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9 Consequentialism

Abstract: Consequentialism is the category of ethical theories that determine the morality of potential, current and past actions by analyzing the outcomes or potential outcomes of those actions. Here we discuss consequentialism as a method for analysis for production, distribution and use of mass communication based on the theory described by John Stuart Mill, a nineteenth Century philosopher. Consequentialism is applicable to the study of mass communication because the intent of mass communication is to have impact on an audience.

Keywords: consequentialism, happiness, aggregate good, double effect, justice

In 1956, British philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe recommended to her Oxford University colleagues that the university deny U.S. President Harry Truman the honorary degree for which he had been nominated (Solomon 2008). Anscombe argued that Truman had committed a morally prohibited act in ordering atomic bombs to be dropped on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in 1945. She believed that Truman's order, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians, disqualified him for such an honor.

Dropping bombs on civilians to end World War II was what Anscombe called an example of immoral *consequentialism*. She thought consequentialism – judging the morality of action by its intended outcome – insufficient for making accurate moral judgments. She said that moral analysis of action need to include review of unintended consequences as well as those that were intended. She claimed that consequentialism, in this case, had been used to provide justification for an act that was clearly wrong (Solomon 2008).

At the time, U.S. and Allied military leaders argued that dropping atomic bombs on Japanese cities was justified because it brought the end to a war that had raged for six years, resulting in global death and destruction. Ending World War II did benefit more people than it hurt. From this well-known, but mistaken, application of consequentialist analysis: “Do the greatest good for the greatest number of people,” dropping atomic bombs seemed to be a good thing. The mistake in this use of consequentialism was in doing a quantitative comparison of the number of people harmed with the number of people not harmed, without consideration of other essential moral factors.

Consequentialism is the category of ethical theories that determine the morality of potential, current and past actions by analyzing the outcomes or potential outcomes of those actions. Actions that bring about good results are morally permitted. Actions that bring about bad results are morally prohibited. What is best, is an action or a kind of action that brings about the greatest happiness or benefit. What is bad, is an action or a kind of action which causes pain, unhappiness or harm.

In this chapter, we discuss consequentialism as a method for analysis for production, distribution and use of mass communication, based on the theory described by John Stuart Mill, a nineteenth-century British philosopher¹ and on the work of more contemporary utilitarian theorists such as Peter Singer and Julia Driver.

Consequentialism is an obvious theoretical construct to turn to for analyzing the moral permissibility of acts related to mass communication. Messages published through mass communication, by definition, are intended to reach audiences regardless of the platform on which they are published. Messages are published with the intent of bringing about outcomes. Whether mass communication messages are meant to entertain, to inform, or to provoke, the intent involves creating some change, however small in the user or world. Virtual. Physical. Or both.

Let's further consider the U.S. military action credited with ending World War II to understand Anscombe's objections. History shows that American leaders were reluctant to be the first (and as of this writing, the only) officials to order atomic bombs to be dropped on civilian populations. Unlike traditional munitions, atomic bombs vaporize everything living within miles of the explosion by extreme temperature and radiation.

At the time that the bombs were dropped, the Japanese had already been defeated. Blockades of all port cities deprived Japan of desperately needed resources. Major cities were in ruins from relentless carpet bombing by the U.S. using traditional munitions. Nevertheless, the Japanese military commanders were unwilling to surrender. The U.S. and its allies were eager to put the war behind them.

In early August 1945, Japanese military command was delivered a demand for immediate and unconditional surrender, without being told the consequence if that demand was rejected. The Japanese declined. Days later, the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, resulting in the instantaneous deaths of more than 70,000 civilians and the destruction of the entire seaside city. Two days after the first bomb was dropped, when Japan still did not agree to an unconditional surrender, a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki resulting in deaths and devastation that rivaled Hiroshima. Soon, Japan issued an unconditional surrender and the war was over. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians died from radiation sickness in the months that followed. Thousands more Japanese citizens died from radiation-induced cancers long after the end of the war.

