The Consequentialist Perspective

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Philosophers use the term consequentialism to identify a general way of thinking about right and wrong and thereby provide a convenient label for a whole family of theories or possible theories in normative ethics. Consequentialist ethical theories maintain that right and wrong are a function of the consequences of our actions—more precisely, that our actions are right or wrong because, and only because, of their consequences. The only because is important because almost all ethical theories take consequences into account when assessing actions, and almost all philosophers believe that the consequences of our actions at least sometimes affect their rightness or wrongness. What distinguishes consequentialist from non-consequentialist ethical theories is the insistence that when it comes to rightness or wrongness, nothing matters but the results of our actions.

When consequentialists affirm that the results or consequences of an action determine whether it is right or wrong, they have in mind, more specifically, the value of those results. That is, it is the goodness or badness of an action’s consequences that determines its rightness or wrongness. Different consequentialist theories spell out this relationship in different ways. In other words, if right and wrong are a function of the goodness and badness of the results of our actions, then different functions are possible, different ways of connecting consequences to rightness and wrongness. What I shall call standard consequentialism advances some further theses that distinguish it from other possible types of consequentialism.

Standard consequentialism asserts that the morally right action for an agent to perform is the action, of those actions that the agent could perform at the time, that has the best consequences or results in the most good. Standard consequentialism is a maximizing doctrine. By instructing us to bring about as much good as we can, standard consequentialism distinguishes itself from the thesis that an action is right if and only if it has good consequences (or consequences that are sufficiently good or that are good enough). Standard consequentialism holds, furthermore, that we are not merely permitted or encouraged to act so as to maximize good; we are required to do so. Accordingly, standard consequentialism rejects the idea that there can be degrees of rightness so that an agent might have several options open to him, all of which are right but some of which are more right than others. On the other hand, of the actions open to the agent, several might have equally optimal results. Thus, there may be no single best action and,
hence, no uniquely right action. Put more precisely, then, standard consequentialism holds that an action is morally right if and only if there is no other action, among those available to the agent, that has better consequences; otherwise, the action is wrong. Thus, several actions might be equally right, and what morality requires is that the agent do one of them. Finally, an action might have bad consequences and yet be right. This will be the case if all alternative actions have worse results.

Further Features of Standard Consequentialism

In this section, I describe some further features of standard consequentialism. I call it standard consequentialism because it is the most familiar and widely discussed form of consequentialism; it is what I usually have in mind when discussing the subject. I am also inclined to think it is the most plausible form of consequentialism. But even if I am wrong on both counts, for purposes of discussion it will be helpful to focus on one reasonably specific version of consequentialism.

Outcome includes the value of the action itself

When consequentialists refer to the results or consequences of an action, they have in mind the entire upshot of the action, that is, its overall outcome. They are concerned with whether, and to what extent, the world is better or worse because the agent has elected a given course of conduct. Thus, consequentialists take into account whatever value, if any, the action has in itself, not merely the value of its subsequent effects.

This might sound odd, because when speaking of the “results” or “consequences” of an action, we frequently have in mind effects that are distinct from, subsequent to, and caused by the action. Consequentialists, however, don’t limit results to effects in a narrow or causal sense, because they are interested in the consequences not only of one’s acting in various positive ways, but also of one’s refraining from acting. For example, it would seem odd to say that, by ignoring a panhandler’s request for rent money, I “caused” his family to sleep outside tonight. Still, this may be one result of my not stopping to help him; if so, then consequentialists will take it into account in assessing my conduct.

Consequentialists, moreover, needn’t assume that the line between an action and the effects that flow from it, between what we do and what results from what we do, is set in nature. Rather, this line is a function of how the situation is described. For example, what I did at the faculty seminar at 4:36 p.m. might be described as “opening my mouth wide and covering my ears with my hands,” “feigning shock and horror,” “expressing my disdain for the ontological argument,” or “insulting my colleague.” “Feigning shock and horror” is a subsequent effect of my action when it is described as “opening my mouth wide and covering my ears,” but not when it is described as “insulting my colleague.” This fact buttresses the point that consequentialism is properly concerned with the entire upshot of our actions, with whether they make the world as a whole better or worse. We are to assess and compare the overall outcomes of the various actions we could perform, and these outcomes include the positive or negative value, if any, of each action viewed by itself as well as the positive or negative value of its subsequent effects.

