

Broadening Consequentialism for Environmental and Medical Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Utilitarianism has the strength of taking into account all the foreseeable consequences of actions, but the weakness of heeding only their impacts on subjective states such as happiness and unhappiness. This omits many impacts of positive and negative value for human beings, let alone non-humans. Thus it fails to take into account the value of people's lives developing in accordance with their autonomous wishes, one of the emphases of modern medical ethics. John Stuart Mill wrote as if autonomy and happiness co-incided, people being the best judges of where their happiness lies. But there is no guarantee of this co-incidence. The omission of autonomy also points to the omission within utilitarianism of the value of the fulfilment of people's capacities, insofar as these are central to their humanity. Ignoring the value of fulfilled capacities suggests that people are living well if their lives are pleasant but many central capacities are underdeveloped, whether through lack of education, of encouragement, or of love and care. Nor should subjective states be prioritised as favoured by utilitarianism, for happiness is compatible with a stunted life, and unhappiness with one fulfilled in most but not all respects.

Thus a broader value-theory is needed than that of utilitarianism, including the fulfilment of capacities central to one's inherited nature. This brings in the flourishing of non-human creatures as well as of humans. The capacity of captured wild animals to function in the wild is, on this basis, of significant value, even if the fulfilment of reflective capacities has greater value. Moral standing should be seen as attaching to whatever has a good of its own, and thus of whatever is alive [1]. The range of ethical concern extends to future creatures, as well as current ones, and all the foreseeable impacts of current actions and policies should be taken into account when decisions are being made. This already helps show how consequentialism may comprise an acceptable environmental ethic.

Some philosophers, however, maintain that wholes such as ecosystems and species are valuable and are not yet taken into account. However, both ecosystems and species can be understood as composed of their living members, present and future, and the good of all of these is recognised by the broadened consequentialism just presented. Ecosystems also include non-living components, but there is no need (or point) in ascribing intrinsic value to these. Ecosystems, including their non-living components, are of great importance, but their importance is instrumental to the lives and the flourishing of their living members. As ecosystems, they lack a good of their own, partly because they have no clear boundaries and criteria of identity, and partly because they lack inherited capacities by reference to which their good could be appraised. Species, understood as populations, include both their present and future members, the flourishing of all of which counts within broad consequentialism. They can alternatively be construed as abstractions, but have no value as such. Thus broad consequentialism omits nothing of value, and potentially comprises an acceptable environmental ethic.

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Text

The best-known form of consequentialism is utilitarianism, which shares with other forms of consequentialism the characteristic of making the rightness of actions turn on the overall foreseeable consequences of actions, policies and omissions. At one time some utilitarians used to maintain that all the consequences of action (etc.) were relevant. But as James Lenman has argued, this would make it wrong for a couple to marry if, in consequence, one of their descendants three hundred years later became a mass-murderer [2]. This objection undermines forms of consequentialism that make rightness turn on all the consequences, but not forms that make it turn on the foreseeable consequences. Yet it is appropriate that these are the pivotal consequences, because it is these and only these consequences that can carry reasons for (or against) action that can and (on many views) should be heeded by current agents.

However, utilitarianism selects too narrow a range of consequences, focussing simply on such subjective states as happiness and

unhappiness. It thus omits many impacts of positive value for human beings, let alone for nonhumans. Thus it fails to take into account the value of people's lives developing in accordance with their autonomous wishes, and being the kind of life that they have chosen. But this is one of the central emphases of modern medical ethics, in which respect for patient autonomy is often regarded as a principle of equal importance to beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. Certainly John Stuart Mill wrote in 'Utilitarianism' as if the value of autonomy could be grounded in the promotion of happiness, as a person is always the best judge of where their happiness lies [3]. But there are many cases where this generalisation does not hold good (including many suicide attempts). Accordingly the range of impacts to be taken into account should include the development of people's autonomy; and theories of ethics with value theories too narrow to recognise this should be modified so as to include it. Indeed only if this is acknowledged can consequentialism be reconciled with modern medical ethics.

Autonomy is importantly more than the mere satisfaction of preferences; it involves a developed capacity for reflective decision-making grounded in values of one's own, and much of its value is to be found in such a developed capacity. Some writers suggest that utilitarians should simply replace happiness with preference-satisfaction, as if in that way utilitarianism would promote the good of the individual concerned. But that is an illusion. Health, for example, is clearly a component of an individual's good, but the preferences of many individuals are inimical to their health, and the satisfaction of those preferences is antithetical to their good. Accordingly, despite the superficial similarity of preference-satisfaction to autonomy, the way to amend utilitarianism to make good its deficiencies does not lie in replacing traditional 'hedonic' utilitarianism with preference-satisfaction utilitarianism.

