NOT SO PROMISING AFTER ALL: EVALUATOR-RELATIVE TELEOLOGY AND COMMON-SENSE MORALITY

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Abstract: Douglas Portmore has recently argued in this journal for a "promising result" – that combining teleological ethics with "evaluator relativism" about the good allows an ethical theory to account for deontological intuitions while "accommodat[ing] the compelling idea that it is always permissible to bring about the best available state of affairs." I show that this result is false. It follows from the indexical semantics of evaluator relativism that Portmore's compelling idea is false. I also try to explain what might have led to this misunderstanding.

In "Combining Teleological Ethics With Evaluator Relativism: A Promising Result," Douglas Portmore[1] advances the thesis that a *N*on-egoistic *A*gent-relative *T*eleological *E*thical theory (NATE) can "accommodate the compelling idea that it is always permissible to bring about the best available state of affairs." This is supposed to be a "promising result" about NATE, because unlike consequentialism, NATE can also accommodate ordinary common-sense moral intuitions about things like agent-centered constraints, special obligations, and options.[2] On the grounds that NATE can account for these common-sense intuitions, but unlike deontology can also accommodate the Compelling Idea, Portmore argues that NATE holds significant advantages over both consequentialism and deontology. Unfortunately, however, as I will explain here, Portmore's version of NATE *cannot* accommodate this Compelling Idea. Confusion

over whether it can is due to Portmore's misleading suggestion (shared by several other authors[3]) that adopting an "evaluator-relative" account of the good is merely a matter of having a different *axiological* view. It is not. An "evaluator-relative" account of the good is not a view about *what* is good, but about the *semantics* of 'good' – and not, at that, a particularly promising one.

1.   *Evaluator relativism and constraints*

What is an *evaluator-relative* account of the good? As apparent from its descriptive name, it is an account of good on which the truth of sentences including the word 'good' (and correlatively 'bad', 'worse', and so on) is relative to who the evaluator is – in other words, to contexts of utterance.[4] So it is the view that 'good' is an indexical. If 'good' and its correlates are evaluator-relative, then nothing rules out all three of the following sentences being consistent:

Franz 1:   It is worse for me to commit a murder than for both Hans and Jens to commit murders.
Hans 1:   It is worse for me to commit a murder than for both Franz and Jens to commit murders.
Jens 1:   It is worse for me to commit a murder than for both Franz and Hans to commit murders.

And this is a useful result. For if Franz, Hans, and Jens can all speak truly in saying so, then we can explain an ordinary, common-sense intuition about *constraints*.

Suppose that Franz can prevent both Hans and Jens from committing murders by committing a murder. The intuition about *constraints* is that he is still not permitted to commit this murder. Ordinary consequentialism can accommodate this intuition by postulating that Franz's murder is different from Hans's and Jens's in some way that makes it *worse*. But the intuition about constraints is not an intuition only about Franz. It applies equally well if the situation is that *Hans* can prevent Franz and Jens from committing murders by committing a murder. If as consequentialists we accommodate the first intuition by postulating that Franz's murder is worse than the other two, then we are forced to conclude that Hans ought to murder in order to prevent the other murders – indeed, that Hans ought to murder even to prevent only Franz from murdering.

Evaluator-relativity about 'good' seems to offer a more promising way of treating this kind of case than consequentialism can offer. For suppose that each of the following sentences are true:

Franz 2:   It is always permissible for me to bring about the most good.
Hans 2:   It is always permissible for me to bring about the most good.
Jens 2:   It is always permissible for me to bring about the most good.

From the **1** sentences and the **2** sentences we can derive:

Franz 3:   It is permissible for me to refrain from murdering and allow Hans and Jens to murder.
Hans 3:   It is permissible for me to refrain from murdering and allow Franz and Jens to murder.
Jens 3:   It is permissible for me to refrain from murdering and allow Franz and Hans to murder.

And so, it seems, we manage to accommodate the ordinary common-sense intuition about constraints – at least, when we only look at sentences in which an agent is talking about her own actions.

2. *Evaluator relativism and the compelling idea*

Portmore (and others) have argued by such reasoning that an evaluator-relative account of 'good' can both account for our ordinary common-sense intuitions in a way that ordinary consequentialism cannot[5] *and* preserve the very feature that is supposed to make consequentialism attractive — that it accommodates the *Compelling Idea*:

Compelling: It is always permissible to bring about the most good.

In our discussion in section 1 I *assumed* that the following sentence was true relative to every context of utterance, including all three of Franz, Hans, and Jens:

Me: It is always permissible for me to bring about the most good.