The good is agent-neutral and independent of the right

Standard consequentialism assumes that we can sometimes make objective, impartial, and agent-neutral judgments about the comparative goodness or badness of different states of affairs. At least sometimes it will be the case that one outcome is better than another outcome – not better merely from some particular perspective, but simply better, better tout court. Thus, for example, it is a better outcome (all other things being equal) when eight people have headaches and two people die than when two people have headaches and eight people die. Most people believe this, as do most philosophers, including many non-consequentialists. However, some non-consequentialists contend that this idea makes no sense (e.g., Thomson 2001: 12–15, 41). One state of affairs can be
better for Fred or worse for Sarah than another state of affairs, they say, but it can’t be said to be just plain better. There is no such thing as being just plain better, only better along some particular dimension or better for someone or better from some perspective. In line with this, some philosophers have proposed variants of consequentialism in which all or some judgments regarding the comparative value of states of affairs are agent-relative as opposed to agent-neutral. I shan’t discuss these non-standard variants of consequentialism.

Standard consequentialism takes it for granted not only that the goodness or badness of an action’s outcome is an agent-neutral matter, but also that this is something that can be identified prior to, and independently of, the normative assessment of the action. The point, after all, of consequentialism is to use the goodness or badness of an action to determine its rightness or wrongness. And circularity would threaten the theory if our notions of right and wrong were to infect our assessment of consequences as good or bad. Standard consequentialism thus assumes that we can identify states of affairs as good or bad, better or worse, without reference to normative principles of right and wrong. If we cannot do this, then the distinction between consequentialism and non-consequentialism begins to dissolve – leaving us, for example, unable to avoid labeling as consequentialist the deontological theorist who says that the right thing for an agent to do is to bring about the best state of affairs that he can, where the best state of affairs always consists in the agent’s doing his duty, which in turn consists in his performing tokens of act types that are intrinsically right and refraining from performing tokens of act types that are intrinsically wrong.

Most non-consequentialists would agree with what I have just written. They grant that the good can be identified prior to, and independently of, the right, but they distinguish themselves from consequentialists by holding that the good doesn’t, or doesn’t always, determine the right. However, some self-described consequentialists would challenge the previous paragraph. They believe that it is theoretically acceptable for some normative notions to enter into our assessments of goodness and badness and that their doing so neither is viciously circular nor undermines the spirit of consequentialism. They might hold, for example, that one state of affairs may be better than another because it is just and the other unjust and that this fact may make bringing about the first state of affairs the right thing to do. Again, however, I’ll be ignoring non-standard forms of consequentialism like this.

Expected consequences, not actual consequences, are what count

According to standard consequentialism, an action is right if and only if nothing the agent could do would have better results. However, we rarely know ahead of time and for certain what the consequences will be of each of the possible actions we could perform. Standard consequentialism therefore says that we should choose the action, the expected value of the outcome of which is at least as great as that of any other action open to us. The notion of expected value is mathematical in origin and conceptualized as follows. Every action that we might perform has a number of possible outcomes. The likelihood of those outcomes varies, but each can be assumed to have a certain probability of happening. In addition, each possible outcome of a given action has a certain value; that is, it is good or bad to some specified degree. Assume for the sake of discussion that we can assign numbers both to probabilities and to values. One would then calculate the expected value of hypothetical action A, with (let us suppose) three possible outcomes, by multiplying the probability of each outcome times its value and summing the three figures. Suppose that the first outcome has a probability of 0.7 and a value of 3, the second outcome has a probability of 0.2 and a value of —1, and the third outcome a probability of 0.1 and value of 2. The expected value of A is thus 2.1, which equals \((3 \times 0.7) + (-1 \times 0.2) + (2 - 0.1)\). A is the right action to perform if and only if no alternative has greater expected value.

In reality, of course, we never have more than rough, qualitative estimates of probabilities and values. Indeed, we are likely to be ignorant of some possible outcomes or
misdive their goodness or badness, and we may overlook altogether some possible courses of action. Nevertheless, the point being made is important. Standard consequentialism instructs the agent to do what has the highest expectation of good as judged by what a reasonable and conscientious person in the agent's circumstances could be expected to know. It might turn out, however, that because of unfavorable circumstances, the action with the greatest expected value ends up producing poor results—worse results, in fact, than several other things the agent could have done instead. Assuming that the agent's original estimate of expected value was correct (or, at least, the most accurate estimate one could have arrived at in the circumstances), then this action remains the right thing to have done. Indeed, it is what the agent should do if he or she were faced with the same situation again. On the other hand, an agent might perform an action that has less expected value than several other actions the agent could have performed, and yet, through a fortuitous chain of circumstances, it turns out that the action has better results, brings more good into the world, than anything else the agent could have done. Nevertheless, standard consequentialism asserts that the agent acted wrongly.

