Blameless Wrongdoing and Agglomeration: A Response to Streumer

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Bart Streumer argues that a certain variety of consequentialism – he calls it 'semi-global consequentialism' – is false on account of its falsely implying the possibility of 'blameless wrongdoing'. This article shows (i) that Streumer's argument is nothing new; (ii) that his presentation of the argument is misleading, since it suppresses a crucial premiss, commonly called 'agglomeration'; and (iii) that, for all Streumer says, the proponent of semi-global consequentialism may easily resist his argument by rejecting agglomeration.

Bart Streumer argues against a view that he calls 'semi-global consequentialism'.[1] The details of the view are not important here; suffice it to say that the distinguishing mark of semi-global consequentialism is that it 'covers' – that is, it has something to say about – everything that 'agents can bring about'.[2] Thus, Streumer distinguishes it from (fully) global consequentialism, which covers *everything*, including those things that no agent can bring about.

Streumer's objection to semi-global consequentialism is that it falsely implies the possibility of what Derek Parfit has called 'blameless wrongdoing'.[3] Parfit gives the following example.

> Clare could either give her child some benefit, or give much greater benefits to some unfortunate stranger. Because she loves her child, she benefits him rather than the stranger.[4]

Clare's benefiting the stranger would have had better consequences than her benefiting her child. Therefore, she acted wrongly, according to consequentialism. However, Clare has a consequentialist defence: although she acted wrongly, her doing so was a result of her having a certain disposition – roughly, the disposition to love her child – and that disposition is the one that she ought to have, by consequentialist lights, since her having any other disposition would have worse consequences. Parfit concludes that Clare's wrongdoing is blameless; we cannot blame

[1] Bart Streumer, 'Can Consequentialism Cover Everything?', *Utilitas* 15 (2003).
[2] Ibid., p. 241.
[3] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984).
[4] Ibid., p. 32.

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her for acting in a way that arose out of her having a disposition that she ought to have, even though she acted wrongly.

In summary, blameless wrongdoing occurs, on Parfit's view, when the following claims hold: (i) some person ought to perform a certain action; (ii) the same person ought to have a certain disposition; and (iii) the person's having the disposition prevents her performing the action. Streumer's objection is that these three claims lead to a contradiction, and hence that blameless wrongdoing is impossible.

Streumer's argument depends on two principles. The first builds on the idea that, if a person ought to do one thing and she ought to do another, then she ought to do both. Following Bernard Williams I shall call this principle 'agglomeration'.[5] We may state it as follows:

Agglomeration: If $O_S(p)$ and $O_S(q)$, then $O_S(p\&q)$,

where S is some person, p and q are propositions, and $O_S(p)$ means that the person S ought to see to it that p (alternatively, it is obligatory for S that p).

The second principle is commonly expressed by the slogan 'ought implies can'. Following David Brink, I shall call this principle 'voluntarism'.[6] We may state it as follows:

Voluntarism: If $O_S(p)$, then $\Diamond_S(p)$,

where $\Diamond_S(p)$ means that it is possible, in the relevant sense, for S to see to it that p.

Streumer's argument shows that, given these two principles, the claims of semi-global consequentialism regarding the case of Clare lead to a contradiction. Writing L for 'Clare loves her child', B for 'Clare benefits the stranger', and C for Clare, this is easily shown as follows:

1. $O_C(L)$	[premiss]
2. $O_C(B)$	[premiss]
3. $\neg\Diamond_C(L\&B)$	[premiss]
4. $O_C(L\&B)$	[1, 2, agglomeration]
5. $\Diamond_C(L\&B)$	[4, voluntarism]
6. $\neg\Diamond_C(L\&B)$ & $\Diamond_C(L\&B)$	[3, 5]

Although Streumer's argument rests implicitly on both principles, he makes explicit reference to only one of them: namely, voluntarism. The other principle, agglomeration, is a suppressed assumption in his presentation of the argument. This is unfortunate; for it may give the

[5] Bernard Williams, 'Ethical Consistency', *Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 39 (1965).