So if **Compelling** just means the same thing as **Me**, then the discussion in section 1 illustrates that it is consistent to suppose that **Compelling** is indeed true relative to every context of utterance. But unfortunately **Compelling** does not mean the same thing as **Me**. And as a result, it actually turns out that **Compelling** is false relative to every context of utterance relative to which the sentences expressing the ordinary, common-sense intuitions about *constraints* are *true*. In other words, even if we have an evaluator-relative account of 'good', **Compelling** is true only if our intuitions about constraints are false.

The argument is simple. **Compelling** does not mean the same thing as **Me**, because when made explicit, what **Compelling** says is that:

Compelling*: It is always permissible *for anyone* to bring about the most good.

Anyone who believes that it is always permissible for her to bring about the most good, but thinks that other people are sometimes required to bring about less than the most good, has not fully grasped the Compelling Idea. She thinks that she is somehow exceptional, some kind of special case. It may *seem* that **Compelling*** follows from the fact that **Me** is true relative to every context of utterance, but that is going too fast. 'I am here now' is true relative to every context of utterance, but it does not follow that everyone is here now. This doesn't follow, because 'here' and 'now' are also indexicals. Similarly, according to evaluator-relativism about 'good', 'good' is an indexical. So **Compelling*** does not follow from the fact that **Me** is true relative to every context of utterance.

If **Compelling** is to be true relative to every context of utterance, the following sentence must also be, by universal elimination:

Comp Hans: It is always permissible for Hans to bring about the most good.

Since we're assuming that **Me** is true relative to every context of utterance, **Comp Hans** is true relative to contexts in which Hans is the speaker (henceforth: "Hans's context"). But as I'll now show, it follows from our ordinary, common-sense intuitions about constraints that **Comp Hans** is false relative to every other context of utterance. Similar reasoning will show that another entailment of **Compelling**, **Comp Jens**, is false relative to Hans's context, and thus it will follow that if we accept the common-sense intuitions about ordinary morality and evaluator-relativism about 'good', **Compelling** is actually provably *false* relative to every context of utterance.

One *part* of our ordinary common-sense intuitions about constraints has already been discussed. Let us call the situation in which Franz can murder to prevent Hans's and Jens's murders the *Franz situation*, and similarly for Hans and Jens. One *part* of the common-sense intuition about constraints is that the following sentences are true:

Franz 4: In the Franz situation, I ought to refrain from murdering and allow Hans and Jens to murder.
Hans 4: In the Hans situation, I ought to refrain from murdering and allow Franz and Jens to murder.
Jens 4: In the Jens situation, I ought to refrain from murdering and allow Franz and Hans to murder.

But this leaves out an important part of the ordinary, common-sense intuition about constraints. Not only does it seem that Franz and the others should be able to say these things about *themselves*, it seems that sentences like the following should *also* be true:

Franz 5: In the Hans situation, Hans ought to refrain from murdering and allow me and Jens to murder.

Hans 5: In the Jens situation, Jens ought to refrain from murdering and allow Franz and me to murder.

That is, Franz should be able to *agree* with Hans about whether Hans acts rightly in refraining from murdering. But if **Franz 5** is true relative to Franz, then **Comp Hans** must be false relative to him. After all, we allowed that **Franz 1** was true relative to Franz:

Franz 1: It is worse for me to commit a murder than for both Hans and Jens to commit murders.

But from **Franz 1** and **Franz 5** it follows that there is some situation – the Hans situation – in which it is not permissible for Hans to bring about the most good. So **Comp Hans** is false relative to Franz's context. And since **Compelling** entails **Comp Hans** relative to every context of utterance, **Compelling** is also false relative to Franz's context.

Substituting any agent (other than Hans) for Franz in the foregoing argument,[6] we get the result that **Comp Hans** is false relative to each of their contexts of utterance, and hence that **Compelling** is. A similar argument shows that from the truth of **Hans 5** and **Hans 1** relative to Hans, it follows that **Comp Jens** must be false relative to **Hans**, and hence that **Compelling** is false relative to Hans's context as well. Hence it follows from the ordinary, common-sense intuitions about constraints and the indexical, "evaluator-relative" account of 'good' that **Compelling** is actually false relative to every context of utterance. Portmore's "promising result" is therefore provably false.

