

# The structural appeal of consequentialism (and how to resist it)

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## 1. Introduction

Consequentialism: simple and transparent

- CONSEQUENTIALISM: „An action is right iff its consequences are at least as good as the consequences of each alternative action.“
- Consequentialists often point out that part of what makes consequentialism attractive is that it is structurally appealing.

Questions

- Is consequentialism structurally specifically appealing?
- Do potentially appealing structural features of consequentialism count in its favour (and against deontological views that do not display them)?

## 2. The classical argument

An inference to consequentialism ...

- (1) The value of one's actions' consequences is an important moral factor.
- (2) *Therefore*: Either is the value of one's actions' consequences the only moral factor, or there are also others.
- (3) *Therefore*: One should either accept (a version of) consequentialism or (a version of) pluralism.
- (4) Consequentialism is simpler than pluralism.
- (5) Over and above the difference in simplicity, there are no other relevant differences between consequentialism and pluralism.
- (6) *Ceteris paribus* the simpler theory should be preferred over the more complex one.
- (7) *Therefore*: One ought to accept (a version of) consequentialism.

... and its limits

- The classical argument primarily addresses the contrast between consequentialism and the standard version of pluralism:

ROSSIAN PLURALISM: „The value of one's actions' consequences is an important moral factor, apart from which, however, there also are others. There are no informative principles about what to do in cases of conflicting factors.“

The classical argument will leave those unimpressed who do not share its first premise. In particular, it does not address two other important deontological views:

ABSOLUTISM: „There are certain types of action that are morally wrong, irrespective of the consequences.“

CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE: „Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a *universal law of nature*.“

- Premise (5) is too strong. The *ceteris paribus*-clause in (6) will only be satisfied in exceptional cases. It is hard to imagine dialectical situations in which a difference in simplicity could be relevant for the assessment of rivaling ethical theories.

	Monism	Pluralism
value of consequences important factor	CONSEQUENTIALISM	ROSSIAN PLURALISM
value of consequences not important factor	CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE	

3. A partial typology of ethical theories

Determinacy

- Against Rossian Pluralism, it is often objected that it offers too little guidance and that it, consequently, falls short of providing what an ethical theory ought to provide.
- Rossian pluralism is not *determinate*: principles of determinate moral theories, when conjoined with the relevant non-moral premises, allow for the derivation of judgements about the moral rightness/wrongness of individual actions.
- The objection against pluralism presupposes that determinacy is a desirable structural property of ethical theories.

	Monism	Pluralism
value of consequences important factor	1 CONSEQUENTIALISM	3 ROSSIAN PLURALISM
value of consequences not important factor	4 CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE	2

*determinate*  
.....  
*not determinate*

Complementing the scheme

- 1: No alternative to consequentialism here.
- 2: Views of this sort can be disregarded for the time being.
- 3: COMPLEX DEONOTOLOGY: „The value of one’s actions’ consequences is an important moral factor, apart from which, however, there also are others. There are informative principles about what to do in cases in which two or more factors are relevant.“\*
- 4: Absolutism is the most convincing determinate and monist alternative to consequentialism.

	Monism	Pluralism
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*determinate*  
.....  
*not determinate*

4. A new argument

The argument ...

- (1) Ethical theories should be determinate.
- (2) Consequentialism, Absolutism and Complex Deontology are the most convincing determinate ethical theories.
- (3) Complex Deontology is structurally unattractive.
- (4) Consequentialism is more convincing than Absolutism.
- (5) *Therefore:* Consequentialism is the most convincing structurally attractive ethical theory.

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\* An example is Kamm’s *Principle of Permissible Harm*: „[A]n act is permissible if (i) a greater good or (ii) a means that has a greater good as its noncausal flip side causes a lesser evil. However, it is not permissible for an act (iii) to require lesser evil (or someone’s involvement leading to lesser evil) as a means to greater good or (iv) to directly cause a lesser evil as a side effect when it has a greater good as a mere causal effect unmediated by (ii)“ (Kamm 2007: 24).

... and why it is interesting

A structural premise that many are committed to, taken together with a plausible moral claim, entail that consequentialism is the most convincing ethical theory. (Even so, this does not count in favour of consequentialism's acceptability.)

## 5. Conclusion & outlook

### Upshot

- Consequentialism is structurally appealing (and more so than important deontological rivals) in more than one way.
  - Reference to structural features that are more or less specific for consequentialism can play different argumentative roles:
    - (i) Either, they might be relevant once moral considerations have done their work and if *ceteris paribus*-conditions obtain [see Section (2.)];
    - (ii) or, they come into play right at the argumentative outset, constraining the set of ethical theories that are taken into consideration at all [see Section (4.)].
- When one aims at formulating ethical theories that most appropriately state what is morally right or wrong, then only arguments of the first sort are relevant. Arguments of the second sort might be relevant in contexts in which ethical theorizing aims at pragmatic goals (such as at providing guidance).
- The view that ethical theorizing simultaneously aims at getting matters morally right and at providing guidance is misleading.

### Consequentialising

- There is reason to believe that the (structural and other) properties of ethical theories discussed in this paper are invariant under consequentialization.
- Then, an ethical theory is not structurally less appealing than its consequentialized counterpart.

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