

# Consequences Are Everything? (20170328)

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## Introduction

In the podcast episode [“Serious Inquiries Only Episode 27: What Grounds our Morals? With Aaron Rabi.”](#) host Thomas Smith attempted to defend the position that, in matters of morality, “consequences are everything.” Here, I wish to offer a critique of that statement and, with it, a basic (simplified) account of the three types of moral theories – utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue theory. This simplification will help to focus on the issue of what the question is between these theories. I will then offer a brief account of how desirism begins to answer that question.

To illustrate the form of my argument against “consequences are everything”, please imagine the following:

There is a biology conference in which the topic of discussion is the relationship between animals and plants. An attendee shows up and says, “I think everything is animal.” The task is to explain that there is a distinction between plants and animals and to demonstrate that some things can be plants and not animals. That is to say, the task is to show that there are things that are not animals.

I think all would agree that we can set aside the argument, “Some things are animals; therefore, everything is an animal.” In other words, we can set aside the argument that says, “Consequences matter; therefore, consequences are the only thing that matters.” I will accept and argue for the claim that consequences matter, but deny that they are the only thing that matter.

Smith expressed an interest in debating a full-blown deontologist. However, that would be like a debate between somebody who claims that all things are animal and a person who claims that everything is a plant. It may have some entertainment value, but it would not help us understand biology. A similar debate between such a pure deontologist and consequentialist would prove just as fruitless.

## Means and Ends

The distinction I want to use analogous to the distinction between plants and animals is the distinction between means and ends. This can also be understood as the distinction between things that are good because of what they do and things that are good because of what they are.

To illustrate this difference, I wish to examine pain.

When I was a young teenager, I put my hand on a hot plate (not knowing it was hot). My hand immediately blistered – second degree burns. After tending to the injury – putting salve on it and wrapping it – it still hurt. It hurt a lot.

At this point, this pain was producing no good consequences. When I evaluated this pain, I did not evaluate it according to the good or bad it would bring about. The pain was awful in itself – independent of its consequences.

One could argue that the fact that we feel pain often produces good consequences. However, we would not want to be rid of our capacity to feel pain. However, that did not give the pain I was in at the moment any positive value. It is still the fact that it would have been better that pain went away when

there is nothing one can do – when it ceased to produce good consequences - is better than a pain that persists past all usefulness.

Like the useless pain of my burn, there is also the useless pain of a kidney stone or pancreatic cancer, and the useless pain of childbirth.

These examples show how pain can be bad in itself – independent of its consequences. In fact, sometimes pain has good consequences. It tells us of an injury so that we can tend to it. However, it still has a badness because of what it is, independent of what it does.

We can see this as the distinction between means and ends. To have value in virtue of consequences is to have value as a means. A thermometer seldom has value for its own sake. It has value because of what you can do with it. For something to have value for its own sake – and not for the sake of its consequences – is to have value as an end. It is the consequence in virtue of which means has value. That which helps one to avoid pain has value as a means. The pain itself, on the other hand, is to be avoided because of its own awfulness – because it is painful. The ends are what gives its value to the means – and without the ends, the means are worthless.

Certainly, it is true that if the pain is small enough and the consequences are great enough, one might need to endure some pain to produce those good consequences. However, this does not prove that the consequences are the only thing that matter – that “consequences are everything”. It is also true that if the pain is great enough, and the consequences are trivial enough then one may sacrifice the good consequences to avoid the pain. This does not prove that consequences do not matter – that consequences are nothing. Both the pain and the consequences matter.

In short, in the same way that “everything is an animal” is false because some things are plants, the claim “everything has value because of its consequences” is false because some things have their own goodness or badness independent of consequences. Once we admit that some things can be good or bad in themselves, the next question to ask is “What things are good or bad in themselves?”

### Implications of “Good in Itself”

There is not enough room in this paper to launch into an examination of what is good in itself. Instead, I just want to look at some possibilities of “good in itself” that are relevant to moral theory. We can see a distinction in the common types of moral theory in virtue of the different kinds of things that they claim to be “good in themselves”.

### Act Consequentialism

Act consequentialist theories assert that acts are to be valued solely based on what they do and never on the basis of what they are. This is not to say that consequences are the only thing that matter. But it does say that consequences are the only things that matter when it comes to evaluating actions. If you want to know whether telling a lie is good or bad, look at its consequences. If you want to know whether a given murder is good or bad, look to its consequences.

