

Consequentialism, Incoherence and Choice. Rejoinder to a Rejoinder.

by Peter Simpson and Robert McKim

In a number of books and essays Joseph Boyle, John Finnis, and Germain Grisez (hereafter BFG) have presented an argument against consequentialism.¹ In an earlier essay (in this journal under its previous name) we contended that their argument was unconvincing.² BFG had argued that consequentialism was incoherent because it could not account for the making of wrong choices. We replied that consequentialism could quite easily do this. We considered a simple example, the case of Jane, an act-utilitarian, who is faced with a choice between using a sum of money to buy a second home and using it to aid victims of famine, where the latter choice is the correct one according to her act-utilitarian principles, and is recognized by her as such. We supposed that Jane decides to buy the second home. Utilitarians, we suggested, have no difficulty accounting for such a decision because they need not accept that the only reasons which Jane could have for choosing what to do would be reasons which are based on her utilitarian commitment. Jane can view the alternative courses of action that confront her either from the utilitarian point of view of impartial benevolence or from the point of view of her own selfishness (or even from other points of view). Buying the home is the superior option from the point of view of selfishness but not from the point of view of impartial

¹ Germain Grisez "Against Consequentialism," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 23 (1978) 21-729; Germain Grisez, "Christian Moral Theology and Consequentialism", in *Principles of Catholic Moral Life*, edited by William E. May (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981), 293-327; Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 48-49, 150, 152-54, 160-61; John Finnis *Fundamentals of Ethics* (FE) (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1983), 89-90; John Finnis, Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., and Germain Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence. Morality and Realism* (NDMR), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 254-60.

² Robert McKim and Peter Simpson "On the Alleged Incoherence of Consequentialism," *The New Scholasticism* 62 (1988): 349-52.

benevolence. Since Jane can consider her courses of action from both of these points of view she can make either choice.

BFG have now written a reply.³ They say that the case of Jane is irrelevant to their argument. For, they say, they were never committed to the view that consequentialism is unable to account for people acting wrongly on the basis of a “nonrational motive,” or an “urge to do so,” or a “merely emotional motive.”⁴ Their view is that consequentialism is unable to account for people acting wrongly on the basis of a rational motive. This, however, is what it must allow for if it is to function as a method of moral judgment between practical possibilities.

(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 consequentialism—like any other 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 more good or less evil. (ICPR, 271)

It is clear from this passage, and others, that BFG say something stronger than that consequentialism is unable to account for wrong choices. They say that

³ Joseph Boyle, Germain Grisez, and John Finnis, “Incoherence and Consequentialism (or Proportionalism)—A Rejoinder,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* (formerly *The New Scholasticism*) 64 (1990): 271-77, 275. We refer to this paper as ICPR.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 272-73. See also NDMR, 260.

consequentialism cannot account for the making of right choices either, because it cannot account for the making of any choices. Rather what purports to be a theory which can give guidance in choosing between alternatives would actually have the result that the favored alternative—the one which consequentialism picks out as the right action once all of the relevant considerations are taken into account—is *unavoidable*, while the other alternatives are *impossible*.

What BFG seem to have in mind is this. Consequentialism is an attempt to take into account all of the relevant goods offered by the different courses of action available, and by doing so to find the option which maximally promotes these goods. But it is impossible that you should “both know which alternative promises the unqualifiedly greater good and make a rationally motivated choice of the other alternative (ICPR, 273).” There can be no intelligible reason to choose any less good alternative; there can be no “rationally motivated” choice of an inferior option. For an option can be chosen only if there is something appealing about it. But other is commensurability of goods so that all the goods promised by the different actions are taken into account in one calculation, then the best option will necessarily have all of the appeal of the other options and more besides. The situation is, we may suggest, rather like choosing between different sums of money where the greater the amount the greater the good. For \$500 includes all the good that \$100 has and more besides, so one could have no reason to choose \$100 over \$500. The choice of \$100 would lose all its appeal by comparison and one could have no rational motive for making it (ICPR, 273-274). If one did nevertheless make it, one's motive could only be something nonrational like a sudden urge. The case of Jane is, say BFG, like this. She could have a nonrational motive for buying the second

home but not a rational one. Hence her case is irrelevant to their criticism of consequentialism.

This reply, however, is based on a confusion, the same confusion we pointed out in our original article, namely the confusion between comparing all goods and comparing all goods from all points of view. To avoid repetition let us put the same point slightly differently. In one sense consequentialists hold that the action with the best consequences includes the good of actions with less good consequences, but in another sense they need not. They do when the goods are considered as comparable quantities; they need not when the goods are considered as possessed by different persons. So, *qua* comparable quantities, the good promised by Jane's buying the second home is included in the good promised by her giving the money to the famine victims, in the same way that \$100 is included in \$500. But, *qua* who enjoys these goods, Jane's enjoying the second home is not included in the famine victims' enjoying her charity. For if they enjoy her charity she does not enjoy the home, and manifestly, while \$100 is included in \$500, *my* having \$100 is not included in *your* having \$500. From this point of view, then, there is reason for Jane to buy the home, because she, and not somebody else, gets the benefit. From another point of view, of course, namely that of her concern with impartial benevolence, she only has reason to give the money to the famine victims. But since both ways of looking at the situation are available to her, Jane can have a rational motive to choose the wrong action. Thus, *contra* BFG, Jane's case is relevant and when consequentialism tells her to give the money away and not buy the home, it is giving guidance to rationally motivated choice exactly in the sense BFG require.

