

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

UST Research Online

---

Philosophy Faculty Publications

Philosophy

---

2001

## What Else Could I Do? The Self Definition of Consequentialists

Gary M. Atkinson

*University of St. Thomas, Minnesota*, [gmatkinson@stthomas.edu](mailto:gmatkinson@stthomas.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ir.stthomas.edu/cas\\_phil\\_pub](https://ir.stthomas.edu/cas_phil_pub)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at UST Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UST Research Online. For more information, please contact [asle4660@stthomas.edu](mailto:asle4660@stthomas.edu).

## “WHAT ELSE COULD I DO?”

### THE SELF-DEFINITION OF CONSEQUENTIALISTS

#### ONE

By “consequentialism” I mean the theory that takes a good action to be the one with the best consequences, and a good agent to be the one who performs an act *because* he believes it to be a good one. Actions are good or bad because of their consequences (outcomes, results). Agents are good or bad because of their choice to perform or not perform acts with the best consequences.

This apparently straightforward theory presents a few puzzles. For instance, outcomes occur *after* the actions that produced them. Is an action neither good nor bad until its consequences have occurred? And how many of them? All, or only some? And if some, which ones?

You don’t have to push very far to suspect that the consequences our theory insists upon are not the actual consequences of an act. Are they then the consequences the agent believed would occur as the result of what he does? Again, pretty obviously not. If I whip out my six-shooter and fire into the air, overjoyed at the success of my favorite team, you will not be inclined to let me off, even when I tell you that, like Werner von Braun, I wasn’t much attending to the possible aftermath of my gunplay.

No, consequentialism stresses neither the actual nor the foreseen but the *foreseeable* consequences, those a reasonable (but not omniscient) person could, under the circumstances, have foreseen would or might occur. My firing away was a bad thing to do even if no one was actually harmed. It was bad because a reasonable agent would have recognized the risk, even though in the heat of victory *I* did not. And this feature of reasonable foreseeability exists *prior to* an act’s performance, so that acts are good or bad even before they occur, good or bad even when contemplated only in prospect.

And foreseeable consequences are *all* that matter. To assess the goodness of an act, the question of whether the foreseen (and therefore foreseeable) consequences were or were not also *intended* by the agent does not and must not arise -- at least *as such*. Why is this?

Consequentialism as a theory asks us to view actions in terms of the *differences* they make, the changes they cause first in the inanimate world, and subsequently in the consciousness of rational and other animals. And a change is a change, whether the agent did or did not *seek* to bring about that change by means of his action. The issue is solely one of *controllability*. If I cause your death by taking you off a respirator, it makes no difference *as such* whether I merely foresaw that you would die as a result of my action, or intended you to die by means of it. Dead you are, either way.

Consequentialists are quick to note, though, that the intended/merely-foreseen distinction does not vanish because it *can* take on a *derivative* significance. Agents are typically (though not always) aware of their intentions, and sometimes others are aware as well, and this awareness is not always insignificant. Nurses and physicians, for instance, don’t necessarily feel the same way about causing death. Some are okay with withdrawing a respirator from a patient judged irreversibly comatose because the respirator is thought useless, but shrink from administering a lethal injection to the same patient, and explain (justify?)

their contrasting feelings by appeal to different intentions. Many patients and their families feel the same way.

Is this difference rational? Perhaps not, but consider. An agent who administers a lethal injection may view himself differently from one who merely (?) withdraws a respirator. The former may see himself as a killer, and if he does, *where* will he stop? Perhaps it *should* make no difference to patients, other things being equal, whether they are caused to die by the removal of a respirator or by a lethal injection, but it *does* make a difference to some. We can't rationally ignore feelings however irrational these may be, for irrational feelings have consequence too, just like rational ones.

Whatever place finally assigned to intentions, consequentialism offers the following seven steps to take in deciding how to act. (1) You discover what actions are open to you in your circumstances, including the possible option of not doing anything at all. (2) You discover what are the possible consequences of performing each of the options. (3) You assess the goodness or badness of all the consequences of each of the options. (4) You assess the probabilities of each of the possible consequences. (5) You discover the *net expected utility* of each of the options by subtracting the total amount of badness in the consequences from the total amount of goodness in them, always taking care to factor in considerations of probability. (6) You determine which option possesses the *greatest net expected utility*. (7) You choose to perform that action *because* it possesses that feature. Step (6) displays the good act to perform under your circumstances, and if you complete step (7), you are a good person for having done that act.