Some consequentialists adopt the rival view that the right action is the one that actually brings about the best results (or would in fact have brought about the best results, had it been performed), regardless of its expected value. How can it be right, they ask, to do what in fact had suboptimal results? Or wrong to do the thing that had the best results? Because these consequentialists still want the agent to act in whatever way is most likely to maximize value, they draw a distinction between objective rightness and the action it would have been reasonable (or subjectively right) for the agent to perform. Comparing the actual results of what we did with what the actual results would have been, had we done an alternative action, raises philosophical puzzles. But the main reason for orienting consequentialism toward probable results rather than actual results is that the theory, like other ethical theories, is supposed to be prospective and action-guiding. In acting so as to maximize expected value, the agent is doing what the theory wants him to do, and he is not to be blamed, nor is he necessarily to modify his future conduct, if this action does not, in fact, maximize value. Accordingly, standard consequentialism holds that this is not merely the reasonably, but also the morally right, way for the agent to act.

Further comments on the uncertainty of consequences

Critics of consequentialism perennially point to the inevitable uncertainty of our knowledge of future events, arguing that this uncertainty undermines the viability of consequentialism. Although, as was just discussed, we don't have to know what the outcome of an action will be in order to estimate its expected value, in fact we are unlikely to know all the possible outcomes an action might have, or to do more than guess at their comparative probabilities. And, depending on the particular theory of value the consequentialist adopts, he or she will have greater or lesser difficulty assigning values to those outcomes. These problems are compounded by the fact that the consequences of our actions continue indefinitely into the future, often in ways that are far from trivial even if they are unknowable.

Consequentialists can concede these points, yet affirm the viability of their theory. First, they can stress that, despite our ignorance, we already know quite a lot about the likely results of different actions. The human race wasn't born yesterday, and in reflecting on the possible consequences of an action, we do so with a wealth of experience behind us. Although by definition the specific situation in which one finds oneself is always unique, it is unlikely to be the first time human beings have pondered the results of performing actions of type A, B, or C in similar sorts of circumstances. Second, consequentialists can stress that the difficulties we face in identifying the best course of action do not undermine the goal of endeavoring to bring about as much good as we can. Whether we are consequentialists or not, we must act. And even though ignorance and uncertainty plague human action, they don't prevent us from striving to do as much good as we can. Third, and finally, consequentialists can point...
that uncertainty about the future is a
problem for other normative theories as well.
Almost all normative theories take into account
the likely consequences of the actions open to
the agent and are thus to some extent infected
by uncertainty about the future.

Utilitarianism

Consequentialism is not a complete ethical
theory. (From now on by "consequentialism"
I mean "standard consequentialism", unless
otherwise indicated.) It tells us to act so as to
be acting as much expected good as we
can, but it doesn't say what the good is. Thus,
depending on one's theory of value, there are
different ways of filling out consequentialism
and turning it into a complete ethical theory.
Utilitarianism represents one way, and it is
worth saying a little about it because utilitarian-
ism is the most influential as well as the
most widely discussed consequentialist ethical
tory. In fact, only a couple of decades ago
did philosophers begin to appreciate fully that
an ethical theory could retain the consequential-
ist normative structure of utilitarianism
while relinquishing its specific value commit-
ments - that is, that an ethical theory could
agree with utilitarianism that our actions
should bring about as much good as possible
and yet disagree with it about what the good is.
Utilitarianism takes happiness or, more
broadly, well-being to be the only thing that is
good in itself or valuable for its own sake. We
don't need to explore what well-being involves
to point out some important features of utili-
tarianism's value theory. First, the good, as
utilitarians understand it, attaches only to par-
ticular individuals (that is, to human beings or
other sentient creatures). Thus, a state of affairs
is good or bad to some degree (and better or
worse than some other state of affairs) only in
virtue of the goodness or badness of the lives
of particular individuals. There is no good or
bad above and beyond that, no good or bad
above and beyond the happiness or unhappi-
ness of individuals. Second, utilitarians believe
that the good is additive, that total or net
happiness is just the sum of the happiness
or unhappiness of each individual. More
happiness here counterbalances less happiness
there. Underlying this, of course, is the as-
sumption that in principle we can compare
people's levels of happiness or well-being. But
one shouldn't interpret this assumption too
rigorously. Utilitarians have always granted
that interpersonal comparisons of happiness
or well-being are difficult, and they can even
concede that some issues of comparison and
addition may be irresolvable in principle.
Utilitarians need believe only that we can rank
many states of affairs as better or worse. Finally,
utilitarians believe that each person's well-
being is equally valuable, and his happiness or
unhappiness, her pleasure or pain, carries the
same weight as that of any other person. As
Bentham wrote, each person counts as one, and
no one as more than one.

