CAN CONSEQUENTIALISM COVER EVERYTHING?

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Abstract:

Derek Parfit, Philip Pettit and Michael Smith defend a version of consequentialism that covers everything. I argue that this version of consequentialism is false. Consequentialism, I argue, can only cover things that belong to a combination of things that agents can bring about.

CAN CONSEQUENTIALISM COVER EVERYTHING?

Some philosophers defend a version of consequentialism that covers everything. For example, Derek Parfit writes:

> Consequentialism covers, not just acts and outcomes, but also desires, dispositions, beliefs, emotions, the colour of our eyes, the climate, and everything else. More exactly, [consequentialism] covers everything that could make outcomes better or worse.[1]

Philip Pettit and Michael Smith endorse Parfit's version of consequentialism. They call it 'global consequentialism', and claim that it tells us

> not just which acts are the right ones to perform, but also which desires, beliefs, and emotions are the right ones to have, whether it is right to have this colour eyes or that, whether it is right for it to be rainy or cloudy or sunny, and so on and so forth.[2]

In this paper, I shall argue that this version of consequentialism is false.

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[1] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford, 1984, p. 25. Shelly Kagan makes a similar claim, writing that 'that 'absolutely every kind of thing is a potential evaluative focal point' for consequentialism, such as 'atoms, the weather, sewer systems, suns'. See his 'Evaluative Focal Points' in *Morality, Rules and Consequences*, eds. Brad Hooker, Elinor Mason and Dale Miller, Edinburgh, 2000, p. 151.

[2] Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, 'Global Consequentialism', in *Morality, Rules and Consequences*, p. 122.

I

All versions of consequentialism consist of two parts.[3] The first part is:

> *Theory of the good*: the good consists in X.[4]

There are at least three versions of the second part. The first version is:

> *Straightforward theory of the right*: a Y is right if and only if it maximizes the good.

The second version is:

> *Collective theory of the right*: a Y is right if and only if it would maximize the good if the overwhelming majority of agents chose this Y.

And the third version is:

> *Indirect theory of the right*: a Z is right if and only if it stands in relation *i* to a Y that maximizes the good.[5]

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[3] See Philip Pettit, 'Consequentialism', in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer, Oxford, 1991.

[4] Throughout this paper, I use 'good' as an evaluative term and 'ought' and 'reason' as deontic terms, and I use 'ought' as an overall term and 'reason' as a pro tanto term. The differences between these different kinds of terms will become clear from the implications that I attribute to claims that contain these terms.

[5] This distinction is sometimes conflated with the distinction between versions of consequentialism on which the criterion of rightness is the same as the decision-making procedure and versions on which it is not, which was first made by R. E. Bales in his 'Act-Utilitarianism: Account of Right-Making Characteristic or Decision-Making Procedure?' *American Philosophical Quarterly* viii (1971), 257-65. Peter Railton, in his 'Alienation, Consequentialism and the demands of Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* xiii (1984),

Different versions of consequentialism adopt different versions of the theory of the right, and make different claims about what X, Y and Z are. For example, the version of consequentialism that adopts the straightforward theory of the right and claims that a Y is an act is:

> *Act consequentialism*: an act is right if and only if it maximizes X.[6]

The version of consequentialism that adopts the indirect theory of the right and claims that a Y is a motive, that a Z is an act and that relation *i* is one of 'resulting from' is:

> *Motive consequentialism*: an act is right if and only if it results from a motive that maximizes X.[7]

And the version of consequentialism that adopts a combination of the indirect and the collective theories of the right and claims that a Y is a set of rules, that a Z is an act and that relation *i* is one of 'resulting from the internalization of' is:

> *Rule consequentialism*: an act is right if and only if it results from the internalization of a set of rules that would maximize X if the overwhelming majority of agents internalized this set of rules.[8]

Parfit and Pettit and Smith's versions of consequentialism must adopt either the

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174-231, calls the latter distinction that between 'objective' and 'subjective' consequentialism. Philip Pettit and Geoffrey Brennan, in their 'Restrictive Consequentialism', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* lxiv (1986), 438-55, call the latter distinction that between 'unrestrictive' and 'restrictive' consequentialism.

[6] See, for example, J. J. C. Smart, 'An Outline of A System of Utilitarian Ethics', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge, 1973.

[7] See, for example, Robert Merrihew Adams, 'Motive Utilitarianism', *Journal of Philosophy* lxxiii (1976), 467-81.