## TWO

Now let's see what all this has to do with Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice marooned on a deserted island. They have plenty of water but insufficient food to last them until the rescue vessel reaches them in eight weeks. (Consequentialists loathe "fantastic" examples like this one, but people in fantastic examples, as Plato warned us [*Rep* 515a], *may* be "no different from us.") Anyway, what do *you* think the castaways should do? Good consequentialists all, *they* agree to draw straws, the one drawing the shortest straw to be killed and eaten. This turns out to be Bob's. Should he be killed or not? If no one is killed, the four will probably all die, including Bob. If he is killed, the other three will probably live. Since Bob is likely to die in the near future, his being killed doesn't harm him all that much. He consented to the lottery, and the lottery was fair.

Consider this. If Bob were alone on one island and the other three were together on a second island and you could only reach one of the islands, you'd choose to save the three without a qualm, wouldn't you, in preference to saving Bob alone or saving nobody? Wouldn't you?

Now it's true that in the second case you don't intend Bob's death when you move to save the other three, and it's true that in the first case the three must intend Bob's death, but what of that? If *you* feel differently about these two cases, are you sure your feelings are really rational? And even if there were harmful consequences associated with Carol and Ted and Alice's viewing themselves as killers, you won't seriously contend that those harmful consequences outweigh the benefit of their being saved, will you?

### THREE

Consequentialism arises from the recognition of an important truth: agents perform actions for the sake of producing various goods, and therefore their actions must in some way be justified by reference to those goods. Now if one goes further and asks what makes something good, consequentialists provide different answers. The hedonistic variety of consequentialism answers that the good is pleasure or what is productive of pleasure. Alternative answers have been given. But so as not to get bogged down in details, let's employ a general theory of the good, one that hedonists and non-hedonists, consequentialists and non-consequentialists, can accept owing to its generality: the good is whatever completes or fits an agent. If pleasure is fitting to an agent, it is good. If things other than pleasure are also fitting, they are good as well.

In addition, to call a thing good is also to imply something about the possessor of that good. To say that a thing is good or befitting or completing is to imply that its possessor is of such a nature as to be fitted or completed (partially) by a thing of that sort. Thus, to call pleasure good is to say that those who experience it are completed (partially) by that experience. Finally, to say that an act is good for an agent to perform is to say that the agent is completed (partially) by the performance of that act.

Notice how these apparently simple notions expose an easily ignored feature of consequentialism. Our theory places primary stress on the *controllability* and therefore on the *foreseeability* of consequences, and accords only secondary significance to the feature of *intentions*. But this setting of priorities obscures the role intention plays in defining both the human good and, inferentially, the nature of the human agent. You see, to aim at producing a state of affairs (to intend it) is to claim (by implication) (1) that the state of affairs is a good and (2) that the agent is completed (made good) by the performance of that act.

### FOUR

Let's return to the still-marooned Bob and company. We've already noted that if you could either save Bob or the other three but not all four, you'd save the three and let Bob go. So what's your problem with killing Bob? Well now we see that your hesitation (if you had any) over killing Bob may possess a rational basis after all. When you choose to rescue the three while letting Bob go, you do not strive to bring it about that Bob is not rescued. You do not view Bob's non-rescue as a good. It is an evil, an unmitigated evil. In contrast, when you approve the killing of Bob so that the others may live, you turn Bob's death into a good, not an unmitigated good, but a good nonetheless.

Now wait a minute, consequentialists interject. We too think Bob's death an unmitigated evil, however he dies, whether alone on an island, or killed and eaten. It's an evil either way, only it's *less* of an evil than the deaths of three or four. We just think that it is permissible to do evil that good might come, because it doesn't matter whether the evil in question is merely foreseen or intended as well.

Consequentialism is right about two things: Bob's death is an evil abstractly considered, and it is a lesser evil (other things being equal) than the deaths of three or four. Nonetheless, at the heart of consequentialism lies the thesis that it is (at least in principle) permissible to intend the death of Bob for the sake of some good.