In sum, utilitarianism has a welfarist value
theory, which holds that the happiness or well-
being of persons is the only thing that is valu-
able for its own sake and that the well-being of
any person is neither more nor less valuable
than the well-being of any other. It holds that
the good is additive and that we can - some-
times and to some extent - compare the rela-
tive gains and losses in the well-being of
different persons. As a consequentialist theory,
utilitarianism thus asserts that the standard of
moral assessment is well-being and that the
right course of action is the one that brings
about the greatest expected net well-being.

Non-utilitarian variants of consequentialism
drop this exclusive commitment to well-being,
seeing things other than or in addition to it as
having intrinsic non-moral value. A utilitarian
believes that the things we normally take to
be valuable - say, close personal bonds, knowl-
edge, autonomy, or beauty - are valuable only
because they typically lead, directly or indi-
crectly, to enhanced well-being. Friendship, for
instance, usually makes people happier, and
human lives almost always go better with it
than without it. By contrast, the non-utilitarian
consequentialist holds that some things are
valuable independently of their impact on
well-being. Some of these things, like auton-
omy, say, may be things that are believed to be
an intrinsically valuable component of any
human life. They are thought to be good for an
individual, regardless of whether they promote
the individual's well-being. Some non-utilitarian consequentialists go further, however, and cut the link between being good and being good for someone that is characteristic of utilitarianism. They hold that some states of affairs are intrinsically better than others even if they are not better for anyone. For example, a world with more equality or beauty or biological diversity might be thought intrinsically better than a world with less even if no one is aware of the increased equality, beauty, or diversity and it makes no individual's life more valuable.

In addition to, or instead of, challenging the unique value placed on well-being, a non-utilitarian consequentialist might deviate from utilitarianism by declining to count equally the well-being of each. For example, the non-utilitarian might believe that enhancing the well-being of those whose current level of well-being is below average is more valuable than enhancing by an equal amount the well-being of those whose current level of well-being is above average. Or the non-utilitarian consequentialist might give up the belief that the good is additive and that the net value of an outcome is a straightforward function of various individual goods and bads. G. E. Moore (1903), for example, famously urged that the value of a state of affairs bears no regular relation to the values of its constituent parts. Although the non-utilitarian consequentialist would, in these ways, be challenging the value theory of utilitarianism, he or she would remain committed to the proposition that one is always required to act so as to bring about as much good as possible.

Two common objections to utilitarianism

Many critics of utilitarianism object to its maximizing approach to right and wrong on the grounds that the theory sometimes condones immoral conduct and that it is indifferent to the distribution of well-being. Because utilitarianism entails that an action's rightness or wrongness depends on its expected consequences in the particular circumstances facing the agent, it follows that the theory might require an action that commonsense morality repudiates as evil because, in the given circumstances, the action would produce more well-being than any alternative would produce. Furthermore, utilitarianism places no intrinsic value on how well-being is distributed among individuals. It cares only about total well-being. As a result, critics charge that utilitarianism too easily permits one person's happiness to be sacrificed for the benefit of others and, more generally, that it subordinates considerations of justice, equality, and fairness to the principle of utility. Utilitarianism's critics have illustrated these two points with various imaginary but vivid examples, intended to embarrass the theory by showing that its implications are out of step with ordinary moral thinking.

Utilitarians, for their part, have a lot to say in their defense, and it is far from obvious that the above criticisms carry the day (see Shaw 1999: chs 4 and 5). Here, however, I wish only to note that these criticisms have less force against consequentialist theories that identify as intrinsically valuable various goods other than, or in addition to, well-being or that put greater priority on the well-being of those who are less well-off.

Consequentialism in Practice

According to consequentialism, an action is morally right if and only if, among the actions that the agent could perform, there is no other action, the outcome of which has greater expected value. To act in any other way is wrong. The consequentialist criterion of rightness is straightforward, but the theory's practical implications can be surprisingly subtle.

Praise and blame

For consequentialists, whether an agent acted wrongly is distinct from the question whether he or she should be blamed or criticized for so acting (and, if so, how severely). Consequentialists apply their normative standard to questions of blame or praise just as they do to other questions. In particular, they will ask whether it will maximize expected good to criticize someone for failing to maximize expected good. Blame, criticism, and rebuke, although hurtful, can have good results by encouraging both the agent and other people to do better in the
future, whereas neglecting to reproach misconduct increases the likelihood that the agent (or others) will act in the same unsatisfactory way in the future. However, in some circumstances, to blame or criticize someone for acting wrongly would be pointless or even counterproductive – for example, if the person did so accidentally, was innocently misinformed, or was suffering from emotional distress. In such circumstances, chastising the person for not living up to the consequentialist standard might do more harm than good.