[8] See, for example, Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, Oxford, 1979, and Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*, Oxford, 2000.

straightforward, the indirect, or the collective theory of the right, and must claim either that X is everything, that Y is everything, or that Z is everything.[9]

Parfit does not make it clear which theory of the right his version of consequentialism adopts, and whether his version of consequentialism claims that X is everything, that Y is everything, or that Z is everything. But Pettit and Smith do. They write that their version of consequentialism

> contrasts with any form of consequentialism that privileges one or another category of evaluand . . . [Indirect consequentialisms] quite generally privilege some non-act category of evaluand . . . and then go on to define right actions in terms of the right things in the privileged category.[10]

Their version of consequentialism thus adopts the straightforward theory of the right.[11] And, as we have seen, they also write that their version of consequentialism tells us

> which desires, beliefs, and emotions are the right ones to have, whether it is right to have this colour eyes or that, whether it is right for it to be rainy or

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[9] Of course, their versions of consequentialism can also insert the theory of the good into a combination of more than one theory of the right, like rule consequentialism does, or into some other theory of the right. And, of course, their versions of consequentialism can also claim that both X and Y are everything, that both X and Z are everything, that both Y and Z are everything, or that both X, Y and Z are everything. But neither Parfit nor Pettit and Smith seem to intend their versions of consequentialism to do this, and even if they did, it would not affect my arguments.

[10] Pettit and Smith, p. 122f. By 'evaluand', they mean both what I call a Y and what I call a Z. In making this claim about versions of indirect consequentialism, they are quoting Simon Blackburn, but they do so approvingly.

[11] For all Pettit and Smith say here, their version of consequentialism could also adopt the collective rather than the straightforward theory of the right. But they do not seem to intend their version of consequentialism to do this, and even if they did, it would not affect my arguments.

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cloudy or sunny, and so on and so forth.[12]

Their version of consequentialism thus claims that Y is everything. We can therefore formulate Pettit and Smith's version of consequentialism as:

Global consequentialism: everything that maximizes X is right.

II

Can consequentialism really claim that everything that maximizes the good is right? That depends on what its claims about rightness imply. When act, motive and rule consequentialism claim that my performing an act is right, this claim implies:

(1)   I ought to perform this act.

Since, on consequentialism, there is no normatively significant difference between performing an act and bringing it about that an act is performed, this claim can be reformulated as:

(2)   I ought to bring it about that this act is performed.

Suppose that it is raining where I am at the moment, and that it would maximize the good if it were sunny instead. Global consequentialism will then claim:

(3)   Its being sunny is right.[13]

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[12] Pettit and Smith, p. 122.

[13] After all, Pettit and Smith claim that global consequentialism tells us, among other things, 'whether it is right for it to be rainy or cloudy or sunny' (p. 122).

If global consequentialism uses the term 'right' the same way act, motive and rule consequentialism use this term, this claim implies:

> (4)   I ought to it bring about that it is sunny.

But, of course, I cannot bring it about that it is sunny. So if global consequentialism claims that I ought to do this, and if

> *'Ought' implies 'can'*: if an agent ought to do something, this agent can do this thing,

then global consequentialism is false.

Pettit and Smith could respond to this in two different ways. First, they could deny that 'ought' implies 'can'. But it is hard to deny that if an agent ought to do something, it is at least physically possible for this agent to do this thing. And it is clearly physically impossible for me to bring it about that it is sunny.

Second, they could deny that global consequentialism uses the term 'right' the same way act, motive and rule consequentialism use this term. They could claim, for example, that global consequentialism uses the term 'right' the way other views use the term 'instrumentally good'.[14] Claim (3) could then be reformulated as:

> (5)   Its being sunny is instrumentally good.

This claim does not imply claim (4). But if global consequentialism used the term 'right' the way other views use the term 'instrumentally good', it would not really be a version of consequentialism. It would merely be an addition to consequentialism's theory of the good.[15]

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[14] It would then use 'right' as an evaluative term rather than as a deontic term (see note 4).

[15] Pettit and Smith could also claim that global consequentialism uses the term 'right' the way other views use this term with regard to things an agent can bring about, and uses the

Alternatively, Pettit and Smith could claim that global consequentialism uses the term 'right' the way other views use the term 'reason-giving'.[16] Claim (3) could then be reformulated as:

(6)   I have a reason to bring it about that it is sunny.

Again, this claim does not imply claim (4). But if global consequentialism claims that I have a reason to bring it about that it is sunny, and if

'*Having a reason' implies 'can'*: if an agent has a reason to do something, this agent can do this thing,

then global consequentialism is again false.