Many people value this view of morality in theory; nobody even comes close to practicing it. To be a practicing act consequentialist, one must base every decision on the consequences of an action and never on the value of the action itself. Imagine going to the store and buying groceries based on which purchases would produce the best consequences. Or choosing who to marry – or who one’s friends are, based on the overall global consequences. At this moment, as you read this paper, you could probably

do more good if you were working a minimum-wage job promising to donate your money to charity when you are done. This is particularly so if your shift at the minimum wage job took the place of watching television or playing a computer game.

The fact that there are no act consequentialists is not, itself, an argument against act consequentialism. The argument against act utilitarianism comes from the fact that one would have to care about one thing and one thing only – producing the best consequences. If one cared about anything else – even the relief of one's own pain – then there will be circumstances in which one will act to do something other than produce the best consequences.

### Rule Consequentialism

To avoid the problems of act consequentialism, some consequentialists propose some type of rule consequentialism. According to rule consequentialism, the right act is the act that conforms to the best rules, and rules are judged by their consequences. There are objections to rule consequentialism, but they are much less straight forward than the objections to act consequentialism. Furthermore, they are not important here since my goal is simply to describe the differences between the three major ethical families – not to give the definitive argument in favor of any of them. The relevant point to note here is that rule consequentialism must assert that acts have a goodness in virtue of being consistent with the best rules that is independent of the consequences of the act. One of the things that is good in itself is an act in accordance with the best rules.

### Deontology

Deontology holds that an act is right or wrong – not (solely) in virtue of its consequences, but (also) in virtue of being an act of a particular type. Certain types of action are good or bad for their own sake. An act of murder is worth avoiding in the same way that pain is worth avoiding. In the case of pain, it is the case that even if enduring pain would produce good consequences, there are reasons to avoid the pain. Similarly, the deontologist says that even if killing an innocent person produces good consequences, one ought to refrain from killing the innocent person. Killing an innocent person has badness independent of its consequences.

Certainly, if the benefit is great enough, then it might outweigh the badness that murder has for its own sake. However, this still says that an act of murder is bad for its own sake. Consequently, a story in which significant consequences end up overriding the wrongness of murder, this does not get rid of the wrongness of murder. In fact, even in these circumstances, we still sense the wrongness of murder in the fact that one does not happily kill the innocent person. Killing the bad person is, at best, a necessary evil, but an evil nonetheless.

### Virtue Theory

Virtue theory says that one of the types of things that have value for its own sake are traits of character. Honesty, intellectual responsibility, a disposition to keep promises and repay debts, kindness to others and a willingness to give a helping hand, are all valuable for their own sake, and not solely in virtue of their consequences. Being a liar is a bad thing to be. Being lazy. Being an addict. Being a person who does nothing but count blades of grass – even if one enjoys it immensely – are all types of people that one should avoid becoming even if, in becoming that type of person, one could produce good consequences.

## The Case of the Sacrificed Patient

Now, let us look at the story of the doctor who has a chance to kill one healthy patient and use his organs (or blood) to save five others. I want to look at this case from the point of view of somebody who thinks that “consequences are everything”.

Such a consequentialist must show that this type of act always produces bad consequences. Smith responded to this challenge by saying,

*Think of the actual consequences of that. Think if we lived in a world where that was the norm, like, people just made these decisions on their own, like, this is going to be the best thing so I'll just kill this person and like I'll cure all these other people. I mean, we would be horrified to live in a world where you could send your kid to the hospital and they just might not come back.*

However, this response seems to require being fixated on the one person who gets killed and ignoring the five lives that are saved. For every person killed, five who would have otherwise died are saved. One person sent their kid to the hospital who did not come back, but five parents had their child survive what would have otherwise been certain death.

Perhaps this version of the story will make the issue clearer. Assume that there is a new fatal disease that randomly strikes 500,000 people per year. Assume that scientists discover a cure. However, the cure involves putting one healthy person (uninfected by the disease) in a processing machine – in which that person would die, but it would produce enough serum to cure 5 people. The policy recommendation is this: We will hold a lottery every year. 100,000 people will be picked at random to be fed into the processing plant, producing serum to save 500,000 lives.

For any given individual, adopting the policy means that each person might be one of the 100,000 picked to be fed into the machine each year. Rejecting the policy implies that each person might be one of the 500,000 people who die from the disease.

From the point of view of simple math, the situation in which the one person killed is obviously the less horrible.

The doctor killing one healthy patient to harvest his organs to save five others is no different than feeding one person into a processing plant to produce a serum to save five others. Fixating on the one life that is lost and ignoring the five lives that are saved in order to derive bad consequences is irrational. All one is doing in this case is rationalizing a sentiment by ignoring inconvenient facts. One does not like an option, so one simply invents reasons for thinking it is the morally best option.

