



# Utilitarianism (II)

## Maximizing Act-Consequentialism

- **MAC:** Actions are morally permissible iff they maximize the value of consequences (iff no alternative action in the given situation has more valuable consequences).
- **Act vs. Rule:** AU evaluates individual actions directly. RU asks whether an act would be permitted/required/forbidden by some suitable set of rules. The rules are evaluated in terms of the value that they would promote if internalized or generally followed.

Two claims consequentialists accept:

- **Supervenience** (of Permissibility on the Value of Outcomes): The permissibility of actions in a given choice situation supervenes on (is fully determined by) the value of their consequences.
- **Value promotion:** If, in a given choice situation, one action is permissible, and a second is more valuable, then the second action is also permissible.

# Why MAC?

This argument is taken from Shelly Kagan (but modified by Vallentyne)

P1: An action is morally permissible if it is best supported by insistent moral reasons for action.

P2: The value of consequences is always an insistent moral reason for action.

P3: The value of consequences is the *only* insistent moral reason for action.

C: Thus, an action is morally permissible if it maximizes the value of consequences.

[Insistent reasons are understood as reasons that count in favor/against the permissibility of an action, not simply its desirability. The argument assumes that the proper response to the value mentioned in P2 and P3 is promoting and maximizing.]

## Two standard objections to MAC

- Demands too much: Morality does not always require us to maximize. It sometimes allows us to satisfice. [Something less than the best might be good enough.]
- Permits too much: The ends do not always justify the means. [What does this actually mean? On one reading, it means that there are constraints on the way that we might permissibly pursue an end that are not overridden simply because the value contained in that end is greater than the value that could be attained otherwise.]

## Demandingness

Vallentyne says that any maximizing view faces three related objections:

- (i) Excessive sacrifice;
- (ii) Insufficient moral freedom;
- (iii) Insufficient supererogation.

What's the solution? Satisficing. On a satisficing view, a suboptimal action can be right if it's good enough. (On some views, an action is good enough if some absolute level of well-being has been reached. On others, some percentage short of 100% of the maximum would be good enough.)

# Satisficing

SC: An action is right if it is good enough (i.e., some overall level of goodness has been achieved and the action will not bring us below that level).

MC: An action is right iff there's no better alternative.

Advantage of SC: If someone sacrifices often for others, we don't condemn them for sometimes treating themselves to something rather nice. SC can accommodate this intuition, but MC says that it's permissible to treat yourself only if you cannot better distribute the resources you have. If you repeat the utilitarian reasoning in deciding what to do, you will end up rather badly off in the end and still only manage to do what's required.



# On the benefits of satisficing

## 1<sup>st</sup> Objection

SC says that if the balance of good or evil is good enough and would be good enough whatever you do, whatever you do is right. Suppose the balance is good enough. It might be better not to murder than to murder, but if neither refraining nor murdering would bring the world below the relevant threshold, you would act permissibly either way.





## On the benefits of satisficing

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Objection

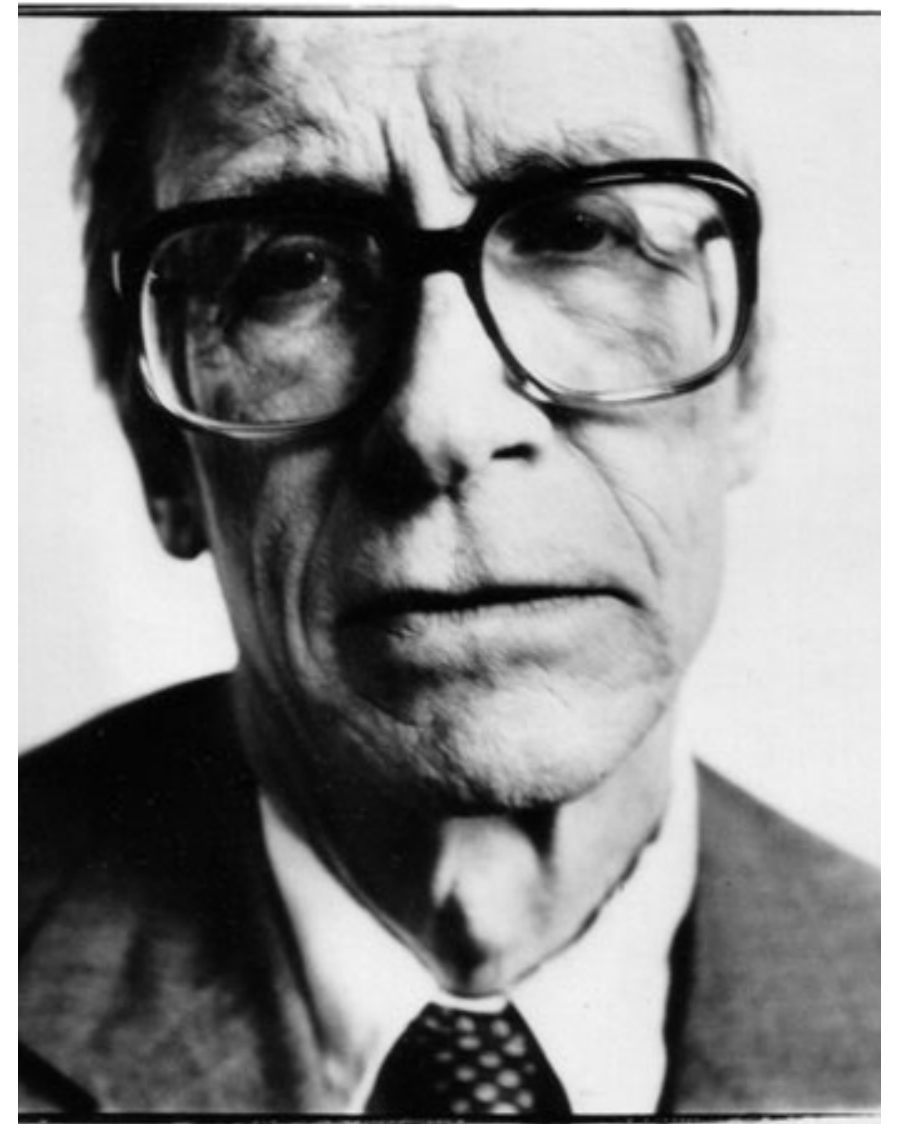
SC says that if the balance of good or evil is good enough and would be good enough whatever you do, whatever you do is right. Suppose the balance is good enough. Suppose that the balance wouldn't be good enough whatever you did. Under these conditions, you would be required to maximize. So, SC might be overly demanding in just the way that MC is alleged to be.