Pettit and Smith could respond to this by denying that 'having a reason' implies 'can'. This may seem more plausible than denying that 'ought' implies 'can', since an agent can have reasons which are such that this agent cannot act on all of them. For example, an agent can have a reason to do A and a reason to do B, even though this agent cannot do both A and B.

Surely, however, if an agent has a reason to do A, it is at least physically possible for this agent to do A, and if an agent has a reason to do B, it is at least physically possible for this agent to do B. So even though it is true that an agent can have reasons which are such that this agent cannot act on all of them, it is not true that an agent can have a reason on which it is physically impossible for this agent to act. In this sense, it is hard to deny that 'having a reason' implies 'can'. And if 'having a

term 'right' to mean 'instrumentally good' with regard to all other things. In that case, global consequentialism would consist of two parts: first, an addition to consequentialism's theory of the good that is not itself a version of consequentialism, and second, the version of consequentialism that I will call 'semi-global consequentialism' below. My argument would then still apply to global consequentialism's first part, which is enough to reach the conclusion I will reach at the end of this section.

    [16] It would then use 'right' as a pro tanto term rather than as an overall term (see note 4).

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reason' implies 'can' in this sense, that is enough to make global consequentialism false.

It therefore seems that Pettit and Smith will have to modify their view. They could, for example, modify it to:

> *Semi-global consequentialism*: everything that maximizes X and that agents can bring about is right.

<div align="center">III</div>

After claiming that one of the things that consequentialism covers is the climate, Parfit goes on to claim that 'the best *possible* climate is the one that would make outcomes best.'[17] Parfit therefore may have meant to defend semi-global consequentialism, rather than global consequentialism.[18]

However, this version consequentialism is false as well. We can see this by considering one of Parfit's own examples: the case of Clare.

Clare has what Parfit describes as one of 'the best possible sets of motives', that is, a set of motives that maximizes the good.[19] One of these motives is a strong love for her child. She finds herself in the following situation:

> Clare could either give her child some benefit, or give much greater benefits to some unfortunate stranger. Because she loves her child, she benefits him rather than the stranger.[20]

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[17] Parfit, p. 25 (italics added).

[18] However, by 'possible', Parfit may simply mean 'physically possible', rather than 'possible for agents to bring about'.

[19] Parfit, p. 32.

[20] Ibid., p. 32.

Loving her child and benefiting the stranger are both things that Clare can do. But she can benefit the stranger only if she does not love her child, and she can love her child only if she does not benefit the stranger.[21]

What does semi-global consequentialism tell Clare to do? Since Clare can love her child, and since it will maximize the good if she does this, semi-global consequentialism claims:

(7)   It is right for Clare to love her child.

Since Clare can benefit the stranger, and since it will maximize the good if she does this, semi-global consequentialism also claims:

(8)   It is right for Clare to benefit the stranger.

Together, these claims imply:

(9)   It is right for Clare to both love her child and benefit the stranger.[22]

And if semi-global consequentialism uses the term 'right' the way act, motive and rule consequentialism use this term, this claim implies:

(10)   Clare ought to both love her child and benefit the stranger.

But Clare cannot both love her child and benefit the stranger. So if semi-global consequentialism claims that Clare ought to do this, and if 'ought' implies 'can', then

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[21] Of course, it may not be true that Clare can benefit the stranger only if she does not love her child and can love her child only if she does not benefit the stranger. Parfit discusses a version of Clare's case in which this assumption is dropped (p. 33), but I am here only concerned with cases in which this assumption is true.

[22] Claim (7) and claim (8) together imply claim (9) because 'right' is being used as an overall term here (see note 4).

semi-global consequentialism is false.

Parfit admits that '[i]t cannot be claimed that Clare ought to have acted differently if she could not have done so.'[23] But he continues:

> This last clause does not mean 'if this would have been causally impossible, given her actual motives'. It means 'if this would have been causally impossible, whatever her motives might have been'.[24]

Parfit here appeals to the fact that it would have been possible for Clare to benefit the stranger if she had not loved her child. That is true, but irrelevant. Clare cannot both love her child and benefit the stranger, and this is what semi-global consequentialism tells her to do.

Parfit also writes:

> It is hard to believe that it could be impossible for someone to avoid acting in a way that deserves to be blamed. . . . But [Clare's case] would be a case of *blameless* wrongdoing. . . . [W]e *can* always avoid doing *what deserves to be blamed*. This is enough to satisfy the doctrine that ought implies can.[25]

Parfit here equates the claim that 'ought' implies 'can' with:

> '*Deserves blame' implies 'could have'*: if an agent deserves blame for failing to do something, this agent could have done this thing.