President Truman justified dropping the bombs by the act's good intention: to force Japan to quickly and unconditionally surrender, thus bringing World War II to an end. The killing of Japanese civilians as a result of these bombings was the unintended, but foreseeable consequence (Solomon 2008). In contemporary wars, we

¹ John Stuart Mill credited his wife and intellectual partner, Harriet Taylor Mill, as co-author of all of his philosophical work. However, as Harriett Taylor Mill is not listed as co-author, this chapter cites John Stuart Mill as a single author. This chapter is then written with a silent nod in appreciation of Harriett Taylor Mill's often-unacknowledged input.

refer to such unintentional citizen deaths as collateral damage. Truman's intent was to end the war, bringing about world peace; his intent was not to slaughter hundreds of thousands of Japanese citizens.

Anscombe (1958) argued that it was wrong to ignore the magnitude of the killing and harming hundreds of thousands of civilians in the ethical analysis of Truman's choice. Anscombe's motion to deny Truman an honorary degree received only three votes in addition to her own, but her preoccupation with how morality connects to unintended consequences resulted in her major contribution to ethical theory, "Modern Moral Philosophy," which was published in the journal *Philosophy* in 1958 (Anscombe 1958). Anscombe's analysis of unintended consequences brought an added dimension to would be considered in consequentialist thinking that followed.

1 A brief history

While Anscombe is credited for the first use of the term *consequentialism*, many historical philosophers described moral theories that incorporated evaluation of outcomes and the effects of action (Driver 2012). The two main historical branches of consequentialist theories are hedonism and utilitarianism. Hedonistic theories judge pleasure and pain that is caused to an individual; utilitarian theories judge pleasure and pain (or as it is more broadly addressed, happiness and unhappiness) based on how groups of people or how the community as a whole will be affected. Hedonist theories hold that actions are right based on their ability to bring individual pleasure. Utilitarian theories hold that actions are right based on their ultimate usefulness or benefit for the community as a whole.

Utilitarianism is further nuanced by a division between "act" and "rule" utilitarianism. Anscombe's objection classified Truman's choice to drop the bomb as an example of **act** utilitarianism. She (1958) argued that the specific act was wrong when viewed with the particulars of the situation, including harm that was foreseeable although not intended. In making her argument, she could be seen as arguing for **rule** utilitarianism in concluding that the only moral way to apply consequentialist theories was to always use this rule in figuring out the most ethical thing to do: consider all foreseeable consequences, including those that are not intended. This is called **rule** utilitarianism because the theory argues that the best overall consequence comes about if people always apply a certain rule in thinking through ethical issues.

Greek philosopher Epicurus (300 BCE) is usually used to exemplify hedonism in the Western tradition. But, while "epicurean" has come to mean people who prioritize immediate gratification or satisfaction of desire, Epicurus actually argued that individuals are best able to maximize their pleasure by considering what a specific choice might mean in their overall life and development. Epicurus recognized that true pleasure was not the same as immediate gratification.

Chinese philosopher Mo-Tzu (also spelled Mozi), who wrote in the same period as Epicurus, might be called the first utilitarian because he rejected the determination of an action as “good” based on whether it followed the community’s accepted custom or tradition. Instead, he argued that actions should be judged based on their usefulness or harmfulness to the community (Driver 2012).

The rise of contemporary consequentialism began in Great Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when social thinkers were starting to challenge traditional social, economic and political systems and the traditional belief that ethical analysis was tied to religion and the commandments of God (Vallentyne 2007). They were also responding to German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who argued that a person’s intent and one’s understanding of his or her moral duty should be the basis for an individual determining whether actions were ethical or not. According to Kant, all adults have the ability to use their rational and moral reasoning ability to decide what constitutes right action. All adults have the responsibility to do what they have determined to be the right action and to do that regardless of the consequences.

So, for example, if a professor tells her students that she will not accept late papers, according to Kant, that professor has a responsibility to keep her word no matter what extenuating circumstances there might be. If a student’s being hit by a car on the way to class has prevented her from turning in her paper on time and that would result in her failing the class and losing her scholarship, according to Kant’s theory, the moral action, for the professor is neither to consider the student’s extenuating circumstance nor the consequences of giving her an F in the class.

