Consequentialism and the Principle of Indifference

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James Lenman argues that consequentialism fails as a moral theory because it is impossible to predict the long-term consequences of our actions. I agree that it is impossible to predict the long-term consequences of actions, but argue that this does not count as a strike against consequentialism. I focus on the principle of indifference, which tells us to treat unforeseeable consequences as cancelling each other out, and hence value-neutral. I argue that though we cannot defend this principle independently, we cannot do without it in practical rationality. Thus abandoning the principle of indifference would involve abandoning all of rationality, not just consequentialist reasoning. I suggest that we should understand the principle as P. F. Strawson understands inductive reasoning – as being part of rationality.

In a recent article, James Lenman argues that consequentialism fails as a moral theory because we do not know enough about the consequences of our actions.[1] In this article I argue that this is a mistake.

Lenman makes various claims in the paper: that our actions can have massive causal ramifications, that we cannot know what these ramifications are, and crucially, that we cannot discount the unforeseen consequences of our actions. Consequentialism directs the agent to act in such a way as to bring about the best possible consequences, and so, as Lenman points out:

> If consequentialism is to be a theory of any real normative interest, it must at least furnish us with a regulative ideal to guide our choices either of actions or decision procedures; it must offer such choices a consequentialist rationale.[2]

According to Lenman, the most we can know about consequences is so little that the rationale we have is hardly consequentialist. Lenman argues that, as we can only predict the reasonably immediate future, and the unforeseeable distant future is much, much longer, 'the foreseeable consequences are so often a drop in the ocean of [an action's] actual consequences'.[3] Hence the consequentialist's guiding light is so dim that it gives no guidance.

[1] James Lenman, 'Consequentialism and Cluelessness', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29/4 (2000).
[2] Ibid., p. 360.
[3] Ibid., p. 350.

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Lenman's argument is supposed to undermine both objective and subjective forms of consequentialism.[4] Lenman could acknowledge the basic subjectivist thought that the agent has no control (in the appropriate sense of control)[5] over how things actually turn out in the distant future, and so is not to be held responsible for those events. However, Lenman is challenging the grounds on which a subjective consequentialist makes her decisions. A subjective consequentialist bases her decisions on how things are *likely* to turn out. Lenman's point is that no judgement of likelihood is tenable, given the enormity of the unforseeable consequences.

Consequentialists have noticed the problem posed by the epistemic argument before, and have offered various responses. Lenman considers three possible replies the consequentialist might make: the ripples in a pond postulate; the principle of indifference; and the scaling down response. Lenman argues that all three are unsatisfactory. In this article, I shall argue that all three responses work together, and are perfectly satisfactory.

Lenman refers to the first response as 'the Moore/Smart response', which claims that the remote consequences of our actions fade away to insignificance. Lenman treats this as an empirical claim, and rejects it on the grounds that our actions are often identity-affecting, and this is no insignificant matter. However, the claim should not be read as an empirical claim but as a claim about responsibility. Clearly our actions can be *necessary conditions* for certain events in the future. It is not clear that this is a reason to say that we are causally or morally responsible for every event, no matter how remote or unexpected, that would not have happened had we acted differently. In other words, the Moore/Smart response should be read as a defence of subjective consequentialism.

However, on its own, this is not a reply to Lenman's main objection. If I cannot predict the future, then it seems fair enough to say that I am not responsible for it. But consequentialism demands that we make decisions that *have as their justification* the whole future. If we cannot predict the future it seems that we cannot make decisions on the basis of how they will affect the whole future.

[4] See my 'Consequentialism and the Ought Implies Can Principle', *American Philosophical Quarterly* (2003), for a defence of subjective consequentialism. The crucial difference between subjective and objective consequentialism is a difference in how we attribute responsibility. According to objective consequentialism, an agent acts wrongly (and usually blameworthiness goes along with acting wrongly) when the consequences of her action are sub-optimal. According to subjective consequentialism, an agent acts wrongly only when the consequences of her action were or could have been predicted by the agent to be sub-optimal.

[5] I will not try to develop that here – for the purposes of this article it does not matter.