Suppose that a well-intentioned agent acted in a beneficial way, but that she could have produced even more (expected) good had she acted in some other way. Should consequentialists criticize her? Depending on the circumstances, the answer may well be “no”. Suppose she acted spontaneously but in a way that was unselfish or showed regard for others, or suppose that she could have produced more good only by violating a generally accepted rule, the following of which usually produces good results. Or imagine that pursuing the second course of conduct would have required a disregard for self-interest or for the interests of those who are near and dear to her that is more than we normally (or, perhaps, can reasonably) expect from human beings. In these cases, blame would seem to have little or no point. Indeed, if the agent behaved in a way that usually produces good, we may want to encourage others to follow her example (that is, to adhere to the same rule or act from the same motive) when they encounter similar situations. Praising an agent for an action that fails to live up to the consequentialist standard can sometimes be right. Consequentialists applaud instances of act-types they want to encourage, and they commend motivations, dispositions, and character traits they want to reinforce.

Motives, dispositions, and character traits

Consequentialists generally take an instrumental approach to motives. Good motives are those that tend to produce right conduct, whereas bad motives are those that tend to produce wrongful conduct. Consequentialists generally assess dispositions, behavioral patterns, and character traits in the same instrumental way: one determines which ones are good, and how good they are, by looking at the actions they lead to. According to some value theories, however, certain motives are intrinsically, not just instrumentally, good or bad; likewise, the exercise of certain dispositions or character traits might be judged intrinsically good or bad. If so, then the presence or absence of these factors will make a difference to the overall value of a state of affairs. This fact, in turn, will make more complex the consequentialist’s analysis of how one ought to act.

Even if a consequentialist adopts an entirely instrumental approach to the assessment of motives, dispositions, and traits, it doesn’t follow that the agent’s only concern ought to be the impartial maximization of good. On the contrary, the consequentialist tradition has long urged that more good may come from people acting from other, more particular motivations, commitments, and dispositions than from their acting only and always from a desire to promote the general good. For one thing, a consequentialist should not try to compute the probabilities of all possible outcomes before each and every action. Even if this were humanly possible, it would be absurd and counterproductive. At least in trivial matters and routine situations, stopping and calculating will generally lead to poor results. One does better to act from habit or do what has proved right in similar situations or what seems intuitively or at a glance to be the best course of conduct. Thus, consequentialism implies that one should not always reason as a consequentialist or, at least, that one should not always reason in a fully and directly consequentialist way. Better results may come from people acting in accord with principles, procedures, or motives other than the basic consequentialist one.

This last-statement may sound paradoxical, but the consequentialist standard itself determines in what circumstances we should employ that standard as our direct guide to acting. The proper criterion for assessing actions is one matter; in what ways we should deliberate, reason, or otherwise decide what to do (so as to meet that criterion as best we can) is another
issue altogether. Consequentialists will naturally want to guide their lives, make decisions, and base their actions on principles, procedures, and motives, the following of which will produce the best results over the long run. Which principles, procedures, and motives produce the best results is a contingent matter, which depends in part on one's value theory. But a consequentialist will approve of people's acting out of a concern for things other than the general good or on the basis of values that his theory does not believe to be basic if the consequentialist believes that people's so acting is likely to bring about more good in the long run.

**Following moral rules**

Although consequentialism bases morality on one fundamental principle, it also stresses the importance in ordinary circumstances of following certain well-established rules or guidelines that can generally be relied upon to produce good results. Utilitarians, for example, believe that we should make it a practice to tell the truth and keep our promises, rather than try to calculate possible pleasures and pains in every routine case, because we know that in general telling the truth and keeping our promises result in more good than lying and breaking promises. Relying on secondary rules helps consequentialists deal with the no-time-to-calculate problem and the future-consequences-are-hard-to-foresee problem. It can also counteract the fact that even conscientious agents can err in estimating the likelihood of a particular result and thus the expected value of a given action. In particular, when our interests are engaged or when something we care about is at stake, bias can unconsciously skew our deliberations. For this reason, we are generally less likely to go wrong and more likely to promote good by cleaving to well-established secondary rules. Finally, when secondary rules are well known and generally followed, then people know what others are going to do in certain routine and easily recognizable situations, and they can rely on this knowledge. This improves social coordination and makes society more stable and secure.

