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978-1-107-03303-0 - The Dimensions of Consequentialism: Ethics, Equality and Risk

Martin Peterson

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THE DIMENSIONS OF CONSEQUENTIALISM

Consequentialism, one of the major theories of normative ethics, maintains that the moral rightness of an act is determined solely by the consequences of the act and its alternatives. The traditional form of consequentialism is one-dimensional, in that the rightness of an act is a function of a single moral aspect, such as the sum total of wellbeing it produces. In this book Martin Peterson introduces a new type of consequentialist theory: multi-dimensional consequentialism. According to this theory, an act's moral rightness depends on several separate dimensions, including individual wellbeing, equality and risk. Peterson's novel approach shows that moral views about equality and risk that were previously thought to be mutually incompatible can be rendered compatible, and his precise theoretical discussion helps the reader to understand better the distinction between consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories. His book will interest a wide range of readers in ethics.

MARTIN PETERSON is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Eindhoven University of Technology, the Netherlands. He is author of *Non-Bayesian Decision Theory* (2008) and *An Introduction to Decision Theory* (Cambridge, 2009).

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Preface

Consequentialism is one of the major theories of normative ethics. This book introduces a new type of consequentialist theory: multi-dimensional consequentialism.

Traditional accounts of consequentialism are one-dimensional, meaning that an act's deontic status is a function of a single moral aspect, such as the sum total of wellbeing produced by the act, or the sum total of priority- or equality-adjusted wellbeing. Multi-dimensional consequentialists believe this picture is too simplistic. Multi-dimensional consequentialists maintain that equality and the amount of wellbeing produced by an act influence the act's deontic status independently of each other, and that its moral rightness is therefore a function of two or more irreducible aspects belonging to different dimensions. Under this view, equality and wellbeing cannot be merged into a composite aspect that accurately reflects both dimensions. Multi-dimensional consequentialists believe that clashes between conflicting moral aspects are irresolvable and that moral rightness and wrongness are, as a consequence of this, non-binary properties. An act that is optimal with respect to some aspect but suboptimal with respect to another is, literally speaking, somewhat right and somewhat wrong.

What makes multi-dimensional consequentialism attractive is that it can account for intuitions that are widely thought to speak against traditional versions of consequentialism. While one-dimensional consequentialists concede that virtually any act could be right provided that the net benefit is optimal when calculated in the appropriate way, the multi-dimensional theory proposed here avoids this counterintuitive conclusion. At best, acts that, for example, lead to someone being better off at the expense of another, or which produce unfair inequalities, or which are risky, could be right to some *degree* but not entirely right, no matter how well these acts score with respect to other aspects.

This book has been in the making for many years, and some parts first appeared in journal articles. A brief sketch of the main argument

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was presented in 'Multi-dimensional Consequentialism', *Ratio*, vol. 25. The axiomatic analysis of utilitarianism discussed in section 7.3, which is the most technical part of the book, first appeared in 'From Consequentialism to Utilitarianism', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 100. The multi-dimensional theory presented here can be read as my own response to that article.

Chapter 2 is influenced by very fruitful, collaborative work with Nicolas Espinoza. The notion of 'deontic leaps', which plays a crucial role in that chapter, was invented by Espinoza. Chapter 3 is an improved version of, 'Can Consequentialists Honour the Special Moral Status of Persons?', *Utilitas*, vol. 22. Chapter 4 contains material from three articles: 'The Mixed Solution to the Number Problem', *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 6; 'Some Versions of the Number Problem Have No Solution', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 13; and 'The Moral Importance of Selecting People Randomly', *Bioethics*, vol. 22. In chapter 6, the final two sections comprise material that first appeared in 'Parity, Clumpiness, and Rational Choice', *Utilitas*, vol. 19. Large parts of sections 7.1 and 7.2 draw on 'Equality AND Priority', *Utilitas*, vol. 17, which was co-authored with Sven Ove Hansson. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to Sven Ove for allowing me to reuse this material. Chapter 8 is a significantly revised version of 'A Royal Road to Consequentialism?', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 13. I am also extremely grateful to Johan E. Gustafsson and Tiago de Lima, who helped me to develop the deontic logic presented in the appendix.

I very much appreciate all the supportive feedback I have received over the years. Special thanks go to Iwao Hirose at McGill University and Erik Carlson at the University of Uppsala for chairing discussions about the entire manuscript in Montreal and Stockholm. I wish to thank all those who attended these events. A large number of people have generously commented on smaller or larger portions of the manuscript at other occasions, the articles on which it is based, or on conference presentations. I would like to thank Gustaf Arrhenius, Gunnar Björnsson, Joanna Burch Brown, Krister Bykvist, John Cantwell, Jonathan Dancy, Barbro Fröding, Karsten Klint Jensen, Stephen John, Guy Kahane, Stefan Koller, Rosemary Lowry, Jonas Olsson, Toby Ord, Douglas W. Portmore and Wlodek Rabinowicz for very helpful suggestions.

My interest in consequentialism arose in the early 1990s, when I studied philosophy at Stockholm University. I would like to thank Lars Bergström, Björn Eriksson, Hans Mathlein and Torbjörn Tännsjö for stimulating discussions and criticism. I also wish to thank the Swedish Research

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Finally, I would like to thank the two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. Their invaluable comments helped me to restructure the entire text and avoid a number of embarrassing errors. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for all remaining mistakes.