To avoid getting distracted by terminology, let's suspend use of the terms "good" and "evil," and employ instead the language of fittingness. Consequentialism, in whatever language it is couched, is committed to three assertions regarding this case, each qualified by the expression "in principle." First, it befits an agent to seek Bob's death in order that others might live. Second, it is not unbefitting to Bob that his death be sought in order that others might live. Third, it befits others that they be preserved by means of the seeking of Bob's death.

Now because of the interrelationship between fittingness and nature noted above, each of these three assertions implies another. First, agents possess a nature to which seeking Bob's death is fitting. Second, Bob possesses a nature to which having his death sought as a means is at least not unfitting. Third, others possess a nature to which survival by means of the seeking of Bob's death is fitting. And because Bob and the rest are all members of the species *anthropos*, these three statements together imply that *all* members of the species *anthropos* possess a nature such that killing, being killed, and benefiting from someone else's being killed are all fitting.

## FIVE

We have already suggested one commonly recognized relationship between agents and their actions: actions modify agents by the forming or strengthening of habits, dispositions to feel and think and act in particular ways. This type of causal relationship is a form of *agent* or *efficient* causality, the type of causality that accounts for the introduction and cessation of *movement* or *change* (alterations in the categories of substance, quality, quantity, or place). But the considerations just raised in the previous section point to a different sort of causal relationship between actions and agents, that of *formal* causality, the causality associated with *definition*.

To act is to *define* oneself. Whenever I act from *choice* (in contrast to involuntary behaviors and actions stemming from weakness of will), I define myself as a being whose nature is fitted or completed by what I do and by the states of affairs I intend or seek to bring about. And whenever I act for the end of producing a state of affairs for another human, I define that other as a being whose nature is fitted to that state of affairs. These are all inescapable implications of rational agency, however much we may ignore, or wish to ignore, their reality and significance.

## SIX

And now back to Carol and Ted and Alice, Bob having been killed and eaten. They deeply regret the whole sordid, gory, horrifying episode and want to put it behind them as quickly as possible in order to get on with their lives. Nonetheless, they rest clear in their consciences, knowing they have done the difficult but consequentially rational thing. Are we okay with this, too? We have already seen that to approve Bob's killing is in effect to adopt the conviction that we are all the sort of being to whom it is fitting (in principle) to be intentionally killed and to whom it is fitting (in principle) to be preserved by means of the intentional killing of others of the same nature. But it's not just a matter of the fittingness of killing and being killed. Torture, rape, rape-as-a-means-of-torture, you name it. Use your imagination. Consequentialist rationality requires that *no sort* of act be ruled out as necessarily unfitting. Whatever the

sort of act *you* might select as a candidate to be absolutely excluded, you can't overcome the objection that the performance of just that sort of act might be necessary to prevent the performance of a dozen acts of the very same sort.

Oh, did I forget to mention earlier that Bob, Carol, Ted, and Alice are a family? Yes, the Robinsons were celebrating Ted and Alice's twentieth wedding anniversary on a seven-day cruise when their ship struck a reef and they wound up on the island. Bob was their oldest, sixteen, and Carol "the baby," thirteen. A handsome family, I keep a photograph of them in my office. Such promise, such tragic dashing of hopes! But then, what family is without its tragedy?

You see, of course, don't you, that it cannot possibly make any difference in principle that it was his parents and sister who were killing and eating Bob. Or maybe you think (because it's useful) that parents should sacrifice themselves for their children. Alright, then the breadwinner Ted should have been spared and the consequentially rational candidate for being killed was Alice. Let's not haggle over details. And let's draw the curtain on the Robinsons *sans* Bob, leaving them to their pursuit of the good. Alice is only forty-two, not entirely *too* old to conceive another child. Ready with amniocentesis (thank heavens for the advances in modern medicine!), Alice Robinson may with a little luck present the family a darling little baby boy, complete with Bobby's bright, wonderful smile.

#### SEVEN

"No different from us" – really?, consequentialists will ask. Deserted islands and cannibalism "no different from us"? Really? And if as a matter of obvious fact they're quite different from us, consequentialists will go on to ask, just what *do* I hope to accomplish by this rather tedious exercise?