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Lenman goes on to consider the principle of indifference: the claim that (in Lenman's words) 'the good and the bad in the unforeseen consequences will cancel out, leaving the foreseen consequences to make the difference'.[6]

Lenman appeals to a well pedigreed objection to the principle of indifference. The worry is that the principle of indifference yields contradictions as follows: According to the principle, I am entitled to assume that the possible outcomes that I cannot distinguish between in terms of likelihood are all equally likely. One example that makes this seem plausible is the die-throwing example: I am entitled to assume, when throwing a die, that a 1 is as likely as a 6. However, there is a problem here. If a die is not loaded, then we are entitled to assume that a 1 is as likely as a 6, but *not* because we do not know the probabilities – in fact it is only because we *do* know the probabilities. We can only justifiably make this prediction if we know that the die is not loaded. Let us imagine that we do not know whether the die is loaded. Now it is less clear that we are entitled to assume that a 1 is as likely as a 6, because we now have no reason to think that the possible outcomes should be divided up into six options: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Why not say that there are two possible outcomes: (1, 2, 3, 4) and (5, 6)? If we now apply the principle of indifference, it seems that we should be able to say that these two options are equally likely. Dividing the options up in different ways is going to yield different probabilities. As Kneale puts it, we should not move from an absence of knowledge to a knowledge of absence.[7]

As the complaint applies to consequentialism, we are not entitled to assume that the good and the bad in the unforeseeable consequences cancel each other out, because we have no reason to assume that there are equal amounts of good and bad in the future. We could equally well think that the future consequences of an action could be divided into three possibilities: good, not so good, and bad. If we apply the principle to this division, the probability of good consequences is only 1 in 3. If we divide up the possibilities in another way, the probability of good consequences will vary accordingly. Saying that the good and the bad consequences in the future cancel each other out seems to be an illicit move from absence of knowledge to knowledge of absence.

A lot of work on the principle of indifference has yielded no satisfactory solutions. Should we conclude that consequentialism is useless? Lenman quotes Kagan's response to the problem:

> [The epistemic argument] threatens not only consequentialism, but indeed all plausible normative theories. For if it is in fact impossible to get a grip on the

[6] Lenman, 'Consequentialism and Cluelessness', p. 352. The Principle of Indifference is sometimes called the Principle of Insufficient Reason.

[7] W. C. Kneale, *Probability and Induction* (Oxford, 1963), p. 173.

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consequences of an act, then this problem will be inherited by all theories that give this factor any weight at all . . .[8]

In fact, the epistemic argument threatens all of practical rationality, and not just normative theories. It does not matter whether our action is guided by morality, or prudence, or anything else. If we are not entitled to use the principle of indifference, we might as well 'put down roots and act like a tree'.[9] This is the crux of the matter. On the one hand, every one of our actions has an effect on the distant future in some small way, and events in the future must have the same (moral or prudential or whatever) value as events that we can predict. If we were suddenly given information about the future we would not discount it simply because it was the future. It is arbitrary and absurd to say that unforeseen suffering does not matter just because it is unforeseen! On the other hand, Lenman seems right that there is no way for these unforeseen consequences to guide our actions. The challenge is to show that it is not irrational to act on a tiny amount of information.

However, we must be able to do this. If we cannot do this, we abandon not just consequentialism, but all rational action. So we must be rational to use the principle of indifference. Now, there are various different versions of the principle that we might defend, and it remains possible to misuse the principle. However, the cost of abandoning the principle is too high. Counterexamples to the principle of indifference show that we cannot appeal to any independent justification of the principle. There isn't one. And that should not be too surprising. Of course we do not know anything about the unforeseeable future – we can never show that it *really is* equally likely that there will be goodness as badness, and (as Lenman insists) we cannot appeal to 'objective grounds' for our subjective probabilities.

My own inclination is that we should understand the principle of indifference as being part of practical rationality, rather than a separate principle that has to be separately defended. This mirrors Strawson's response to the problem of induction.[10] Of course we will never find an independent justification of the principle of indifference, just as we will never find an independent justification of induction. Just as there are problems with the application of inductive reasoning, so there are problems applying the principle of indifference.[11] However, despite

[8] Lenman, 'Consequentialism and Cluelessness', p. 362, quoting from Shelly Kagan's *Normative Ethics* (Boulder, Colo., 1998), p. 64.

