Semi-global Consequentialism and Blameless Wrongdoing: Reply to Brown

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Campbell Brown is right that my argument against semi-global consequentialism relies on the principle of agglomeration. However, semi-global consequentialists cannot rescue their view simply by rejecting this principle.

In 'Can Consequentialism Cover Everything?', I argued that consequentialists should reject the following view:

> *Semi-global consequentialism*: Everything that maximizes the good and that agents can bring about is right.[1]

They should reject this view, I argued, because of the possibility of cases like the following:

> It would maximize the good if Clare loved her child. It would maximize the good if Clare gave a benefit to a stranger rather than to her child. But Clare cannot both love her child and give this benefit to the stranger.[2]

In this case, it would maximize the good if Clare loved her child. Therefore, given how consequentialism uses the term 'right', semi-global consequentialism claims:

(1) Clare ought to love her child.[3]

It would maximize the good if Clare benefited the stranger rather than her child. Therefore, given how consequentialism uses the term 'right', semi-global consequentialism claims:

(2) Clare ought to benefit the stranger.

Claims (1) and (2) together imply:

(3) Clare ought both to love her child and benefit the stranger.

[1] See section III of my 'Can Consequentialism Cover Everything?', *Utilitas* 15 (2003), pp. 237–47.
[2] For this example, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), p. 32.
[3] Throughout this article, I use 'ought' as an *overall* or *all things considered* term, and 'reason' as a *pro tanto* term.

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And given that Clare cannot both love her child and benefit the stranger, claim (3) contradicts the principle that

> *'Ought' implies 'can'*: It can only be the case that an agent ought to bring about P if this agent can bring about P.

Campbell Brown objects to this argument that claims (1) and (2) together imply claim (3) only if the following principle is true:

> *Agglomeration*: If an agent ought to bring about P and this agent ought to bring about Q, then this agent ought to bring about both P and Q.[4]

And he claims that semi-global consequentialists can rescue their view by rejecting this principle.

Brown is right, of course, that this argument relies on the principle of agglomeration. However, semi-global consequentialists cannot rescue their view simply by rejecting this principle.[5] For the principle of agglomeration and the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' together imply the following principle:

> *Combined 'oughts' imply 'can'*: It can only be the case that an agent ought to bring about P and that this agent ought to bring about Q if this agent can bring about both P and Q.[6]

The principle that combined 'oughts' imply 'can' can be true even if the principle of agglomeration is false. And claims (1) and (2) are together inconsistent with the principle that combined 'oughts' imply 'can'. Therefore, to rescue their view, semi-global consequentialists not only have to reject the principle of agglomeration, but also have to reject the principle that combined 'oughts' imply 'can'.

That makes semi-global consequentialism very implausible. To see this, consider first a situation in which the following claims are true:

> (4) Fred can bring about R, and it would produce some good if he did this.

[4] Campbell Brown, 'Blameless Wrongdoing and Agglomeration: A Response to Streumer', *Utilitas*, this issue. As Brown notes, the principle of agglomeration applies only to claims about what an agent ought *overall* or *all things considered* to do, and not to claims about what there is a reason for an agent to do (or, in Brown's terminology, what an agent ought prima facie to do).

[5] Moreover, even if semi-global consequentialists could rescue their view simply by rejecting the principle of agglomeration, there are reasons not to reject this principle. See Paul M. Pietroski, 'Prima Facie Obligations, Ceteris Paribus Laws in Moral Theory', *Ethics* 103 (1993), pp. 489–515 (see pp. 503–4), and Michael Zimmerman, *The Concept of Moral Obligation* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 213–14.

[6] Note, as before, that this principle applies only to claims about what an agent ought *overall* or *all things considered* to do, and not to claims about what there is a reason for an agent to do.

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(5) Fred can bring about S, and it would produce slightly more good if he did this.
(6) Fred can bring about both R and S.
(7) No other thing that Fred can bring about would produce any good.

Surely, in this situation, any consequentialist would claim:

(8) Fred ought to bring about R.
(9) Fred ought to bring about S.[7]

This shows that consequentialists do not simply think that a thing would maximize the good if and only if this thing would produce most good. For if they did, they could not make both claim (8) and claim (9). Instead, they accept something like the following claim:

Maximization: A thing would maximize the good if and only if this thing is part of a set of things that would produce most good.[8]

Now consider a situation in which the following claims are true:

(10) Susan can go to work today, and it would produce some good if she did this.
(11) Susan can read a philosophy book today, and it would produce some good if she did this.
(12) Susan can go shopping today, and it would produce some good if she did this.
(13) Susan can collect money for Oxfam today, and it would produce some good if she did this.
(14) Susan can only do one of these things today.

