

# PHI 202 | An overview of the semester so far

Michal Masny | 15 Oct 2020

## THEME 1: CONSEQUENTIALISM AND ITS CRITICS

**Normative ethics** is a systematic study of what is morally right or wrong, good or bad, praiseworthy or blameworthy, and why.

**Consequentialism** says that whether an action is right or wrong depends exclusively on the action's consequences. **Utilitarianism** is a type of consequentialism. It makes a commitment to maximising: an action is right just in case it has the best consequences. It also adopts a specific theory of how to assess the goodness of the consequences: on the basis of aggregate well-being.

**Well-being** is what is non-instrumentally good (and bad) for a person, what makes their life go well (and badly) for them. According to **hedonism**, what is good for you are pleasures. According to the **desire-fulfilment theory**, what is good for is having your desires satisfied. According to the **objective list theory**, what is good for you are not just pleasures, but also things like relationships, knowledge, awareness of beauty.

We have discussed a number of critiques of consequentialism:

(1) It is **too demanding**. Certain actions seem to be 'supererogatory': beyond the call of duty. And it is perhaps important to have some 'moral freedom'.

(2) It makes it **impossible for us to have valuable relationships** or else **leads to moral schizophrenia**. (Michael Stocker)

(3) It has an **implausible commitment to moral aggregation**. Summing up harms and benefits to different people just doesn't make sense. (John Taurek)

(4) It is **ok to be partial to our own interests and the interests of our loved ones**. (John Taurek)

(5) Whether an action is right depends on **how individuals are affected**, not on how people are affected in the aggregate. (T. M. Scanlon)

(6) It **ignore things that intuitively matter** to the permissibility of actions, such as:

- (i) **the agent's intentions**: are the effects intended or merely foreseen? (Warren Quinn)
- (ii) **how an outcome was brought about**: killing or letting die? (Judith Thomson); is the death causally upstream or causally downstream from the action? (Frances Kamm)
- (iii) **who brought the outcome about** (Bernard Williams)

(7) It makes it **impossible for us to have genuine commitments**. (Bernard Williams)

## THEME 2: PRAISE, BLAME, AND THE LIMITS OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

According to the **Control Principle**, two people should not be assessed differently (praised, blamed, punished) if the only differences between them and how they acted are factors beyond their control. (Immanuel Kant)

According to Thomas Nagel, **moral luck** pervades most of our moral assessments. But almost nothing about what a person does seems to be under their control. Thus, applying the Control Principle consistently threatens to undermine our ordinary moral practices.