An analogy with traffic laws and regulations illuminates these points. Society's goal, let's assume, is that the overall flow of automobile traffic maximize benefit by getting everyone to his or her destination as safely and promptly as possible. Now imagine a traffic system with just one law or rule: drive your car so as to maximize benefit. It's easy to see that such a one-rule traffic system would be far from ideal and that we do much better with a variety of more specific traffic regulations. Without secondary rules telling them, for example, to drive on the right side of the road and obey traffic signals, drivers would be left to do whatever they thought best at any given moment depending on their interpretation of the traffic situation and their calculation of the probable results of alternative actions. Some philosophers seem to think that if people were smart enough and well informed enough, and if time and effort were no consideration, then secondary rules would be unnecessary. But this is a delusion, as Brian Barry explains:

The optimal course of action for me depends upon what I expect others to do, while the optimal course of action for others depends upon what they expect me to do... Expectations can be coordinated only by a system of rules (such as that enjoining promise-keeping) which are adhered to without regard to consequences. Only within a matrix of stable expectations created in this way does it make sense for people to make judgments about the likely consequences of acting in one way or another. (1995: 220)

For the reasons just canvassed, consequentialists of all stripes agree that to promote the good effectively, we should, at least sometimes, rely and encourage others to rely on secondary rules, precepts, and guidelines. Moreover, it is widely agreed among consequentialists that the full benefit of secondary rules can only be reaped when they are treated as moral rules and not merely as rules of thumb or practical aids to decision-making. Having people strongly inclined to act in certain rule-designated ways, to feel guilty about failing to do so, and to use those rules to assess the conduct of others can have enormous utility. This is because it produces good results to have people strongly disposed to act in certain
predictable ways, ways that generally (but perhaps not always) maximize expected benefit.

In practice, then, consequentialists approach issues of character and conduct from several distinct angles. First, about any action they can ask whether it was right in the sense of maximizing expected value. Second, they can ask whether it was an action the agent should have performed, knowing what she knew (or should have known) and feeling the obligation she should have felt to adhere to the rules that consequentialists would want people in her society to stick to. Third, if the action fell short in this respect, consequentialists can ask whether the agent should be criticized and, if so, how much. This will involve taking into account, among other things, how far the agent fell short, whether there were extenuating factors, what the alternatives were, and what could reasonably have been expected of someone in the agent’s shoes, as well as the likely effects of criticizing the agent (and others like her) for the conduct in question. Finally, consequentialists can ask whether the agent’s motivations are ones that should be reinforced and strengthened, or weakened and discouraged, and they can ask the same question about the broader character traits of which these motivations are an aspect. Looking at the matter from these various angles produces a nuanced, multidimensional assessment, but one that reflects the complicated reality of our moral lives.

The Appeal of Consequentialism

Although this essay abstains from metaethical questions, I incline toward the view that moral theories are “necessarily grounded in intuitions of truth or value that cannot be objectively demonstrated or disproved” (Hardin 1988: 179). At any rate, I know of no proof of consequentialism. G. E. Moore once thought otherwise. In his famous work Principia Ethica (1903), he argued that consequentialism is true by definition because “morally right” simply means “maximizes the good.” “The assertion ‘I am morally bound to perform this action,’” he wrote, “is identical with the assertion ‘This action will produce the greatest amount of good in the Universe’” (p. 82). A few years later, however, Moore admitted that he was mistaken, as indeed he was, to assert that these statements are identical in meaning. Nevertheless, Moore continued to maintain that the two propositions “morally right” and “produces the most good” are logically equivalent – that there is a “necessary and reciprocal connection” between them – even though they are not identical in meaning. Why? Moore’s answer was simply that it is self-evident “that it must always be our duty to do what will produce the best effects upon the whole” (1912: 100; 1952: 562–3).

Too many reflective thinkers have rejected consequentialism for a Moore-like assertion of self-evidence to carry the day. But if this is so and if, as I suspect, ethical theories cannot be proved, then the question is whether one finds the ethical ideas, values, or assumptions that inspire consequentialism more attractive and convincing than those that guide non-consequentialist approaches to ethics and whether one believes that consequentialism provides the most coherent, systematic, and plausible orientation to ethics that one is likely to find.