The regrettable omission of autonomy from utilitarianism exemplifies the omission of other valuable conditions in the form of the fulfilment of people's capacities, insofar as these are central to their humanity, which should also be included. Ignoring the value of fulfilled capacities suggests that people are living well if their lives are pleasant but many central capacities are underdeveloped, whether through lack of education, of encouragement, or of love and care. The inclusion of fulfilled capacities supplies a much-enhanced value-theory and at the same time offers a much more cogent form of consequentialism. How to specify the relevant generic capacities, and how to omit specific undesirable ones cannot be discussed here; I have attempted all this elsewhere, and can refer those interested to books such as Attfield [4,5]. Here it should be stressed instead that subjective states such as happiness and unhappiness, while important, should not be prioritised over fulfilled capacities, for happiness is compatible with a stunted life, and unhappiness with one fulfilled in most but not quite all respects.

Another way of looking at the capacities of which the fulfilment is valuable is that these are the capacities central to people's inherited nature. But nonhuman creatures also have inherited natures, and it appears arbitrary to include the fulfilled capacities of human beings and ignore those of non-human creatures, even if the fulfilment of reflective and of artistic capacities may be thought to have greater value. The capacities of nonhumans differ in accordance with the different species in question, but if we care about the good of nonhumans (as early utilitarians such as Bentham creditably did, at least for sentient creatures), we should be concerned about the impacts of action and inaction on these kinds of fulfilled capacities as well as those of human beings. For example, the capacity of captive wild animals to function in the wild is, on this basis, of significant value. Here we begin to discover how broadened forms of consequentialism can begin to satisfy at least some of the emphases of both animal ethics and environmental ethics. For animal ethicists usually recognise the value of such fulfilments, and so do those environmental ethicists who are not committed to anthropocentrism.

Particular forms of consequentialism need to be equipped with a theory of moral standing and a theory of value. What I am suggesting is that our theory of moral standing should include everything with a good of its own, that is, all living creatures (present and future), as argued by Goodpaster; and that the good of the same range of beings should figure in our theory of value. Broad consequentialism will recognise both this theory of moral standing and this theory of value, as was also argued in Attfield [4,5]. Much further work would be needed to spell out the good of the various kinds of nonhuman species, and thus the detail of

this theory of value, but that cannot be addressed here, in view of the need to respond to potential objections about the adequacy of this approach. But it should be explained that the inclusion of future nonhumans in this theory of moral standing, and of their good in such a theory of value, means that where broadened consequentialism is understood to need to be hitched to such theories of moral standing and of value, the foreseeable impacts of action and inaction on this range of goods will and must figure in its account of right or justified action.

My central claim is that such a broadened form of consequentialism, once spelt out and applied in greater detail, supplies a satisfactory environmental ethic, grounded in the promotion of the good of all living creatures, present and future. Thus it will defend the preservation of species, since the extinction of species precludes the existence and thus the good of future species-members; and it will defend the protection of ecosystems and habitats, since the continued existence of all nonhuman creatures depends on the continued existence either of current ecosystems and habitats or of habitable adjusted forms of them. Yet this broadening of consequentialism, it should at once be said, is far more than a manipulation of simpler theories to make consequentialism fit environmentalism, for the broadening of (for example) moral standing was argued for on independent grounds by Goodpaster, and the broadening of the value-theory of utilitarians is supported by many consequentialists simply to supply consequentialism with a more adequate theory of what is good for human beings than unrefined utilitarianism can offer. The extension that proceeds to include the fulfilled capacities of nonhuman creatures is little more than the logical conclusion of these two moves.

However, various objections are likely to be raised to this theory when offered as an environmental ethic. Some might well suggest that its emphasis on the good of individuals fails to pay adequate recognition to the importance of wholes, widely recognised within environmental ethics. More specifically, it could be held deficient in not taking proper account of ecosystems, habitats and species, or possibly of the biosphere, conceived as the system of ecosystems. These would be serious defects if they stood up. The rest of this presentation will seek to supply responses.