[6] David Brink, 'Moral Conflict and its Structure', *The Philosophical Review* 103 (1994).

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impression that semi-global consequentialism is in more dire straits than, in fact, it is. Streumer claims, for example, that his argument shows that 'if "ought" implies "can" then semi-global consequentialism is false'.[7] But that claim is, at best, highly misleading, since it suggests that these two – voluntarism and semi-global consequentialism – are inconsistent, which plainly they are not. It is only once agglomeration is thrown into the mix that any inconsistency arises. To be sure, proponents of semi-global consequentialism could avoid contradiction by rejecting voluntarism. But, logically speaking at least, they could equally well avoid contradiction by rejecting agglomeration. And this latter option is not given a fair hearing by Streumer; indeed, it is not given any kind of hearing at all.

Streumer seems to be aware that agglomeration has provoked some philosophical controversy. In a footnote, he stresses that the 'oughts' in question are of the 'overall' variety.[8] And it appears that, in so doing, his aim is to forestall purported counterexamples to agglomeration of the following kind: You have promised to meet a friend of yours for lunch; but on the way there you encounter an injured person by the roadside; you ought to meet your friend and you ought to help the injured person, but it is not the case that you ought to do both (because you cannot do both). A standard way in which to defuse such purported counterexamples is to invoke a distinction between prima facie obligations and overall obligations, and to maintain that agglomeration holds only for the latter.[9] In the example, you may have prima facie obligations both to help the injured person and to meet your friend, but you have only one overall obligation – to help the injured person, say.

Thus, Streumer seems confident that, so long as we are careful to restrict our attention to overall 'oughts', we will not find any counterexamples to agglomeration. It is odd, however, that he should be so confident when there is a putative counterexample right under his nose: namely, Parfit's example of Clare. Proponents of semi-global consequentialism may well argue as follows: Clare ought to love her child and she ought to benefit the stranger, but it is not the case that she ought to do both (because she cannot do both); therefore, agglomeration is false. In order to resist this argument against agglomeration, it appears that Streumer must first reject semi-global consequentialism; but that is the very point at issue! Hence, Streumer's argument begs the question against semi-global consequentialism. Of course, if Streumer

[7] Streumer, 'Consequentialism', p. 243.
[8] Ibid., p. 242, n. 22.
[9] See, for example, Sven Ove Hannson, 'Deontic Logic without Misleading Alethic Analogies: Part I', *Logique et Analyse* 31 (1988).

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had provided some independent reasons in favour of agglomeration – if he had shown that rejecting agglomeration gets us into hot water elsewhere – then that would be a different story, and the charge of begging the question would not stick. But Streumer fails to provide any such reasons; he simply assumes that agglomeration is true.

It is worth noting that a precedent for such an argument against agglomeration may be found in the literature on so-called 'moral dilemmas'. A moral dilemma – on at least some analyses – is a situation in which a person ought to do each of two things but cannot do both. (Depending on how we flesh out the analysis, it may be that blameless wrongdoing is a special kind of moral dilemma.) A casual sampling of the literature on moral dilemmas reveals that Streumer's argument against blameless wrongdoing is nothing new; structurally identical arguments have commonly been given against the possibility of moral dilemmas.[10] Such a sampling reveals also that a common strategy for defenders of moral dilemmas is to reject agglomeration. For example, Brink argues that rejecting agglomeration 'may be a cost that we could bear'.[11] Now, perhaps Streumer disagrees; perhaps he believes the cost is unbearable. But if so, he owes us an argument. Why is agglomeration so indispensable?

In conclusion, then, I doubt that agglomeration has the kind of 'deal-breaker' status that Streumer implicitly attributes to it. Agglomeration is not so potent as to sink an otherwise buoyant moral view; at any rate, Streumer has not shown it to be such. Contrary to what he claims, the mere observation that, given voluntarism, blameless wrongdoing is inconsistent with agglomeration does not constitute a knockdown objection against semi-global consequentialism. So far as I can tell, it is not much of an objection at all.

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[10] See, for example, Brink, 'Moral Conflict', p. 228.
[11] Ibid., p. 237.

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