[9] Dennett's expression.

[10] P. F. Strawson, 'On justifying Induction', *Philosophical Studies* 9 (1958).

[11] We have some sense of why grueness is not the 'right' property, and similarly we have some sense of why we should think in terms of the options being simply 'better or worse' rather than divided into three categories. However, it may be impossible to defend this – perhaps this too is simply part of our concept of rationality.

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the problems about their justification and application, we cannot get by without either the principle of induction or the principle of indifference.

This reply is just an expansion on the 'partners in crime' answer – I am pointing out that everyone is a partner in crime. If that is so, it is hard to maintain that there really is a crime.

It seems that Lenman too should be committed to using the principle of indifference; however, he apparently claims that he is not:

> Here is what I suggest nonconsequentialists may plausibly say an agent should do about the invisible consequences of his or her actions. Rather than act on the profoundly shaky assumption that they cancel each other out, the agent should ordinarily simply not regard them as of moral concern . . . insofar as the agent's concern is with consequences at all, it is with the visible consequences that he or she should be, even indirectly, concerned.[12]

Lenman's non-consequentialism is supposed to be better than consequentialism in that Lenman's non-consequentialism bites the bullet and claims that unforeseeable consequences do not really matter morally. However, as I have said, this is absurd. Why would the fact that a child is tortured in the unforeseeable future rather than in the foreseeable future make the difference between it mattering or not? Of course, it could make the difference between whether an agent should be blamed for bringing it about – and perhaps this is what Lenman intends. Perhaps all he meant to say was that we are not responsible for the unforeseeable consequences. However, if that is what he wants to say – if he admits that there is value in the unforeseen future – then he himself is using the principle of indifference.[13] He is not denying that unforeseeable consequences matter objectively, but he is discounting them. This would put Lenman into the same position as the subjective consequentialist – if Lenman is not guilty of the irrationality he accuses the consequentialist of, he must mean that unforeseeable consequences do not matter at all, i.e. are not morally important in themselves, and just because they are unforeseen.

So Lenman has a choice between an absurdity (the claim that unforeseeable consequences do not matter at all) and using the principle of indifference. This is the case even if his morality is, in the main, non-consequentialist – for we need the principle of indifference for any decision, moral or not.

The only remaining problem relates to the scaling down of our reasons. Lenman argues that even if we allow the principle of indifference, the consequentialist's reasons are too weak to justify decisions. He

[12] Lenman, 'Consequentialism and Cluelessness', pp. 363–4.

[13] On p. 364 he admits that it does seem plausible that invisible consequences matter, but denies that they matter morally. However, it is hard to see how they can matter without mattering morally.

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considers the consequentialist reply that *all* our reasons have been scaled down:

> [W]hen we say these are weak reasons, we cannot mean that they are weak *relative to other reasons* we sometimes have. For *all* our (practical) reasons are subject to the same swamping by an invisible hinterland of remote effects. So the *relative* strength of reasons remains the same.[14]

And he rejects it. Lenman makes a distinction between identity-affecting actions and non-identity-affecting actions. Obviously, the identity-affecting actions are the ones with worryingly huge causal ramifications. Clearly not all our actions are identity-affecting, and thus not all our actions have such worrying causal ramifications. However, just as we do not know what the ramifications of any action will be, we do not know which are the identity-affecting actions. I do not know, when I call my friends, whether or not they are on the verge of conceiving – how many potential infants are unborn as a result of my gregarious nature? Thus, epistemologically, all my actions are on the same footing – all are potentially wonderful or disastrous – not just the ones I traditionally think of as 'moral'. If we are allowed the principle of indifference (and by Lenman's stipulation here we are), we can use it here too.

In conclusion, Lenman's complaint is not an argument against consequentialism, but rather an argument against practical rationality. I have suggested that we cannot give up on practical rationality and so need not give up on consequentialism.[15]

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[14] Lenman, 'Consequentialism and Cluelessness', p. 358.

[15] I would like to thank Brad Hooker, James Lenman and Dale Miller for comments on earlier drafts of this article, and my colleagues at CU and at the 2003 ISUS conference where I presented versions of this article.

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