The Deficiency of Consequentialist Moral Explanations

Benjamin Sachs

Program in Environmental Studies and Center for Bioethics, New York University

I argue elsewhere that between the best version of consequentialism and the best version of non-consequentialism there will be no differences except in their respective moral explanations (Sachs 2010). Given this, it is crucial to determine which of these two theories has the superior set of moral explanations. In my paper I argue that the moral explanations available to the consequentialist are quite bad.

A ‘moral explanation’ is a claim to the effect that moral fact M holds in virtue of non-moral fact N. Necessarily, every version of consequentialism holds that any given fact about the moral permissibility or impermissibility of an action holds in virtue of a fact about the relative goodness of the outcome of that that action compared to the goodness of the outcomes that would have resulted from the other actions that were available to the agent.

I argue that all explanations of this sort have two problems:

1) Sometimes an act of wrongdoing has an object—i.e., an individual who is wronged. This explains why some people have a special status (a claim to an apology, e.g.) with respect to some wrongs. However, a failure to maximize the good is not something that is done to anyone. So the non-moral facts that the consequentialist picks out as explaining the moral facts do not designate objects of wrongdoing and consequently do not explain the fact that some wrongdoing is wrongdoing.
2) They are counterintuitive. If I sneak up behind Jones and stab him in cold blood, it seems wrong to say that I’ve done wrong on account of the fact that the outcome of my action was less good than some other action I could have undertaken.

Both of these problems are obvious, yet the first of them has never been mentioned (as far as I know) and the second has never been given an in-depth discussion. This is to be regretted, as there is much to be said about each. For instance, consequentialists often say that actions like stabbings are wrong because of the harm they cause. This seems like a much better explanation; is the consequentialist entitled to it? How much normative weight are we to attach to explanatory intuitions? At a more general level, we should want to know what kind of explanation we’re after here, since it’s clearly not causal explanation. My paper gives these matters the attention they deserve.

Works Cited