Kant believed that every situation had one morally correct answer that any competent adult could reason to. Moral reasoning, from this point of view, is no different from mathematical reasoning. (See Chapter 8.) People might choose to behave in a way that was not the best ethical choice, but Kant wanted individuals to admit when they were acting in ways different from what morality demanded. Kant’s intent was for all people to realize that doing the right thing is a struggle and that, as mortals, we all fall sort at least most of the time. Our duty, as human beings, was to keep working to figure out the best choices and to act on those principles.

Kant’s formula for how to figure out the right thing to do seemed complicated, at best, for many people. And, many people were not comfortable with the idea of morality being such an exacting science. While most professors do have a general rule about not accepting late papers, almost all of them have done so in extraordinary circumstances. If they are willing to bend the rule for all students who have the same kind of extenuating circumstance, many professors would argue that their willingness to extend a deadline for an individual student in a bad circumstance is not an immoral act.

British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) is the founder of modern utilitarianism, which is the turn that consequentialism took in the nineteenth Century. Like Epicurus, Bentham believed that pleasure was good and pain was bad and that people should seek to achieve pleasure and avoid pain (Driver 2012). Bentham was a

social reformer, arguing that utilitarianism was the theory that should guide governmental as well as individual actions. The results of his calculus in the early 1800's included his enlightened views that slavery was wrong; that women deserved equal treatment under law; and that it was wrong to abuse animals. In his many published works, Bentham showed how utilitarian calculus could fairly distribute the division of community goods (Driver 2012). A difficulty that critics have had with Bentham's calculus was in trying to figure out how to weight the various elements that he considered important in calculating utility: intensity (of pleasure or pain), duration, likelihood, timeliness, and extent.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), a young contemporary of Bentham, took on the project of dealing with the criticisms that Bentham's calculus was overly complicated and that seeking “the greatest good for the greatest number” might result in a small number of individuals being sacrificed for the good of the larger community. Mill, for whom Bentham was a mentor, gave up Bentham's felicific calculus and replaced it with an analysis that included review to ensure that everyone involved be treated justly. Like Bentham, Mill's work was motivated by his desire to create social reform, to inform law and social policy as well as to help individuals think about how to analyze their potential, current and past actions (Driver 2012). Mill appreciated that nations, societies, and communities within them could have different combinations of people with different traditions, religions, and resources. But, according to Mill, “Whatever their origin and character, to count as well-constituted, these combinations of individuals must be founded on substantive principles of justice.... only the virtue of justice, which is grounded on the value of perfect equality, is consistent with the promotion of human well-being and the improvement of societies as a whole” (Morales 1996: 184). Mill's insistence on applying the elements of justice as a step prior to conducting the utilitarian calculus guarantees that no individual or less powerful group could be sacrificed for the happiness of the majority. As Mill's system for how and when to apply the utilitarian calculus consists of a number of essential rules, it is properly held as an example of **rule** utilitarianism.

2 Mass communication and consequentialism

As the point of mass communication is for the producer of messages to share their messages with a targeted or diffuse audience, consequentialist analysis of that action is logical. Almost every question relating to mass communication can be asked in a consequentialist way: How was information gathered and can that process be justified by the potential and actual outcome? How was the information presented and what was the presentation intended to do? What was the result of the action? Is the outcome beneficial or harmful? If it causes harm, can that harm be justified? If so,

how? Even if the intended outcome is good, are there unintended negative consequences? If so, how can those be justified?

The consequentialist analysis provided by John Stuart Mill is particularly appropriate for mass communication because along with his utilitarian theory, Mill was also a strong proponent of free speech, free press and governmental non-interference.² “Millian democracy is a form of life and, as such, it is an ideal that ought to govern the constitution of just communities of all kinds. On Mill’s own principles, the higher value of democracy is directly related to its role in promoting the improvement of the human condition,” according to one theorist (Morales 1996: 18).