# Separateness of Persons

The most natural way, then, of arriving at utilitarianism ... is to adopt for society as a whole the principle of rational choice for one man ... On this conception of society separate individuals are thought of as so many different lines along which rights and duties are to be assigned and scarce means of satisfaction allocated ... so as to give the greatest fulfillment of wants. The nature of the decision ... is not, therefore, materially different from that of an entrepreneur deciding how to maximize his profit ... This view of social co-operation is the consequence of extending to society the principle of choice for one man, and then, to make this extension work, conflating all persons into one through the imaginative acts of the impartial sympathetic spectator. Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons.



What's the problem supposed to be? Vallentyne says:

Individuals have certain rights that may not be infringed simply because the consequences are better. Unlike prudential rationality, morality involves many distinct centers of will (choice) or interests, and these cannot simply be lumped together and traded off against each other. The basic problem with standard versions of core consequentialism is that they fail to recognize adequately the normative separateness of persons. Psychological autonomous beings ... are not merely means for the promotion of value. They must be respected and honored, and this means that at least sometimes certain things may not be done to them, even though this promotes value overall. An innocent person may not be killed against her will, for example, in order to make a million happy people significantly happier. This would be sacrificing her for the benefit of others.

## What's at issue?

Three ideas contained in this passage:

- (i) We have rights and sometimes what's right to do will depend upon whether we respect some agent's rights rather than whether we maximize utility.
- (ii) Individual's have interests and they cannot be traded off against one another.
- (iii) Individuals should be respected or honored.

Some consequentialists claim that their view is compatible with (iii) in that the consequentialist view gives everyone's well-being some weight and gives nobody's well-being any special weight. Thus, the objection turns on (i) and (ii). As for (ii), it surely isn't always wrong to trade off one individual's interests against another (e.g., in deciding who to save first, this is just what we do). Don't numbers count sometimes? [Some have said that the numbers never count.]

What about (i)?

# Rights and utility

Contrast two saving cases. In the first, two people are in mortal peril. You can save them only if you drive them to the hospital. If you do this, you can't save someone who you could save who you can only get to if you head the other direction. In the second, two people are in mortal peril. You can save them, but only if you drive them to the hospital. You can only drive them to the hospital if you run over someone who has been trapped on the roadway.

Some say that there's a difference between these cases because there's a difference between the negative rights (e.g., right not to be run down) and positive rights (e.g., right to be saved). If there is such a difference, it seems the difference has to be due to the fact that there's a morally significant distinction between doing and allowing. Such a distinction seems impossible to defend. [Rachels' bathtub]

Thus, some consequentialists (e.g., Norcross) think there's nothing to the separateness of persons objection. To defend the objection, it seems you either need to defend the doing/allowing distinction (which itself would undermine consequentialism) or argue that the relative stringency of negative and positive rights has nothing to do with the relative stringency of duties to assist and duties to refrain from harming.

# Utilitarianism and the virtues

Two important points from Foot's paper:

- Identifies where (she thinks) the argument for consequentialism goes awry;
- Argues that the utilitarian's conception of beneficence is defective.

Our focus today will be on the first issue. We talk about utilitarianism and beneficence next week while discussing virtue ethics.

# An argument for consequentialism

It is never rational to pick an acknowledged lesser good over a greater good. Thus, you cannot (reasonably) ask whether an option identified as best is the option you should pick. The consequentialist view is just the view that says that it is always right to pick the best option and never right to bring about anything less than the best. So, the consequentialist view must be the right view.

Remember that the consequentialist doesn't tell us what's distinctive of the best option. It just tells us that we should maximize whatever it is that's good.

## Best vs. Best

The consequentialist thinks of what's best/what's good should be understood not from the point of view of parent, friend, citizen, etc., but from an impersonal standpoint.

Foot is skeptical of the idea of something that's good or bad from the impersonal standpoint.

I have to confess that I'm less skeptical, but there's a weaker point that might serve Foot's purposes. There's thinking of what's good/bad from some point of view and thinking of what's good/bad from the impersonal standpoint. Can't we ask which of these two standpoints would better allow us to identify what our obligations are?



# Best vs. Best

Two accidents in which kids get hurt; Three agents (the negligent driver, the mother, and the nurse).

- First agent thinks to himself it would be better to give to A. (Why? Because I ran him over.)
- Second agent: It would be better to give it to B. (Why? Because that's my kid.)
- Third agent: It wouldn't be better either way, so I should flip a coin. (Why? Because the drug is equally effective either way.)

If each agent identifies what she's permitted to do, notice that none of them does anything less than what's 'best' (in the relevant sense), but only one agent characterizes the 'best' in the way that the consequentialists do.