

Consequentialism

Last time we discussed Singer's argument that we are morally obliged to give most of our money to help alleviate third world poverty. The key premise of (one version of) that argument was the following:

The Strong Singer Principle

One always ought to prevent something bad from happening if one can do so without sacrificing anything with moral importance comparable to the thing to be prevented.

There is no doubt that this principle can seem intuitively true. But why does it seem to be true?

The background idea is this: we measure our actions by their consequences. More specifically, we can consider the following thesis:

Consequentialism

Whenever we consider two possible courses of action, we ought to perform the one which will bring about the better consequences.

If Consequentialism is true, then the Strong Singer Principle seems to follow. After all, that principle just says that (all things being equal) if you can prevent some state of affairs which is bad without also causing some state of affairs which is at least as bad, you should do it.

Consequentialism gives rise to two questions: (1) What makes one state of affairs better than another? and (2) Is Consequentialism true?

Let's focus on question (1) first. One simple answer to this question might seem to emerge from Singer's discussion. He clearly thinks that what is bad about the sorts of situations he discusses is that they involve massive *suffering*. But what is suffering? Presumably, a certain amount and kind of a particular sensation, pain. This might suggest the following view:

One state of affairs is better than another if and only if it involves less pain.

If this sort of principle were true, it would support Singer's argument. But this is not a very plausible principle. Can you see why not?

A better view about what makes one state of affairs better than another is the following:

Hedonism

One state of affairs is better than another if and only if it involves the best overall distribution of pleasure and pain.

The worry that this account of "better than" is circular, and a response to the worry.

If we combine hedonism with consequentialism, we get *hedonistic consequentialism*. The characteristic thesis of the hedonistic consequentialist is that we should always perform the action which will lead to the state of affairs with, overall, the most pleasure and least pain.

Hedonism in general, and hedonistic consequentialism in particular, are the target of Nozick's example of the "experience machine" in the reading for today:

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences? If you are worried about missing out on desirable experiences, we can suppose that business enterprises have researched thoroughly the lives of many others. You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life's experiences for, say, the next two years. After two years have passed, you will have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your *next* two years. Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? *What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?* Nor should you refrain because of the few moments of distress between the moment you've decided and the moment you're plugged. What's a few moments of distress compared to a lifetime of bliss (if that's what you choose), and why feel any distress at all if your decision *is* the best one?

Nozick's example raises a few questions:

- What must the hedonist say about the relative goodness of the state of affairs in which everyone (or almost everyone) plugs in and the state of affairs in which no one does?
- Suppose you face the decision whether or not to have everyone plugged in to an experience machine. What must a hedonistic consequentialist say about what you ought to do?
- Is Nozick right that these consequences of hedonism, and hedonistic consequentialism, are incorrect?

It is important to see that, even if you agree with Nozick, his example does not show that Consequentialism is false, but only that a particular version of that view - hedonistic consequentialism - is false. One might agree with Nozick, and be a Consequentialist, if one holds that what makes one state of affairs better than another can sometimes depend on facts other than sensations of pleasure and pain.

What might make one state of affairs better than another, if not the overall distribution of pleasure and pain? This is a difficult question, to which many different answers have been given. Some relevant facts might include:

- The extent to which the desires of agents are satisfied.
- The extent to which the states of affairs contain beauty, or love, or friendship, or something else taken to be of objective value.
- The extent to which the states of affairs maximize the well-being, or welfare, of agents.

Let's leave aside the question of what makes one state of affairs better than another, and assume that we have some satisfactory account of this. Remember Singer's key premise:

The Strong Singer Principle

One always ought to prevent something bad from happening if one can do so without sacrificing anything with moral importance comparable to the thing to be prevented.

To derive this principle, we do not need to assume that hedonistic consequentialism is true; it is enough if *some* version of Consequentialism is true. So let's ask: is Consequentialism true? This is the question taken up by Bernard Williams in the other piece we read for class today.