3 The consequentialist theory of John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill argued that one can judge the morality of actions using a Utilitarian calculus, but he put three safeguards in place that thinkers are required to consider before determining which act produces the greater good (Elliott 2007).

First, he believed in the autonomy and moral importance of each individual. He said that people need to be independent so that they can figure out which actions are morally permitted, and which are not. Indeed, the lifelong duty for all people, according to Mill, is to “form the truest opinions they can” (Gray 1991: 23). As Mill explains in his essay, *On Liberty*, the only way that people can figure out the truth is by continually testing out their opinions, engaging in discussions with other citizens, and trying to really understand opinions different from their own. Mill was a strong proponent of personal liberty, free speech and open channels of communication because he believed that these are essential pillars of democracy.

The enlightened, educated citizen is someone who is not threatened by people who think differently. Mill’s ideal citizen seeks to truly understand what people with opposing opinions think and why they think the way that they do. Mill says, the person “who has calmness to see and honesty to state what his opponents and their opinions really are, exaggerating nothing to their discredit, keeping nothing back which tells, or can be supposed to tell, in their favour. This is the real morality of public discussion” (Gray 1991: 61). Yet, for all of Mill’s desire for citizens to respect differences, it doesn’t follow from his theory that all opinions are equally acceptable. Mill believed that the truth of our opinions should be tested over and over by individuals and by the community as a whole, but he did think that if individuals work at it, they would find their way to important truths, including beliefs that were unusual for people to

² Readers are encouraged to read John Stuart Mill’s essays, “On Liberty,” “Subjection of Women,” and “Utilitarianism,” which can be found in Gray, J. (Ed.) (1991). *On liberty and other essays*. New York: Oxford University Press.

hold in the mid-1800's: for example, slavery is wrong, and women should have equal rights to men. They would come to realize that, at a fundamental level, every person matters. “[b]y stimulating other-regarding attitudes, democratic participation fosters the development of sympathetic bonds among people and encourages their commitment to the common good. Thus, democratic participation has a profound socializing effect, tied closely to the development of morality” (Morales 1996: 18).

Second, as every individual has equal worth, Mill laid out elements of justice that must be considered as people are weighing their ethical options of how to act in regards to another person. As people are naturally inclined to give moral attention first and foremost to those most immediately affected by our actions and those who are closest to us, Mill wanted to make sure that no one's rights were trampled in the process.

Mill described five elements of justice: legal rights, moral rights, getting what one deserves, having promises kept, and being treated impartially (Gray 1991: 178–180). Every person affected by an action must be treated justly. First, they should not be deprived of what they have a legal right to expect. In addition, people should get what they are morally owed, even if the law is silent on the subject. Moral obligation includes people meeting their responsibilities toward others. For example, my students have a moral right to my time and attention even if there is no law that says that I need to provide additional help outside of class time and office hours.

When Mill argued his third element – that people should get what they deserve – he meant that in both a positive and negative way. Mill said that it was unjust for someone “to obtain a good, or be made to undergo an evil, which he does not deserve” (Gray 1991: 179). So, for example, a mother watching in horror as her child dies in a house fire, does not “deserve” to have her picture taken at that awful moment, published and shared throughout the Internet. The picture may be riveting. It may be newsworthy. But those arguments for publication would arguably fail on Mill's grounds that she was not treated justly.

When promises are made to a person, they should be kept. Those who have been promised may release promisers of their moral obligations. But as it is unjust for the promiser to break their promise without being released by the person affected. For example, journalists should not make promises unless they are very certain that they can keep them.

Lastly, Mill argued that people should be treated impartially. That relates directly to Mill's point that all people's lives are of equal worth. If people are similar in a relevant way, then people who have power to affect them should treat them in the same way. So, if a professor gives one student who has had an emergency a few extra days to complete an assignment, the professor must be willing to do that for any student in the class. Professors are not justified in giving a student special privileges that are not open impartially to others.

