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PETTIT ON CONSEQUENTIALISM AND UNIVERSALIZABILITY

ABSTRACT. Philip Pettit has argued that universalizability entails consequentialism. I criticise the argument for relying on a question-begging reading of the impartiality of universalization. A revised form of the argument can be constructed by relying on preference-satisfaction rationality, rather than on impartiality. But this revised argument succumbs to an ambiguity in the notion of a preference (or desire). I compare the revised argument to an earlier argument of Pettit's for consequentialism that appealed to the theoretical virtue of simplicity, and I raise questions about the force of appeal to notions like simplicity and rationality in moral argument.

KEY WORDS: consequentialism, desire, impartiality, rationality, universalizability

Consequentialism and universalizability are both concerned to make morality equal, universal, and impartial. Both seem to displace *oneself* from the centre of the moral universe. Thus they appear altruistic and as somehow basic to morality. Yet they do this in different ways, arguably. Consequentialism does so by demanding we look at the bearing of our actions on everyone, without priority for our own case. Universalizability insists that we all have the same duties, so no one can claim a privileged exemption from duties he expects of others. Both have a vision, but a different vision, of impartiality. And they can conflict. Consider that according to consequentialism, just as there is nothing special about *me* when it comes to the effects of my action, so there is nothing special about *me and my duty* when it comes to *the duty to perform the action*. If – as universalizability requires – other people's duties to perform the universally prescribed action are no more or less stringent than mine, then impartiality requires that I not perform my duty, if, by doing so, I can improve *overall* compliance with duty. But doesn't that conflict with the impartial ideal of universalizability that one not exempt oneself from duties one expects of others?

Philosophers sympathetic to both universalizability and consequentialism have often suspected some deep connection between them. Peter Singer believes that the (supposed) impartialist requirement of ethics to consider the interests of all creatures and not merely one's own, is good reason for treating utilitarianism as presumptively the best ethical theory.¹ R. M. Hare, more ambitious, argues that the logic of the ordinary moral term 'ought' entails universalizability, which in turn entails utilitarianism.² Hare's argument has not found much support. However, recently, another consequentialist with a strong Australian connection, Philip Pettit, has revived in a different way, the attempt to derive consequentialism from universalizability.³ This paper is an examination of Pettit's argument.

Unlike Hare and Singer, Pettit is not a utilitarian, so his argument is to that extent less ambitious. He distinguishes between the 'theory of the good' – the theory of what is good or valuable – and the 'theory of the right' – the theory of what makes an action the morally right action to perform. The two theories are closely connected. Indeed in one place Pettit characterises the theory of the right as a theory 'about what individual and institutional agents should do by way of responding to valuable properties'.⁴ The big issue in the theory of the right, according to Pettit, is whether we are to *promote* good generally or *instantiate* good in our own actions.⁵ Or more precisely, whether good should be promoted *at the expense, if necessary, of instantiating it*, or whether instantiation should always take precedence over promotion if the two clash. (I shall follow Pettit in glossing 'promotion' as the maximization of expected value.) Most of the time instantiating harmonises with promoting. Among the ways for me best to promote veracity is by telling the truth myself. But there are cases – Pettit calls them 'perverse' – where this is not so. A politician may sometimes better promote veracity by lying to conceal past lies, preserving a (illusory) good example. Police may sometimes deter criminals by breaching the law themselves. And so on.

Those who advocate these breaches of normal duty in order to promote greater duty compliance are consequentialists. Those who hold that (at least sometimes) I should *instantiate* veracity or law-abidingness, even when doing so entails a greater number of lies and more criminality, are taking a non-consequentialist stance. Pettit's aim is to show that if one universalizes some action one judges right, then one must agree, in perverse cases, to promote that action at the expense of oneself instantiating it. That is, one must be a consequentialist.