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Consequentialist Moral Theory

THE CHARACTER OF CONSEQUENTIALISM

In the next three chapters we shall be examining the claims of the different forms of moral theory that emerge from moral philosophy. Consequentialist, deontological and aretaic moral theories each fasten on one of the facets of action that we normally take to be relevant to assessing its moral worth. One of the tasks moral theory might usefully accomplish is to set out in greater detail how each of these facets of action contributed to moral decision making and judgement. However, both consequentialist and deontological moral theories in our time have been offered as ways of simplifying and re-fashioning ordinary moral thought through the means of showing how their favoured dimensions of moral assessment somehow eliminate or ground the others. This is particularly true of consequentialist moral theory, which has aimed to show how forms of moral assessment other than weighing the worth of the results of action are at best provisional, or at worst reducible to consequentialist reasoning.

We shall approach consequentialist and deontological moral theories in this light: as attempts to reconstruct or reground moral thought on the basis of the exclusive role or priority of one facet of action and moral assessment. Seen in this way such theories are then bound up with the pretensions of moral philosophy itself. In offering a form of moral theory with these aims, philosophy can offer a definitive re-ordering and grounding of moral insight, replacing ‘intuitive’ judgement by theoretically sound deductions and calculations. We shall see in this respect a notable difference between representative consequentialist and deontological theories, on the one hand, and aretaic theories on the other. We shall discover that the last are typically built on quite a different picture of
the relation between ordinary moral judgement and philosophical reflection and accordingly have quite different goals.

There are many versions of consequentialist moral theory, but if they are to achieve the aims described above they must share some common structural properties (compare Frey 1984a:4-5, Sumner 1987:171-3). They must posit some morally important good or goods which are clearly detectable as the results of action. If this good or goods are in the ultimate the sole source of moral worth and sole topic of moral assessment then they must have various features. First, their presence or absence must be detectable without reference to consideration of the motives or intrinsic nature of acts. Second, judging the absolute or relative worth of the goods resulting from acts must be possible by reference to the character of these goods alone, without reliance on other forms of putative moral judgement. This in turn suggests, third, that the morally relevant good or goods produced by conduct be numerically measurable, so that it is nothing other than the amount or quantity of good resulting from action that determines its rightness. Fourth this leads us to conclude that if the theory opts for one intrinsic good it must be strictly measurable across the various contexts of its occurrence; or if it posits a number of intrinsic goods, they must be strictly commensurable, so that their presence as the results of action gives us varying, comparable and quantifiable measures of a single overarching good. With a good resulting from action of this kind and the assertion that the amount of this good makes actions choiceworthy or not, the theory finally needs an appropriate mathematical function which determines what the optimal state of this good is. This function is typically that of seeking the maximum amount of good (though there are versions of consequentialism which offer different ways of determining the optimal state – so long as these are mathematically expressible the essence of the approach is not disturbed). For simplicity’s sake ‘maximising the good’ will be taken in this chapter as the appropriate mathematical function of the good that consequentialism seeks.

These various ideas produce a simple core to consequentialist theories. There is a single intrinsic good (or if many intrinsic goods, they are all strictly commensurable). Actions are right if they promote the greatest quantity of this good. The hegemony consequentialism exercises over other forms of moral assessment now becomes clear. Morally important motives of action tend to collapse into one: the desire to promote the good as defined by