BFG erroneously suppose that, according to consequentialism, all reasons for

action are exhausted in the calculation of the goods offered by the several alternatives so that when the calculation is finished there could never be any reason to do other than what the calculation says. That this supposition is indeed erroneous the case of Jane illustrates. But we might ask why BFG are led into this error. We suggest that it springs from their looking at consequentialism in the light of their own theory of reasons for action.

According to BFG's own ethical theory,⁵ there are seven intelligible or basic goods: "life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness and religion (FE, 51)." These seven goods are the things which we "intelligently [regard] as desirable (FE, 36)." A specification of these goods provides the answer to the question, "What are you really aiming for?" An account of these goods is supposed to be an account of all of the reasons that there are for action. If there is to be a choice about what to do, the alternative courses of action must differ with respect to the goods they offer. "Wherever there is a choice, there is incommensurability between the goodness of the alternatives...(ICPR, 275)." In other words, freedom of choice requires incommensurability of the basic goods. Since consequentialism makes all goods commensurable BFG suppose that it makes choice impossible as well. They then conclude that, according to consequentialism, the only reason that someone could have for making a choice would be the reason provided by the consequentialist calculation. All of the reasons for action have been, as it were, swallowed up in that calculation.

Consequentialists, however, have no reason to accept BFG's analysis of reasons for action. They certainly need not suppose that the only reasons someone might have for acting are reasons which will be accounted for in the course of a consequentialist

calculation. Indeed in the case of selfish reasons they expressly suppose the opposite, namely that such reasons will not, and indeed ought not, to be so accounted for.

The extent to which BFG misunderstand consequentialism can be further illustrated by something else in their reply to us. They say that if consequentialism is able to account for wrong choice only by assuming there are several points of view from which things can be considered, then consequentialism is implicitly conceding that choice is between incommensurable alternatives. For, they say, the two points of view from which giving the money away and buying the home appear as reasonable must be incommensurable. But this, they then mistakenly conclude, concedes what they have been arguing for, namely that if we can rationally choose between alternatives the goods promised by these alternatives must be incommensurable (ICPR, 275-276). This, however, is another confusion. Consequentialists will concede that choice is between incommensurables if what is meant by this in Jane's case is that the two points of view are incompatible. But, contrary to BFG's assumption, it does not follow from this that the goods chosen between are incommensurable. On the contrary consequentialists will say these goods remain commensurable when considered as comparable quantities (as \$100 is commensurable with \$500). Whatever incommensurability is involved arises simply from the fact that these goods can be viewed as possessed by different people, and specifically as possessed by me rather than someone else. Hence, the possibility of adopting the selfish point of view instead of that of impartial benevolence. But this incompatibility of points of view is not the incommensurability of goods that BFG are contending for.

BFG have no answer to this point. What they do say in reply to it in fact raises a

⁵ In presenting this part of their theory we follow Finnis.

different issue altogether. For they ask how, if consequentialist impartial benevolence and selfishness are incommensurable positions, Jane can decide for one against the other.

Does she have a reason for espousing consequentialism or for thinking it preferable to the selfish point of view? If she does (and we agree that it is reasonable to assume she must), then she faces the following dilemma. Her reason must itself be either consequentialist or not consequentialist. If it is consequentialist it could not give her a reason to become a consequentialist since it could only motivate her after she already was one. If it is not consequentialist then there is after all some nonconsequentialist moral norm for choice, namely whatever norm she uses to decide she should become a consequentialist (ICPR, 276). But this is just another confusion. If we consider how consequentialists seek to justify their position we see that they appeal neither to consequentialist nor to nonconsequentialist norms. They appeal rather to facts of psychology (Mill) or logic (Hare) or to some intuitive and independently held principle of reason which they say is only or best captured by consequentialism (Scheffler). These justifications may fail, but they begin from something that one may accept, or come to accept, before one is obliged to take up any position at all about consequentialism or its opposite.

The trouble with BFG's argument is that they are supposing there is no middle between consequentialism and nonconsequentialism. This would be true if these terms were contradictories. But in the way BFG use them they are in fact contraries. For their argument takes both consequentialism and nonconsequentialism to be moral positions and hence to be positions that presuppose a certain domain. These positions are thus logically like the pair odd and even and not like the pair odd and not-odd. But since contraries allow a middle ground, the reasons consequentialists appeal to in defense of

their position need be neither consequentialist nor nonconsequentialist but instead distinct from both. In sum, BFG's argument does not exhaust all the possibilities and so is not a true dilemma.

For the record one final point. We are not ourselves consequentialists: we are merely of the opinion that consequentialism is not wrong for the reasons BFG give.