Mill understood that meeting all of these requirements is the ideal, but there are times when that might be impossible. He said, “Justice is a name for certain moral requirements, which, regarded collectively, stand higher in the scale of social utility, and are therefore of more paramount obligation, than any others, though particular

cases may occur in which some other social duty is so important, as to overrule any one of the general maxims of justice. Thus, to save a life, it may not only be allowable, but a duty, to steal, or take by force, the necessary food or medicine, or to kidnap, and compel to officiate the only qualified medical practitioner” (Gray 1991: 201). Decision-makers can make justified exceptions to meeting all of the elements of justice in every case, but that exception should be public, open to scrutiny and discussion.

The third safeguard is that benefit to the community must be based on *aggregate* rather than *arithmetic* good. If we allow the greatest number of people to benefit from an action, doing so implies that happiness of the majority is more important than the happiness of those harmed in the bargain. Mill said that this is a mistake. Every person has equal moral importance. In fact, with enough education and enlightenment, individuals can come to see that their individual happiness is dependent on the good of the community. If everyone has what they need to live, there is no need for people to steal for survival. (Gray 1991: 142).

Mill also held that people who think carefully about themselves and their community come to a surprising conclusion: the role of the enlightened, educated individual is to create the best community possible to promote the happiness of every person as they promote their own. Individuals who seek and learn “true opinion” (Gray 1991: 166) come to see that their own individual happiness and wellbeing rests on the good of the community as a whole.

4 Applying Millian utilitarianism

Mill’s utilitarian ethical theory is explained in his essay *Utilitarianism* and is based on something that everyone can appreciate: happiness. Mill calls it the Greatest Happiness Principle, which “holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (Gray 1991: 137). But true happiness, according to Mill, is not the same as immediate gratification, momentary pleasure, or even personal satisfaction. Mill tells us, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question” (Gray 1991: 140).

While it may sound contradictory to say that happiness can coincide with dissatisfaction, Mill pointed out that enlightened people become happy by trying to make the world a better place. He says,

All the grand sources, in short, of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort; and though their removal is grievously slow... yet every mind sufficiently intelligent and generous to bear a part, however small and inconspicuous, in the endeavor, will draw a noble enjoyment from the content itself, which he would not for any bribe in the form of selfish indulgence consent to be without (Gray 1991: 146).

The process then for applying Mill's consequentialist theory, utilitarianism, starts with identifying any other people who might be affected by one's action. The actor's intention is less important than the foreseeable effect that the action is likely to have on others. Once those people are identified, the next step is to think through the elements of justice and make sure that people are getting their legal rights, their moral rights, what they deserve, are having promises kept to them and are being treated impartially. If decision-makers determine that, in a particular case, it is morally permitted for an element of justice to be set aside, they have the additional obligation of thinking of how that unjust treatment could be explained in a public and transparent way. The only justification for treating any person in an unjust way is that this kind of treatment would support the interests of the community as a whole in such an obvious way that people most likely to suffer are likely to agree.

The justification of taxes is an example of this kind of reasoning. In most countries, the wealthiest individuals are those that pay the most tax. One might say that the wealthiest individuals are not getting what they deserve if they are being penalized for their riches. The justification for allowing this exception to the elements of justice is that the community as a whole benefits from the government having tax dollars to care for the neediest and because the wealthiest citizens have voted for the tax code (or voted for legislators who have created the tax code).

Never, according to Mill's utilitarian calculus, is it justifiable to determine most or least harm or good based on the *number* of people affected on either side of the equation. Good or harm must be evaluated based on what the consequence of bringing about the best constituted community as that is also, ultimately, best for individuals.

5 Contemporary work in consequentialist theorizing

Consequentialist theorizing, with its intuitive fit, has been further refined for application in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Contemporary philosopher, Julia Driver, has shown how Millian utilitarianism can work in a complementary fashion with feminist philosophical concerns. Driver echoes Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking work on women's approach to moral theory by saying that women

tend to try to solve moral dilemmas through negotiation and communication, through attempts to make the facts clear in a dilemma situation. For women, the suggestion is that we do not view ourselves in isolation, as men tend to do, and we do not therefore need to relate to each other through a system of rules and principles where impartiality is the moral norm (Driver 2005: 184).