According to semi-global consequentialism, everything that maximizes the good and that agents can bring about is right. Therefore, given the claim about maximization that consequentialists accept, and given how consequentialism uses the term 'right', semi-global consequentialism has to claim:

(15) Susan ought to go to work today.
(16) Susan ought to read a philosophy book today.
(17) Susan ought to go shopping today.

[7] Or, at least, any consequentialist who adopts the straightforward theory of the right would claim this (see Streumer, 'Can Consequentialism Cover Everything?', p. 238). I assume here that semi-global consequentialists adopt this theory of the right.

[8] It may be thought that consequentialists instead accept something like the following claim: A thing would maximize the good if and only if this thing is part of a set of things that, *of the sets of things that agents can bring about*, would produce most good. However, if that were so, semi-global consequentialism would be equivalent to semi-global combination consequentialism (see below).

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(18) Susan ought to collect money for Oxfam today.

But surely, if a semi-global consequentialist made all of these claims, Susan could say:

> 'I can only do *one* of these things today. Therefore, I have to *choose* between them. So which of these things ought I *really* to do?'

Given that claims (15) to (18) are about what Susan ought *all things considered* to do, semi-global consequentialism has no answer to this question. That makes this view very implausible.[9]

Semi-global consequentialists could reply to this in two different ways. First, they could claim that Susan only *really* ought to do the thing that would produce *most* good. To be able to make this claim, however, they would have to reject the claim about maximization that other consequentialists accept. Instead, they would have to accept something like the following claim:

> *Maximization (revised)*: A thing would maximize the good if and only if this thing is part of a set of things that, *of the sets of things that agents can bring about*, would produce most good.[10]

If that claim were true, semi-global consequentialism would be equivalent to the view that I called

> *Semi-global combination consequentialism*: A thing is right if and only if it belongs to a combination of things that maximizes the good and that agents can bring about.[11]

And if that view is true, either claim (1) or claim (2) is false, and there cannot be any cases of so-called 'blameless wrongdoing'.[12]

[9] More generally, for almost any agent A and almost any time *t*, there will be an enormous number of things about which the following claims are true: (19) agent A can bring about any one of these things at time *t*; (20) it would produce some good if agent A brought about any one of these things at time *t*; (21) agent A cannot bring about more than one of these things at time *t*. Given the claim about maximization that consequentialists accept, and given how consequentialism uses the term 'right', semi-global consequentialism will have to claim of *each* of these things that (22) agent A ought to bring this thing about at time *t*. Given that claim (22) is about what agent A ought *all things considered* to do, that makes semi-global consequentialism very implausible.

[10] It may be thought that semi-global consequentialists could instead accept something like the following claim: A thing would maximize the good if and only if, of the things that agents can bring about, this thing would produce most good. However, that would be very implausible, since accepting this claim would prevent semi-global consequentialists from making both claim (8) and claim (9) about Fred (see above).

[11] See Streumer, 'Can Consequentialism Cover Everything?', p. 244.

[12] 'Blameless wrongdoing' is actually a misleading name for the cases that Parfit and Brown have in mind. If we adopt a consequentialist criterion for the attribution of blame, there will be many cases of blameless wrongdoing in which an agent performs a wrong action without being blamed for performing this action, because blaming the agent in

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Second, semi-global consequentialists could accept a modified version of the principle that combined 'oughts' imply 'can' that makes an exception for cases of blameless wrongdoing. They would then be giving up semi-global consequentialism in favour of the following view:

> *Semi-global combination consequentialism with an exception for cases of blameless wrongdoing*: A thing is right if and only if it belongs to a combination of things that maximizes the good and that agents can bring about, except in cases of blameless wrongdoing. In cases of blameless wrongdoing, everything in this case that maximizes the good and that agents can bring about is right.

However, this would be a completely *ad hoc* way for semi-global consequentialists to avoid having to accept semi-global combination consequentialism. After all, why should we make an exception to the principle that combined 'oughts' imply 'can' for cases of blameless wrongdoing, but not for the case of Susan, or for other cases in which an agent cannot bring about all of a large number of things that would produce some good?

I conclude that, to rescue their view, semi-global consequentialists have to reject both the principle of agglomeration and the principle that combined 'oughts' imply 'can', which makes their view very implausible. Therefore, I still think that semi-global consequentialists should become semi-global combination consequentialists.[13]

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this case would fail to maximize the good. Such cases are different from the case of Clare, since what Clare does is not merely supposed to be both wrong and *blameless*, but is also supposed to be both wrong and *right*. It would therefore be more accurate to call Clare's case a case of 'right wrongdoing', which would make it analogous to what Parfit calls 'rational irrationality' (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 13).

[13] I would like to thank Jonathan Dancy for helpful comments.

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