However, though it seems true that 'deserves blame' implies 'could have', it is surely also true that 'ought' implies 'can'. Suppose that we claimed:

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[23] Parfit, p. 33.

[24] Ibid., p. 33.

[25] Ibid., p. 36.

(11)   Clare ought to bring it about that it is sunny.

If 'deserves blame' implied 'could have' but 'ought' did not imply 'can', then as long as we did not blame Clare for failing to bring it about that it is sunny, claim (11) could be true. But that is clearly wrong. Claim (11) is false, whether we blame Clare for failing to do what it tells her to do or not.

Parfit could also claim that semi-global consequentialism uses the term 'right' the way other views use the term 'reason-giving'.[26] Semi-global consequentialism could then claim:

(12)   Clare has a reason to love her child

and

(13)   Clare has a reason to benefit the stranger,

without these claims together implying:

(14)   Clare has a reason to both love her child and benefit the stranger.[27]

However, it would most increase the good if Clare both loved her child and benefited the stranger. Semi-global consequentialism therefore has to claim that this is what Clare has most reason to do. Since 'having most reason to' is normatively equivalent to 'ought to', this claim can be reformulated as:

(15)   Clare ought to both love her child and benefit the stranger.

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[26] It would then use 'right' as a pro tanto term rather than as an overall term (see note 4).

[27] Claim (12) and claim (13) do not together imply claim (14) because 'reason' is a pro tanto term (see note 4).

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And since Clare cannot do this, if 'ought' implies 'can', then semi-global consequentialism is again false.

It therefore seems that, like Pettit and Smith, Parfit will have to modify his view. He could, for example, modify it to:

Semi-global combination consequentialism: a thing is right if and only if it belongs to a combination of things that maximizes X and that agents can bring about.
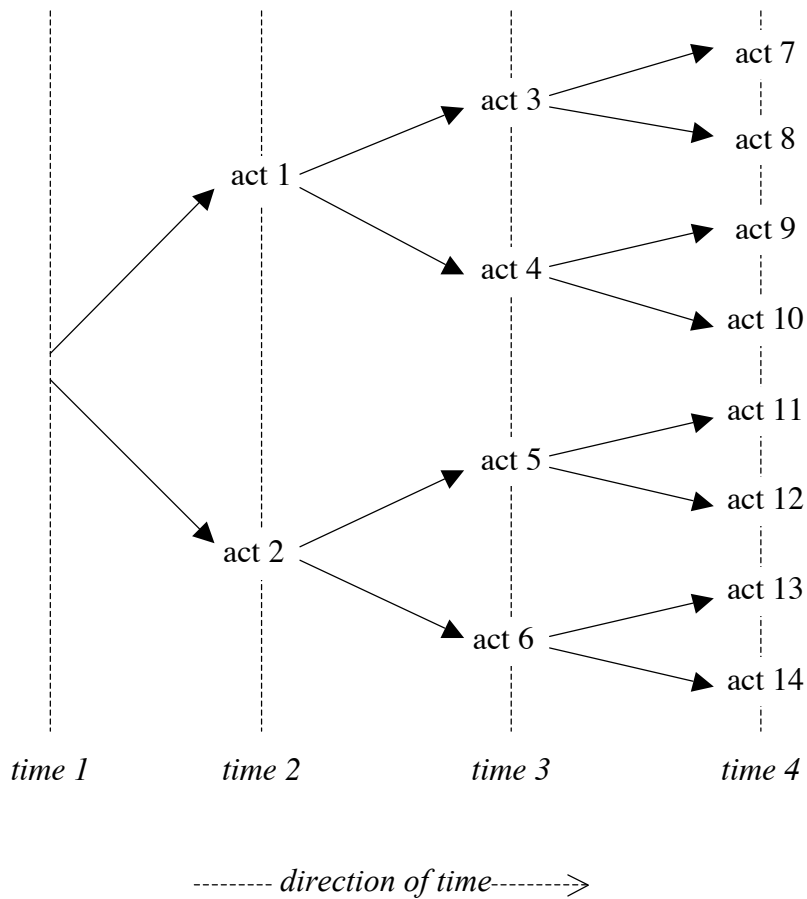

IV

Since, on consequentialism, there is no normatively significant difference between bringing something about and performing the acts that bring this thing about, semi-global combination consequentialism can be reformulated as:

Combined act consequentialism: an act is right if and only if it belongs to a combination of acts that maximizes X and that agents can perform.[28]

We may think that combined act consequentialism is equivalent to standard act consequentialism. But it is not. To see why not, return to the example of Clare. Suppose that Clare can choose between the following acts:

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[28] I assume here that the term 'act' is defined in a way that includes any way an agent can bring something about. Those who disagree with this definition can simply replace 'acting' with 'bringing something about' in what follows.