Imagine yourself a clear-headed consequentialist. This means that everyone around you -- the person sitting next to you in this room, your family, your roommate, your boy friend or girl friend, your future children – all of them are marked by two features, features of which you are aware and which you endorse. First, they are people to whom nothing you can do to them is unbefitting, provided only that it be necessary to achieve the best overall outcome. Second, they are people who can in principle be benefited by anything you can possibly do to another person.

Do you not recognize how by thinking in this way you have defined other people? By declaring what is befitting and what is not unbefitting to other people, you have implied a conception of their nature, what they are, beings who are completed or respected (not violated) by (in principle) actions of absolutely any sort. Are you not then *in pectore* a member of the Robinson family, no different from them after all?

It would be a grave mistake to view this objection to clear-headed consequentialism as the claim that it is harmful and has bad consequences. For all I know or care, conscious consequentialism may over-all be quite useful, at least as consequentialists define "useful." The objection is that its attitude is *demeaning*. List the traits you hope for in your ideal husband or wife. Is clear-headed consequentialism among them?

## EIGHT

I know a woman in her mid-sixties. Let's call her Edith. She was taking care of her grandchild on week days, and an acquaintance who knew of this asked Edith if she'd be willing to take care of a toddler son of one of her employees for a couple of days a week in the mornings. Edith said she wouldn't mind, and so little Frankie appeared at Edith's home, though only eight or so hours a week. Well, a break up between Frankie's parents led to the mother's needing to work full time, and, guess what?, Edith now has Frankie all day five days a week.

When I overheard Edith talking about these developments, I heard her say (it wasn't posed as a question), "What else could I do?" Now Edith, please!, consequentialists will interject, there were a hundred things you could have done. Here's two. You could have told Frankie's mother to get lost, you're not in the day-care business, find somebody else. This approach builds character. Or you could have charged the maximum Frankie's parents were willing to pay for day care and give the proceeds to your favorite charity.

Is Edith a bit slow? Did these alternatives just not occur to her? Maybe, but I have another hypothesis. Perhaps Edith did not consider these alternatives because they simply were not open to her. And why not? Because Edith did not consider herself to be the kind of person to whom those actions were fitting.

When I act, I not only define others, I define myself. I declare that I am the sort of being to whom the performance of such-and-such an act is befitting or completing. The act is good for me to do because I possess a nature fitted to and (partially) completed by that act.

Clear-headed consequentialists have a conception of themselves, a self-definition. They see themselves as the kind of being who can be (partially) completed or perfected in principle by the doing of *anything* under the right circumstances. *Nothing* in principle is unbecoming to them, *nothing* unworthy of them. *Nothing* can in principle be ruled out. The logic of consequentialist rationality demands this attitude.

Once again, the problem lies not with the possible *harmfulness* of such an attitude but with its *debased* character, this time in connection with *one's very self*. Committed consequentialists will not recognize this as real difficulty for them. They are simply being rational and clear-headed, while their opponents are guilty of noble-sounding drivel. So be it. Perhaps it must needs be so. We have been amply warned by both Plato and Aristotle about a kind of vice necessarily unaware, oblivious, of itself.

I am reminded of a passage from Robert Bolt's "A Man for All Seasons," a play about the martyrdom St. Thomas More. More's daughter Margaret and his son-in-law Roper have come to visit More in prison hoping to persuade him to swear to the Act of Succession legitimating Henry VIII's marriage to Ann Bolyn.

Roper. Meg's under oath to persuade you.

More. That was silly, Meg. How did you come to do that?

Margaret. I wanted to!

More. You want me to swear to the Act of Succession?

Margaret. "God more regards the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth." Or so you've always told me.

More. Yes.

Margaret. Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.

More. What's an oath but words we say to God? . . . When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers *then* – he needn't hope to find himself again. Some men aren't capable of this, but I'd be loath to think your father one of them.

Ask yourself, what am I capable of, what incapable of? Answering that question will tell you the kind of person you are. The consequentialist is in principle capable of anything, Thomas More was not. Which kind of person do you want to be? And your children?