Feminists have argued that the impartiality requirement of utilitarianism contradicts the experience of women, which is often relational-centered, partial and particular to the situation at hand. Driver argues "that consequentialism – understood here as a theory that holds the right action to be that action which maximizes the good, where

good is understood agent-neutrally – does not have any trouble accounting for some partial norms” (Driver 2005: 185). Driver distinguishes between **choosing** an action because it maximizes the good and **judging the rightness** of the action because it maximizes the good. This is an important distinction. Few of us choose a friend or a life partner because doing so maximizes the good of society. Yet, if we look at the effect of people being in relationship with one another, we can see that personal relationships do maximize the good by allowing for the pooling of resources, and by motivating care for children, the elderly and other vulnerable populations. As Driver (2005: 194) says, these motivating emotions are “an extremely good thing, from an impartial point of view, since without these emotions it would be difficult to motivate the sorts of sacrifices one finds in these relationships. But this is not what people have in mind when they love their children. Nor should it be.” Driver (2005: 197) quotes Harriet Taylor, John Stuart Mill’s unsung partner, in noting that morality derives “its power from sympathies and benevolence and its reward from the approbation of those we respect.” So, the rightness of partial actions can be judged impartially.

Contemporary utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer not only argues that affluent people who have more than they need should help out people in need, he has created an organization that helps people do just that. Singer’s 2009 book, *The Life You can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (NY: Random House) and the website, www.thelifeyoucansave.org provides opportunities for affluent people to donate at least 1% of their net worth. Singer’s (2009: 230, 1972: 229–243) argument is that “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.” Singer argues that saving unknown children from dying from starvation is not morally different from the obligation to pull a drowning child from a water puddle if all that we risk is muddy clothing. That obligation doesn’t change if other people are choosing to act immorally and ignore the need. In true utilitarian fashion, on the website, Singer includes the expectation that people who reach the level of enlightenment needed to act on his argument will feel better for having done so. The person who helps, in even a small way, to make the world a better place, achieves happiness.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, let’s return to the case we discussed at the start of this chapter. Elizabeth Anscombe accused consequentialists of ignoring an action’s unintended, but foreseen circumstances. When something harmful happens as a side effect to an intended good outcome, this is formally called “a double effect.” *The Doctrine of Double Effect* suggests that a bad side effect can be morally justified to the extent that the primary action is not intended to cause harm and to the extent that the consequence of the intended action promotes overall good. Mill’s consequentialism

removes the distinction that so troubled Anscombe – that only intended outcomes should be considered. From Mill’s point of view, if all people who are affected are treated in accordance with the elements of justice, and if the greatest good for the affected community as a whole is considered, the intention behind the outcomes of action is not morally significant.

Anscombe (1958) also argued that consequentialism does not provide a stable basis for analysis, as the desired consequence may change. Mill would disagree. Dropping atomic bombs on Japanese civilians arguably would not have passed an analysis based on Mill’s form of consequentialism. These civilians were not treated justly. From our contemporary perspective, we can see that, for most citizens, national identity is more likely based on where people are born or choices of their parents and grandparents than rational choice to support a particular form of government. In fact, democratic process allows for the possibility that citizens might be in support of leadership at one point and less in support as others are voted into office. Through an examination of Mill’s elements of justice, it is clear that the civilians killed or affected by the atomic bombs did not get what they deserved. By analogy, it is not justified for terrorists to kill or harm innocent Americans because they do not approve of the actions of the U.S. government or U.S.-owned corporations.

Mill’s form of consequentialism is embedded in a full analysis of democracy and the well-constituted communities that democracy can create. Mill believed that the only morally acceptable societies were those that supported egalitarian values; war, he believed, supported selfish competition that got in the way of creating communities capable of social reform. The primary value for judging the benefit or harm of an act for the aggregate good is whether that act can promote a just and democratic society. That is the primary value because, from a consequentialist point of view, living in this kind of community allows each individual to attain true happiness.

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