3.   *Agent-relativity and axiology*

So whence all of the confusion over whether an evaluator-relative teleological view can accommodate the Compelling Idea that makes consequentialism so attractive? I suggest a two-part diagnosis. First, we have to allow for confusion between an evaluator-relative account of 'good' and other kinds of agent-relative theory about the good. And second, we have to allow for Portmore's misleading suggestion that to adopt an agent-relative account of the good is simply to "endorse a different axiological view".[7]

Evaluator-relativism about 'good' is only one way among many of giving an important theoretical role to a *relational* concept that deserves to be called a "value" or "good" concept. Ordinary English uncontroversially[8] possesses the equipment to talk about one such concept – the *good for* relation. A tax policy can be good for Dick Cheney's pals without being good, and it can be good without being good for Dick Cheney's pals. So being good for someone is not the same as being good, and in their possession, or its being good that they possess it, as Moore unhelpfully suggests.[9] The *good for* concept may be related in some other way to the concept expressed by 'good' when it is used as a monadic predicate, but it is not the *same* concept.

Ethical egoism is a teleological view that employs the *good for* concept *instead* of the one expressed by 'good' when used as a monadic predicate. It says that rather than doing what will bring about the most good, you should do what will bring about the most of what is good *for you*. It does not count as 'teleological' because egoists agree with consequentialists that it is permissible to bring about the most good (they don't) whereas egoists have a special *axiology*, or view about *what* is good. We call it 'teleological' simply because it resembles consequentialism in certain broad respects, and the *good for* concept and the one expressed by 'good' when used as a monadic predicate appear to be similar or closely related – after all, we use the same word, 'good', in order to express them, and plausibly with good cause.[10]

And as a result, ethical egoism allows for situations that are similar to constraints, special obligations, and options – though not exactly the ones we intuitively think there are, according to common-sense morality. So for several decades now moral philosophers have suggested that a teleological theory structured similarly to ethical egoism could successfully mimic the commitments of common-sense morality to constraints, special obligations, and options. To do so, such a theory has to appeal to some *good*-like concept, and the concept has to be relational – it has to have a place for an agent. Moreover, it cannot be the ordinary-language concept, *good for*, because it is obvious that the wrong things are good for people, in order for such a theory to capture the right results about ordinary morality. So to carry out this program of agent-relative teleology, you have to believe in a new *good*-like concept, which we can follow the literature in calling 'agent-relative good' and express it by saying that something is 'good relative to' Franz.[11]

This teleological program is only contingently wedded to Portmore's professed program of taking the 'good' of ordinary English to be evaluator-relative, and hence indexical. For all that agent-relative teleology requires, we simply have no way at all in ordinary English of talking about what is good relative to whom. But there is a good question of why we should believe in such a thing as agent-relative value in the first place, if we don't

have any words to talk about it, and so it is natural to suggest that we *do* already have a word to talk about it – not 'good for', of course, but simply 'good'. So it's a natural idea, if you like the research program of developing an agent-relative teleology, to postulate that despite seeming to be a monadic predicate, 'good' actually expresses a *relational* concept, whose other relata are determined by context. And *one* way of doing that is to propose that 'good' is *evaluator*-relative, or relative to the person who is *making* the evaluation – in other words, that it is indexical, as Portmore advocates and we have been investigating.

Since there are ways of carrying out the program of non-egoistic agent-relative teleological ethics *other* than the evaluator-relative proposal favored by Portmore, this could be part of the source of the confusion. But it can't be the whole source of the confusion, because *no* version of agent-relative teleological ethics actually captures the Compelling Idea that it is always permissible to bring about the most good – not even ethical egoism. *Contra* Portmore, ethical egoists do *not* believe that it is always permissible for you to bring about the most good. They believe that it is always permissible for you to bring about the most of what is good *for you*. But since *good* and *good for* express different concepts, the idea that egoists find compelling turns out not to be at all the same idea that consequentialists find Compelling. Non-consequentialist teleologists differ from consequentialists not by having more sophisticated views about *what* is good, but by talking about something *other* than 'good' in the ordinary sense used by consequentialists.

Every version of agent-relative teleological ethics has to provide an answer to whether the evaluative concept to which their theory appeals can be expressed in ordinary English, and if so, how. If it can't, then they can't capture the Compelling Idea, because it is expressed in ordinary English. If it can, they have to tell us how. If it is expressed by the ordinary language expression, 'good for', then the ethics is egoistic, and will conflict with common-sense morality. If it is expressed by the monadic predicate 'good', they have to tell us how context supplies the agent. However it does, since the Compelling Idea is expressed with the ordinary language word 'good', we have to use this contextualist semantics in order to evaluate whether the Compelling Idea turns out to be true.[12] What I've demonstrated in this paper is simply that contrary to Portmore's assertions, on the indexicalist semantics that he proposes, the Compelling Idea turns out to be uniformly false. I leave it as an exercise for the reader to decide whether the details of an acceptable non-indexical contextualist semantics for 'good' can be given such that 'Everyone is permitted to bring about the most good' turns out to mean, "Everyone is permitted to bring about the most good relative to her," and whether, even if this is the case, this could possibly have been what consequentialists have found Compelling about consequentialism all along.

