dots, C_{n1}$ . In the second step, we should

- (ii) Take stock of all alternatives,  $C_{i2}, \dots, C_{im}$ , to each of the paradigmatic components  $C_{i1}, i=1, \dots, n$ .

Upon completing steps (i) and (ii), we end up, as it were, with a construction kit for consequentialist doctrines, as it is shown in the table below. It registers all components that consequentialists can embrace. The first column shows all the paradigmatic components, i.e. those of CU. Each row shows one paradigmatic component and all its alternatives. To construct a (any) consequentialist doctrine from the kit we simply choose one component from each row. If the rows are, in fact, logically independent, then it should be possible for consequentialists to combine every two components,  $C_{ij}$  and  $C_{kl}$  from two different rows  $i$  and  $k$  in a consequentialist moral theory.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This distinction has famously been emphasized by Rawls (1971/1999).

<sup>16</sup> Note that logical independence between rows should be distinguished from logical independence between components. Logical independence obtains between two components,  $C_{ij}$  and  $C_{kl}$ , if endorsing (or rejecting)  $C_{ij}$  does not necessitate endorsing (or rejecting)  $C_{kl}$  and *vice versa*. Logical independence obtains between two rows,  $i$  and  $k$ , if and only if there is no component in row  $i$  that commits one to a component (or range of components) in row  $k$ . Note that the latter implies the former, but not *vice versa*. That is, the fact that two rows,  $i$  and  $k$ , are logically independent implies that any two components  $C_{ij}$  and  $C_{kl}$  in these rows are logically independent of one another. But the fact that two components  $C_{ij}$  and  $C_{kl}$  from rows  $i$  and  $k$  are logically independent does not imply that the rows themselves are logically independent.



## 3. Table: Construction Kit for Consequentialist Doctrines

$C_{11}$	$C_{12}$	...	...	$C_{1a}$
$C_{21}$	$C_{22}$	...	...	$C_{2b}$
...	...	...	...	...
$C_{i1}$	...	$C_{ij}$	...	...
...	...	...	...	...
$C_{n1}$	$C_{n2}$	...	...	

At this point, then, I can explain what a comprehensive case against consequentialism requires according to the *Family Resemblance Approach* (FRA). In order to show that consequentialism is an untenable moral view we need to show that there is a convincing and decisive objection to each possible combination of components that makes up a consequentialist moral theory. The question is how this can be done methodically. The family of consequentialist doctrines is very large.<sup>17</sup> So, obviously, going through all theories one by one is not an option. Here is a suggestion, however. It starts from the observation that every consequentialist doctrine,  $C$ , has to endorse exactly one component,  $C_{ij}$ , from each row. In order to show that all consequentialist theories are untenable we merely need to show, it seems, that all components in a given row are objectionable. This can be accomplished by climbing onto the shoulders of those who have already put forward convincing objections to (particular versions of) consequentialism. What we need to work out is which components these objections target. In a third step, we should, therefore,

- (iii) Survey objections  $O_1, O_2, \dots, O_o$  to consequentialism and correlate them with determinate components,  $C_{ij}$ .

After that, we can piece together a comprehensive case against consequentialism by combining objections that target components in a given row. So in the fourth and final step, we

- (iv) Put together a set of objections  $O=(O_1, \dots, O_m)$  such that there is at least one objection,  $O_l$ , for all components,  $C_{i1}, \dots, C_{im}$ , of a given row,  $i, l=1, \dots, m$ .

It is not guaranteed, of course, that this four-step-procedure of the FRA will be successful. That will depend on whether or not there are, in fact, enough substantive arguments against consequentialism. But it is clear, at least, that by proceeding along the lines of this method we will not encounter the problems that are associated with the DM. As I explained above, the DM either omits versions of consequentialism, if the definition is narrow. Or it becomes impossible to formulate substantive criticisms, if the definition is broad. If applied properly, the FRA avoids both these problems. It avoids the first, because it takes into account all versions of consequentialism. Consequentialists are, hence, not able to use their strategy of interpretive divergence because, ideally, no version of consequentialism has been left out. It avoids the second problem too, because arguments do not have to rely on a vague and abstract idea that lies behind consequentialist doctrines. They can, rather, directly target concrete components of consequentialist doctrines.