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                                              ► act 7
                          act 3 ─────
                    ►            ──────► act 8
              act 1 ─────
                          ──────► act 4 ──────► act 9
                                          ──────► act 10

                          ──────► act 5 ──────► act 11
              act 2 ─────              ──────► act 12
                          ──────► act 6 ──────► act 13
                                          ──────► act 14

       time 1        time 2        time 3        time 4
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--------- *direction of time*-------->

The dotted arrow at the bottom represents the direction of time, the dotted lines represent particular moments in time, and the closed arrows point to the different acts that Clare can perform at particular moments in time. Which acts she can perform at a particular moment in time depends on which acts she has performed at earlier moments in time.

Suppose that act 1 and act 3 are acts that strengthen Clare's motive of love for her child, that act 2 and act 6 are acts that weaken her motive of love for her child, that act 7 is the act of benefiting her child, and that act 14 is the act of benefiting the stranger.[29] Whatever Clare does, she cannot perform both act 7 and act 14. Suppose that it is now time 1, and suppose that Clare wants to know which act it is right for her to perform at time 4: is this act 7, the act of benefiting her child, or act 14, the act of

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[29] Of course, strengthening or weakening a motive of love will normally take more than just two acts, but this does not affect my argument.

benefiting the stranger?

Standard act consequentialism will answer Clare's question by comparing how much good would be brought about by act 7 with how much good would be brought about by act 14, and by claiming that the act that would bring about most good is right. We have supposed that most good would be brought about by act 14, the act of benefiting the stranger. Therefore, standard act consequentialism will claim that the act that it is right for Clare to perform at time 4 is act 14, the act of benefiting the stranger.

Combined act consequentialism, by contrast, will answer Clare's question by comparing how much good would be brought about by the combination of acts that Clare can perform that act 7 belongs to with how much good would be brought about by the combination of acts that Clare can perform that act 14 belongs to, and by claiming that the act that belongs to the combination of acts that brings about most good is right. Suppose that most good would be brought about by the combination of act 1, act 3 and act 7, since that combination includes the two acts that strengthen Clare's love for her child. In that case, combined act consequentialism will claim that the act that it is right for Clare to perform at time 4 is act 7, the act of benefiting her child.

Standard act consequentialism thus only takes account of how much good would be brought about by act 7 and of how much good would be brought about by act 14. Combined act consequentialism, by contrast, not only takes account of how much good would be brought about by act 7 and of how much good would be brought about by act 14, but also of how much good would be brought about by the acts that Clare has to perform between time 1 and time 4 in order to be able to perform act 7 or act 14 at time 4 – that is, it also takes account of how much good would be brought about by act 1 and act 3, and of how much good would be brought about by act 2 and act 6.[30]

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[30] In this respect, combined act consequentialism is similar to the biographical consequentialism defended by Roger Crisp in his 'Utilitarianism and the Life of Virtue', *Philosophical Quarterly* xlii (1992), 139-60, and to the broad consequentialist criterion for

VI

Parfit and Pettit and Smith defend a version of consequentialism that covers everything. I have argued that this version of consequentialism is false. Consequentialism, I have argued, can only cover things that belong to a combination of things that agents can bring about. In other words, global consequentialists should be combined act consequentialists.[31]

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the evaluation of acts suggested (but rejected in favour of a non-consequentialist view) by Jonathan Dancy in his *Moral Reasons*, Oxford, 1993, pp. 234-52, and his 'Parfit and Indirectly Self-Defeating Theories', in *Reading Parfit*, ed. Jonathan Dancy, Oxford, 1997. According to Crisp, agents ought to live in such a way that the total amount of value in the history of the world is brought as close as possible to the maximum. According to Dancy, when evaluating acts, consequentialism should not just take into account the effects of an act itself, but also the effects of all conditions that have to be satisfied for the act to be performed. Crisp and Dancy argue for these views on consequentialist grounds, rather than by combining these consequentialist grounds with an appeal to the claim that 'ought' implies 'can'. If their arguments are sound, they give consequentialists an additional reason to accept combined act consequentialism.