This result, I think, should not be overly surprising. If this is what is at stake over evaluator-relative accounts of 'good', then such accounts should not be evaluated with respect to how well they account for deontological intuitions. They should be evaluated with respect to how well they satisfy ordinary semantic criteria. And for straightforward reasons it seems that this program should never have gotten off of the ground – it does *not* seem, for example, like **Franz 1**, **Hans 1**, and **Jens 1** ought to turn out to be consistent. On the contrary, they blatantly contradict one another. So the evaluator-relative account of 'good' is independently unpromising. If you have deontological intuitions, then you should *be a deontologist*.[13]

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NOTES

[1] Douglas Portmore (2005), "Combining Teleological Ethics with Evaluator Relativism: A Promising Result," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86, pp. 95–113.

[2] On these three categories, see, for example, Thomas Nagel (1986), *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, and Shelly Kagan (1992), "The Structure of Normative Ethics," *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (Ethics), pp. 223–242.

[3] To varying degrees, this suggestion seems to have been endorsed by J. L. A. Garcia (1986), "Evaluator Relativity and the Theory of Value," *Mind* 95, pp. 242–245; John Broome (1991), *Weighing Goods*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell; James Dreier (1993), "The Structure of Normative Theories," *The Monist* 76, pp. 22–40; and by Krister Bykvist (1996), "Utilitarian Deontologies? On Preference Utilitarianism and Agent-Relative Value," *Theoria* 62, pp. 124–143.

[4] It is relative to the person making the evaluation – i.e. to the person applying the word 'good' – but we shouldn't say "contexts of evaluation," since "circumstances of evaluation" play a different technical role in Kaplanian indexical semantics. See David Kaplan (1979), "On the Logic of Demonstratives," *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 8, pp. 81–98.

[5] Although there is some (verbal, but heated) dispute about whether an agent-relative teleological view counts as a kind of "consequentialism." See, for example, Bykvist, op. cit.; Dreier, op. cit.; Garcia, op. cit.; Frances Howard-Snyder (1994), "The Heart of Consequentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 76, pp. 107–129; David McNaughton and Piers Rawling (1991), "Agent-Relativity and the Doing-Happening Distinction," *Philosophical Studies* 63, pp. 167–185; and Deshong Zong (2000), "Agent-Relativity is the Exclusive Feature of Consequentialism," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 38, pp. 677–693. Kagan, op. cit. and Broome, op. cit. make the helpful suggestion that we use 'teleological' for the broader class of views, but neither actually defines 'teleological' carefully enough to make all such views count.

[6] And constructing the appropriate hypothetical situation in which the agent can murder to prevent Hans from murdering, of course.

[7] Portmore, op. cit. p. 97.

[8] Although Moore and others have been considerably confused by it. See G. E. Moore (1903), *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 148–157.

[9] Moore, op. cit. p. 150.

[10] Notice that neither Kagan, op. cit. nor Broome, op. cit. is careful enough about this in introducing the term 'teleological'.

[11] See, for example, Amartya Sen (1982), "Rights and Agency," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 11, pp. 3–39; A. Sen (1983), "Evaluator Relativity and Consequential Evaluation," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, pp. 113–132; Kagan, op. cit.; Broome, op. cit.; Dreier, op. cit.; Bykvist, op. cit.; Garcia, op. cit.; Robert Stewart (1993), "Agent-Relativity, Reason, and Value," *The Monist* 76, pp. 66–80; Diane Jeske and Richard Fumerton (1997), "Relatives and Relativism," *Philosophical Studies* 87, pp. 143–157; Philip Pettit (1997), "The Consequentialist Perspective," in Marcia Baron, Philip Pettit, and Michael Slote, *Three Methods of Ethics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 92–174; and Michael Smith (2003), "Neutral and Relative Value After Moore," *Ethics* 113, pp. 587–598. Also compare Richard Brook (1991), "Agency and Morality," *Journal of Philosophy* 88, pp. 190–212; Frances Kamm (1989), "Harming Some to Save Others," *Philosophical Studies* 57, pp. 227–260; and David McNaughton and Piers Rawling (1993), "Deontology and Agency," *The Monist* 76, pp. 81–100.

[12] I carry out more of this task in a much more general discussion in "Teleology, Agent-Relative Value, and 'Good'."