The first part of a reply to all these objections might take the form of the claim that species, ecosystems and even the biosphere simply consists of their living members. This reply will not suffice as it stands, but for different reasons in each case. Thus most species have good prospects of persisting beyond the lives of their current living members, even though all their members are living creatures. But this is not true of ecosystems and habitats, which also include non-living constituents such as rocks, parts of the soil, water and air, and their systemic relations. The same is also largely true of the biosphere, which includes the earth's surface, its oceans and its atmosphere.

However, if the suggestion is that the good of (for example) ecosystems should be added to the revised form of consequentialism introduced and defended above, several problems arise. Ecosystems are admittedly of great importance, and indispensable for the continued existence of the living creatures that populate them. But this importance can reasonably be considered a matter of instrumental (or derivative) value. Before we could consider them as having intrinsic value, we would have to hold that they had a good of their own, independent of the goods of their living members. But in fact, as James Sterba has argued, ecosystems lack criteria of identity, just as they mostly lack boundaries. If, for example, a river is an ecosystem, then should this ecosystem be

understood as including some or all of the tributary rivers that flow into the main river, and as including the distributaries that diverge in its delta (if it has one)? And are rivers the same ecosystem when they flow placidly, as the Danube does through Vienna, and turbidly, as it does when flowing through the confined space of the Iron Gates downstream? There again, when humans modify a river by canalising part of it, is the same ecosystem still present, or a different one? If these questions do not admit of a ready answer, then identifying the good of an ecosystem becomes an even more elusive matter. Certainly ecosystems fulfil their function better when they are moderately stable across time, and varied in their composition, but these characteristics can be understood as features of what is instrumentally good about ecosystems.

It was acknowledged above that ecosystems have constituents additional to their living members. But can anyone defensibly claim that these entities (such as rocks, water and air) have a good of their own? Good air, for example, is air that is healthy for those living creatures that need to breathe it and (in some cases) fly through it; yet this, once again, is instrumental goodness. Or does intrinsic value attach not to the components of an ecosystem but to 'the system that they are together', as someone once wrote (I forget who)? Yet systems do not have intrinsic value either; their value turns on the value of those beings, whether human or non-human, who stand to benefit from them.

Before I move on to species, I should also mention the danger of double-counting. If we attempt to expand consequentialism so that it includes both the good of individual creatures and the good of their systems (in the form of ecosystems), then even if we can overcome the problems already mentioned, we are in danger of counting the good of each creature twice over, once for itself, and once again as a member of an ecosystem. But forms of consequentialism need to avoid such double-counting. It was unfair when graduates of some Universities had two votes, one as a citizen and another as a member of (say) Oxford or Cambridge University; and plural voting was rightly abolished for that reason. We should not re-introduce it in efforts to give ecosystems their due, particularly when they are fully represented already through the intrinsic and instrumental value of their living members.

It is time now to turn to species, where the issue of non-living members does not arise to the same degree, for no one is likely to suggest that former members, or members who have died add to the intrinsic value of a species. It has already been granted that species consist not only of their current members but also of their future members. So, if they are populations, they are populations only in this sense. But the broadened form of consequentialism defended here already takes into account the good of current and future living organisms, insofar as it can be foreseen by agents. So the fact that species include their future members is not a reason to give them additional recognition.

It does, however, explain the importance of not extinguishing a species by killing its last pair or group of members. For the value that there could have been in the lives of future members of the species depends on these members surviving and being able to reproduce. This means that when a species is dwindling in numbers, the value of the remaining members is greater than that if members of plentiful species. It is not greater intrinsically, but derivatively, because the value of all possible future members depends on them. (I am disregarding for present purposes the theoretical possibility of regenerating extinct species from fossil DNA).

Species can, of course, be considered as abstractions, such as 'humanity' and 'caninity' or 'doghood'. But no one seriously thinks that abstractions have either a good of their own or any kind of value. So I conclude that there is no need to expand the value-theory defended here to include species in addition to their members (which, if it were possible, would again involve double-counting), nor to expand the broadened form of consequentialism defended here accordingly.

Now for a few final words on the biosphere. Viewed as the system of ecosystems, there is no reason to add the biosphere to the bearers of intrinsic value. But viewed as the matrix of all life, the biosphere must be regarded as having extremely high value. (Much the same could be said of the evolutionary process, as Holmes Rolston has done: see Rolston [6,7]. But this does not mean that it has intrinsic or independent value. Its value depends on the individual lives that it nourishes and makes possible. So, as long as we include them and their flourishing, we are already including the biosphere, necessary as it is for their lives. And that completes my defence of the broadened form of consequentialism against objections that it is not broad enough for environmental ethics [8,9].

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