<sup>17</sup> The following reasoning can get us a rough estimate of how large the consequentialist family is. CU, let us assume, is the combination of eight logically independent claims. (Sinnott-Armstrong (2011) offers a characterization of CU that contains even more independent claims, viz. eleven.) If each of the rows contains merely two components (which is certainly an underestimate), we would end up with  $2^8=256$  individual moral theories.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have analysed the way in which the case against consequentialism is commonly made. As I explained in the first section, the conventional approach involves two steps. First, consequentialism is defined in terms of necessary and sufficient features. Then, criticisms are formulated on the basis of that definition. These criticisms are intended to show that all moral theories which possess the defining features of consequentialism are objectionable and should be rejected. This two-step method, I argued, runs into one of two difficulties. Substantive criticisms can be formulated, if a narrow definition is posited. But such a definition gives consequentialists the opportunity to defend themselves against criticisms using the strategy of interpretive divergence. They can object that their critic's definition is based on an impoverished understanding of consequentialism and that the objections proposed do not apply to a more appropriate interpretation of the creed. If, on the other hand, the definition is all-encompassing, its abstractness seems to make it impossible to come up with any substantive criticisms at all. I illustrated the problem by way of an example. I posited a common definition of consequentialism, formulated three well-known criticisms and showed how consequentialists can dismantle these criticisms using the strategy of interpretive divergence. As I argued further, the problem illustrated by these examples does not seem to be a specific phenomenon of the particular definition that I used in my example. If there was a defining feature of consequentialism that all consequentialist moral theories must embrace, we should detect it by looking towards the properties of a paradigmatic consequentialist theory, *viz.* CU. CU can be characterized as a maximizing, welfarist, hedonistic, aggregative, impartial doctrine. None of these qualities, however, seem to be defining features of consequentialism in general. The only aspect of CU that, indeed, seems to be shared by all other consequentialist moral theories is the very abstract idea that the moral status of an act depends only on the extent to which it promotes the good. But this opaque idea seems impossible to criticize. So the DM does, in fact, seem to run into either one of the two problems I have described.

In the second section, I argued that consequentialism should be regarded as a family of moral theories which are united – not by a single defining feature – but by a common structure. I explored the methodological consequences of this idea and suggested that a case against consequentialism should proceed in the following way. First, critics should determine the structure of a typical consequentialist doctrine, e.g. CU, by factorizing it into logically distinct moral claims. Then, they should consider which alternative components consequentialists may embrace in place of any of the paradigmatic components. Upon completing these two steps, critics possess a construction kit for consequentialist doctrines and can view the case against consequentialism in a new light. What critics are required to do is to show that all doctrines that can be constructed from the kit are subject to a decisive objection. This, I suggested, may be done by surveying objections to consequentialism, correlating them with individual components and by showing that all components of a given row are subject to a decisive objection. If successful, this would refute consequentialism as a whole, because all consequentialist doctrines must endorse at least one component from each row. This FRA is, as I have argued, superior to the conventional procedure of the DM, because it avoids both of the two problems that the latter unavoidably runs into. It makes it possible to address *all* consequentialist doctrines and, hence, does not give consequentialists the chance to defend themselves by diverging to a version of consequentialism to which criticisms do not apply. And it gives critics the chance to criticize consequentialist doctrines in terms of substantive content rather than bare logical structure.

In saying that the FRA solves these problems I do not mean to claim, of course, that it is itself free from problems. In this short piece, I have merely tried to explain why we need a new method for the critical study of consequentialism. And I have laid out the bare bones of what

is, I hope, a promising approach. My suggestion certainly raises new issues that need addressing. And there are surely many gaps in the reasoning that need to be filled. I have left aside, e.g., general moral-epistemological issues, such as the question what constitutes an objection to a moral doctrine anyway. I have not examined how it can be established that a given objection relates to a given component. Furthermore, there are certainly additional problems that still lie in the dark. The best way to deal with them is, I think, to apply the general approach that I have laid out and to see whether it gets us anywhere. I surely hope it does. But here, as anywhere in philosophy, the proof of the pudding is in the eating!<sup>18</sup>

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