As we have seen, consequentialists share the intuition that the morality of our actions must be a function of the goodness or badness of their outcomes and, more specifically, that an action is right if and only if it brings about the best outcome the agent could have brought about. Consequentialists find it difficult to see what the point of morality could be if it is not about acting in ways that directly or indirectly bring about as much good as possible. True, consequentialism may tell us not to guide ourselves directly by the consequential standard of right in our day-to-day actions, but the correctness of that basic standard has struck most thinkers in the consequentialist tradition as obvious. How, they ask, could the foundational principle of morality deem actions as morally right that fail to maximize expected benefit? Acting so as to maximize benefit strikes consequentialists as the essence of rationality. As John Stuart Mill writes:

Whether happiness be or be not the end to which morality should be referred – that it be referred to an end of some sort, and not left in the dominion of vague feeling or inexplicable
internal conviction, that it be made a matter of reason and calculation, and not merely of sentiment, is essential to the very idea of moral philosophy; it is, in fact, what renders argument or discussion on moral questions possible. That the morality of actions depends on the consequences which they tend to produce, is the doctrine of rational persons of all schools; that the good or evil of those consequences is measured solely by pleasure and pain, is all of the doctrine of the school of utility, which is peculiar to it (1838: 83).

Consequentialism's goal-oriented, maximizing approach to ethics coheres with what we implicitly believe to be rational conduct in other contexts, in particular, when it comes to assessing prudential behavior. When seeking to advance our personal interests, we take for granted that practical rationality requires us to weigh, balance, and make tradeoffs among the things we seek in order to maximize the net amount of good we obtain. Only a consequentialist approach tallies with that.

The conviction that moral assessment turns on consequences and that the promotion of what ultimately matters ought to be the guiding principle of ethics lies at the heart of consequentialism. Rival normative theories, of course, rely on other moral assumptions and appeal to different considered moral judgments. Compared to most non-consequentialist approaches, however, consequentialism requires a very small number of ethical assumptions, and these yield, or so consequentialists believe, a powerful but structurally simple normative theory, capable of unifying our understanding of a diverse range of ethical phenomena. By contrast, non-consequentialist approaches to ethics (such as the popular reflective equilibrium method of Rawls [1971] or the common-sense pluralism of Ross [1930]) typically have recourse to intuition at an array of different points. In practice, the result can be a hodgepodge of rules, principles, and injunctions of varying degrees of generality. Moreover, the ethical assumptions on which consequentialists rely are not only few in number, but also very general in character, whereas non-consequentialist theorists typically have recourse to various more specific lower-level intuitions, concerning the legitimacy of particular rules or the moral necessity of particular deontological permissions and restrictions. Intuitions about the rightness or wrongness of specific types of conduct seem more likely to be distorted by the authority of cultural tradition and the influence of customary practice than are the more abstract, high-level intuitions upon which consequentialism relies.

Objections to Consequentialism

Non-consequentialists believe either that it is sometimes wrong to act so as to maximize expected benefit, or that failing to so act is sometimes permissible, or both. That is, they distinguish themselves from consequentialists by affirming certain deontological restrictions or embracing certain deontological permissions.

Deontological restrictions

As mentioned earlier, the likelihood that a consequentialist theory will require conduct that conflicts with the injunctions of ordinary commonsense morality will depend on the particular value theory one adopts. However, even if consequentialists concede that unusual circumstances could, in theory, make it right to perform an action that people normally consider immoral, our earlier discussion should have made it clear that in practice the priority consequentialists give to promoting rules, motives, and dispositions that typically produce good results implies that they will endorse most of the deontological restrictions of everyday morality because doing so maximizes expected benefit.

Even if a consequentialist theory entailed that in the abstract it could be right, if the circumstances were bizarre enough, to do something that would normally be judged morally despicable, like, say, torturing an innocent child, in practice it will make for a much better world if people's characters are such that they would never even entertain the idea of torturing a child, regardless of the circumstances. True, if placed in the imaginary world where torturing the child maximizes good, such people will do the wrong thing (as judged
by the consequentialist standard) by refraining from torturing the child. But the real world in which we live is certainly better the more widespread the inhibition on harming children is and the more deeply entrenched it is in people's psychology. Consequentialists prefer people to have the moral motivations that bring the best results in the everyday world, even if these motivations might lead them to behave suboptimally in fanciful situations. To this, non-consequentialists often reply that the consequentialist gets the right answer but for the wrong reason. Consequentialists, it is alleged, overlook the intrinsic wrongness of torturing. But consequentialists can explain perfectly well why torture is evil. And unless the non-consequentialist is an absolutist, he cannot say that torturing an innocent child is always wrong. What if doing so was the only way to stop a war of aggression? So, the non-consequentialist is reduced to saying that the consequentialist takes the possibility of torturing the child too lightly or is too ready to do it. But these allegations seem specious.