The element of Consequentialism on which Williams focuses on the following principle (p. 95):

The Strong Doctrine of Negative Responsibility

I am just as responsible for things that I allow or fail to prevent as I am for things that I actively bring about.

Williams thinks that the Consequentialist is committed to accepting this principle.

Why does he think this?

Is he right?

Williams thinks that the Doctrine of Negative Responsibility is false, and that this is a serious problem for Consequentialism. He tries to show this by two examples; the first is the example of George the chemist:

(1) George, who has just taken his Ph.D. in chemistry, finds it extremely difficult to get a job. He is not very robust in health, which cuts down the number of jobs he might be able to do satisfactorily. His wife has to go out to work to keep them, which itself causes a great deal of strain, since they have small children and there are severe problems about looking after them. The results of all this, especially on the children, are damaging. An older chemist, who knows about this situation, says that he can get George a decently paid job in a certain laboratory, which pursues research into

chemical and biological warfare. George says that he cannot accept this, since he is opposed to chemical and biological warfare. The older man replies that he is not too keen on it himself, come to that, but after all George's refusal is not going to make the job or the laboratory go away; what is more, he happens to know that if George refuses the job, it will certainly go to a contemporary of George's who is not inhibited by any such scruples and is likely if appointed to push along the research with greater zeal than George would. Indeed, it is not merely concern for George and his family, but (to speak frankly and in confidence) some alarm about this other man's excess of zeal, which has led the older man to offer to use his influence to get George the job . . . George's wife, to whom he is deeply attached, has views (the details of which need not concern us) from which it follows that at least there is nothing particularly wrong with research into CBW. What should he do?

What does Williams think the Consequentialist must say about this case?

Williams' second example is the example of Jim and the Indians:

(2) Jim finds himself in the central square of a small South American town. Tied up against the wall are a row of twenty Indians, most terrified, a few defiant, in front of them several armed men in uniform. A heavy man in a sweat-stained khaki shirt turns out to be the captain in charge and, after a good deal of questioning of Jim which establishes that he got there by accident while on a botanical expedition, explains that the Indians are a random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of protest against the government, are just about to be killed to remind other possible protestors of the advantages of not protesting. However, since Jim is an honoured visitor from another land, the captain is happy to offer him a guest's privilege of killing one of the Indians himself. If Jim accepts, then as a special mark of the occasion, the other Indians will be let off. Of course, if Jim refuses, then there is no special occasion, and Pedro here will do what he was about to do when Jim arrived, and kill them all. Jim, with some desperate recollection of schoolboy fiction, wonders whether if he got hold of a gun, he could hold the captain, Pedro and the rest of the soldiers to threat, but it is quite clear from the set-up that nothing of that kind is going to work: any attempt at that sort of thing will mean that all the Indians will be killed, and himself. The men against the wall, and the other villagers, understand the situation, and are obviously begging him to accept. What should he do?

In each of these examples, Williams thinks that we should find the view of the Consequentialist implausible; and in each of these cases, it seems that what makes trouble for the Consequentialist is the fact that we are inclined to find the distinction between doing something and letting it happen morally relevant --- which is what the Strong Doctrine of Negative Responsibility denies.

At least two other worrying sorts of cases for consequentialism are worth considering:

- Cases which involve our intuitions about the *rights* of others. The example of the transplant.
- Cases in which, if Consequentialism is true, we seem to have a moral obligation to deceive ourselves about what we ought to do.

Consequentialism is one very general framework about how to think about what we ought to do. As the above makes clear, there are many different versions of Consequentialism.

But, as the above also makes clear, whether or not Consequentialism is true has very concrete consequences: for example, it seems to have the Strong Singer Principle as a consequence, and that Principle seems to have as a consequence that you are morally obliged to give almost all of your money to help suffering people around the world.

As we have seen, Consequentialism also faces some serious problems. One might wonder: if Consequentialism is false, what does that entail for Singer's argument? To answer this question, we need to understand how one might think about what we ought to do in a non-consequentialist way. We will begin our discussion of this topic next time.