However, even in the case of killing an innocent person to prevent the bomb from going off, please note that – even though this produces the best consequences – one is not supposed to like it. One must still be reluctant to kill the innocent person. This suggests that there is still a badness in the act that is overridden by its good consequences. However, if one had to kill a guilty person to prevent the bomb from going off (e.g., kill the person who is trying to intentionally set off the bomb), then this does not contain any badness. In the two cases, the consequences are the same. (Case 1: the person is not killed but dies in the explosion, Case 2: the person is killed to prevent the explosion). Yet, the two cases have a different value. This suggests that, even though the action would be required in both cases, and the

consequences are the same, the case of killing the innocent person is still in some way worse than the case of killing the guilty person.

The point of these cases is to argue that killing an innocent person contains a badness independent of its consequences – that it is bad in itself. Again, if the consequences are great enough – say, it would prevent a nuclear bomb from going off in a city – its badness may be outweighed by its consequences. However, there is also a point that – even though the act would produce good consequences – save five patients who need organ transplants – that the killing of an innocent person (like pain) is to be avoided for its own sake. It is bad in itself, and not merely bad because of what it does.

It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Something can have value in virtue of what it is and, at the same time, have value in virtue of what it does. Pain, for example, is bad in virtue of what it is (it is something to be avoided), but often good in virtue of its consequences (it helps people avoid injury). Consequently, we can take something such as an action type (theft) or a character trait (honesty) and determine its value both in terms of what it is, and in virtue of its consequences. Sometimes (e.g., killing an innocent person to protect a city from destruction) the two evaluations can yield polar opposite results.

## Desirism

At this point, we have reason to believe that some types of action, and some character traits, can be good or bad in itself and not simply in virtue of its consequences. Something has to be good or bad as an end – or there can be nothing that has value in virtue of being a means to those ends. Among the types of things that can be good or bad as an end, some types of action and some character traits are on that list.

What desirism adds to this analysis is the following:

What makes something good or bad is that it is the direct object of a desire. What makes pain bad is that we have an aversion to pain. What makes killing an innocent person bad is that we have an aversion to killing an innocent person. What makes eating a chocolate cake good is that we have a desire to eat a chocolate cake.

Furthermore, what we have the ability to desire – what we like and dislike – is malleable. It can change. Depending on circumstances, a person can come to like sports or dislike sports, like to study philosophy or hate math, like to go hiking in the woods or hate to see a Bruce Willis movie. We can – to a certain degree – not only choose what we like, but influence what those around us like. Thus, we can choose for ourselves and influence our communities in choosing what is good in itself or bad in itself.

In making these choices, we have reasons to choose some options over others. We have reason to encourage the people in our communities to have an aversion to killing – to seeing killing as bad in itself – because that makes it less likely that they will kill us or those we care about. We have reasons to surround ourselves with those who are honest, repay their debts, and keep promises. Encouraging people to be honest means causing them to view honesty as something that is good in itself – good for its own sake – independent of its consequences. Encouraging people to have an aversion to taking property without the owner's consent is viewing them to have the same attitude towards theft that they would have towards pain. Such a person would avoid theft even when it would otherwise bring good consequences, simply because they have learned to dislike it.

Desirism, then, becomes a blend of consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. It contains elements of deontology and virtue theory in that it holds that types of actions and character traits can be valued for their own sake and not because of its consequences. Still, it is consequentialist in that it holds that valuing certain types of action or character traits for their own sake is, itself, valued in virtue of its consequences. It does not attempt to choose between these three options. Nor does it say that there is some sort of tension between three incompatible and opposing forces. Instead, it says that these three theories are simply looking at different components of a unified whole.

## Conclusion

The first thing to note, then, is that the world is made up of things that have value in virtue of what they are, and things that have value in virtue of what they do. These are not mutually exclusive categories – some things, such as an influential work of literature such as Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* can be both. Among the things that can have value (good or bad) because of what they are, we can include types of action such as lying, breaking promises, failure to repay debts, vandalism, theft, assault, rape, and murder. We can include character traits such as honesty, integrity, modesty, kindness, trustworthiness, and bravery. What gives things value for their own sake is the fact that we like or dislike them, and what we like and dislike are things we can cultivate socially. Kindness and keeping promises, for example, may be valued for its own sake. However, valuing these things for their own sake is, itself, something that we can evaluate in terms of its consequences – and promote or discourage such sentiments according to the reasons we have for doing so.