In fact, non-consequentialism's commitment to deontological restrictions is vulnerable to consequentialist counterattack. The non-consequentialist sees it as an important fact about our moral lives that an action can sometimes be wrong even though its outcome would be better than that of all alternative actions. Now suppose that somehow your violating a certain deontological restriction (call it R) would result in there being fewer violations of R overall. According to the deontologist, it would still be wrong for you to violate R. This is puzzling, and it is natural to ask: "If non-violation of R is so important, shouldn't that be the goal? How can a concern for the non-violation of R lead to the refusal to violate R when this would prevent more extensive violations of R?" (Nozick 1974: 30 [slightly modified]). Admittedly, these are abstract questions, but one can imagine circumstances in which only by telling a lie (breaking a promise, killing an innocent person) can one prevent several other people from telling lies (breaking promises, killing innocent people). Faced with such situations, deontological theories will, at least sometimes, forbid an action of a certain type even when performing it would result in fewer actions of the forbidden type. This point does not presuppose that the deontologist is an absolutist. Even a moderate non-consequentialist endorses restrictions that it would be wrong for one to violate, at least in some circumstances, even though one's doing so would minimize violations of the very same restriction. This fact leads consequentialists to argue that deontological restrictions are paradoxical or even irational. For how can a normative theory plausibly say that it is wrong to act so as to decrease immoral conduct (that is, conduct that the theory itself identifies as immoral)? It seems illogical for a theory to forbid the performance of a morally objectionable act when doing so would reduce the total number of such actions and would have no other relevant consequences.

In practice consequentialists are likely to endorse many of the restrictions that deontologists insist upon. But these restrictions will be part of the moral code that consequentialists uphold in order to promote the good in the most effective way they can. However strongly agents are encouraged to adhere to these rules and to internalize a commitment to them, these restrictions are not, for the consequentialist, foundational, but derive from a more basic principle of morality.

Deontological permissions

Critics of consequentialism claim that it sets too high a standard and demands too much of us. Their argument goes like this. At many points in our day, when we are innocently relaxing, talking with friends, or simply at work doing our jobs, we could probably be doing something else instead that would create more good. Instead of watching television tonight, we could visit a nursing home to chat and play cards with its elderly residents. Instead of going to the beach with friends, we could work with the homeless. Instead of buying a new car, we could make do with our old one and give the rest of the money to charity. And so on. Our lives are rarely so productive of good that it would be impossible for us to do more. In principle, or so the critics contend, consequentialism could require us to sacrifice our most basic interests in the name of the general good.
Because I have discussed this matter elsewhere (Shaw 1999: 129–32, 261–87) [ ... ] I will be brief. How much sacrifice consequentialism demands of us will, again, depend on the values the consequentialist wants to see maximized. We must bear in mind the good that (on almost any plausible value theory) is likely to come from permitting people to pursue, as much as possible, their own goals and plans, as well as the possibility that it may bring better results “for a man to aim rather at goods affecting himself and those in whom he has a strong personal interest, than to attempt a more extended beneficence” (Moore 1903: 166–7). Suppose, however, that when conjoined with our most plausible theory of good, consequentialism entails that morality demands much, much more of us than people ordinarily think. It doesn’t follow from this that consequentialism is mistaken. Intuitions about these matters, in particular, intuitions about how much effort, time, or money morality obliges us to give to assist those who need our assistance, are an unreliable foundation for normative theorizing because those intuitions reflect social expectations and customary practice in a socioeconomic system, the norms of which are themselves open to assessment.

There are, however, compelling reasons for believing that consequentialists will not advocate a norm requiring (for example) that people give away most of what they have to help those in other parts of the world who need it more. Instead, they will uphold the less demanding norm that we should aid strangers when the benefit to them is great and the cost to ourselves comparatively minor. Trying to install the more demanding norm would be difficult, and the psychological and other costs of doing so (that is, of getting people to feel guilty about not giving away most of what they have) would be high. It is doubtful whether we could ever succeed in motivating people to comply with such a norm – at least not over the long run. In addressing problems like hunger and disease in the Third World, consequentialists will arguably do more good by upholding a less demanding norm and by supporting the institutions necessary to take over the task and reduce the burden on individual beneficence.

Conclusion
This essay has explained the consequentialist approach to ethics, sketched the rich normative resources at its disposal, given reasons for finding the theory appealing, and defended it against some common criticisms. In this way, I hope to have shown that consequentialism provides an account of right and wrong that is morally attractive, philosophically respectable, and viable in practice. However, a full explication and defense of consequentialism would require further discussion of many matters. Among other things, it would require us to say more about the good and to assess in more detail rival normative approaches.

References