

Consequentialism and the Standard Story of Action

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Abstract I challenge the common picture of the “Standard Story” of Action as a neutral account of action within which debates in normative ethics can take place. I unpack three commitments that are implicit in the Standard Story, and demonstrate that these commitments together entail a teleological conception of reasons, upon which all reasons to act are reasons to bring about states of affairs. Such a conception of reasons, in turn, supports a consequentialist framework for the evaluation of action, upon which the normative status of actions is properly determined through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as better and worse. This covert support for consequentialism from the theory of action, I argue, has had a distorting effect on debates in normative ethics. I then present challenges to each of these three commitments, a challenge to the first commitment by T.M. Scanlon, a challenge to the second by recent interpreters of Anscombe, and a new challenge to the third commitment that requires only minimal and prima facie plausible modifications to the Standard Story. The success of any one of the challenges, I demonstrate, is

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sufficient to block support from the theory of action for the teleological conception of reasons and the consequentialist evaluative framework. I close by demonstrating the pivotal role that such arguments grounded in the theory of action play in the current debate between evaluator-relative consequentialists and their critics.

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1 Introduction

G.E.M. Anscombe issued a cryptic warning 60 years ago against the dangers of doing moral philosophy without first getting clear ‘what a human action is at all’ (1958: 5). In particular, she was concerned that certain assumptions about the nature of intentional action propagated by Sidgwick and adopted by those who follow commit them to ‘*consequentialism*, as I name it’ (1958: 12). Such a warning can seem puzzling. Action theory attempts to provide an account of what actions—in particular intentional actions—are. Moral philosophy, and normative ethics more generally, attempts to provide an account of which actions we ought to perform. How can an account of what actions *are* commit us to one particular family of theories about the actions we *ought* to perform? To the contrary, having firmly in place a default theory of what actions are may well seem to simplify and clarify the task of normative ethics, allowing ethicists to focus their debate on central questions concerning which actions we ought, and morally ought, to perform. And we do seem to have such a default theory, the so-called ‘Standard Story’ of action, which has dominated work in the theory of action since its articulation and defense by Donald Davidson and Carl Hempel in the 1960s.¹ This Standard Story has come in for a great deal of criticism, but it remains the default theory of action and the framework within which much of the debate in normative ethics is carried out.

Nonetheless, Anscombe is right. The picture upon which the default theory of action provides a shared, neutral framework within which the debate in normative ethics can take place is profoundly misleading.² Any such account of what actions are must, confronted with Anscombe’s “Why?” question, specify what an adequate answer to the question involves—what rationalizes the performance of an intentional action by the agent.³ The Standard Story account of what intentional actions are is thus in part an account of how actions are rationalized, and this account of the rationalization of action, I will show, generates a powerful presumption in favor of consequentialist moral theories, theories that determine the

¹ See Davidson (1980) and Hempel (1961). A thorough recent defense is offered by Smith (1994, 2012).

² A related case for such a skewing of the debate has been made by Brewer (2009: 14).

³ Anscombe’s claim, more specifically, is that an intentional action is an action ‘to which a certain sense of the question “Why?” is given application; the sense...in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting’ (2000: 9).

moral status of actions through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as better and worse.

My argument will proceed by first making explicit three commitments that are implicit in the standard form of the Standard Story. I will then demonstrate that these commitments together entail a teleological conception of reasons, upon which all reasons to act are reasons to bring about states of affairs. Such a conception of reasons, in turn, supports a consequentialist framework for the evaluation of action, upon which the normative status of actions is determined through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as in some respect better or worse.⁴ Consequentialist moral theory falls out of such a framework as a virtual corollary.

In the second half of the paper I take up these three commitments implicit in the standard form of the Standard Story, and present challenges to each of them. Challenges to the first two commitments have been developed by T. M. Scanlon (Commitment 1) and many recent interpreters of Anscombe (Commitment 2); I develop a new challenge to Commitment 3 that requires only a modest and *prima facie* plausible modification to the Standard Story. The success of any one of these challenges, I will argue, is sufficient to undermine any presumption by the theory of action in favor of the teleological conception of reasons and consequentialist moral theory. I close by demonstrating the pivotal role that such arguments based in the theory of action play in the current debate between new wave, evaluator-relative consequentialists and their critics.

2 The Standard Story Case for Consequentialism

Work in the theory of action over the past half century has been dominated by attempts to provide plausible answers to two questions. Wittgenstein's Question asks 'what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?' (1953: 161). The question is often interpreted as asking what needs to be added to a mere happening or movement, e.g., my arm rising or a matchbox moving, such that what occurs is an intentional action, a raising of my arm or my moving the matchbox.⁵ Anscombe's question is prompted by recognition that intentional action is properly characterized by what gives application to a sense of the question 'Why?' that enquires into the agent's reason for acting. A compelling account of intentional action is thought to require answers to both questions: What must be added to a mere movement for the result to be an action, and what constitutes an acceptable answer to Anscombe's "Why?" question? The standard

⁴ What is taken to be 'attractive about consequentialism,' Mark Schroder writes, is that 'it explains facts about what people ought to do in terms of facts about what is good' (2007: 287). The consequentialist framework for the evaluation of action establishes this explanatory priority of the evaluation of states of affairs to the evaluation of actions. See also Portmore's case (2011: 111–116) for the centrality of such an explanatory commitment to any substantive consequentialist moral theory, and Colyvan, Cox, and Steele's useful contrast between such an explanatory theory and a merely descriptive model (2010: 35–39). For an argument that challenges the importance of this explanatory commitment to consequentialism, see Dreier (2011).

⁵ Michael Smith formulates the question this way: 'What makes it the case that in (say) moving his finger, an agent acts, as opposed to merely being involved in something's happening?' (2012: 387).

form of the Standard Story of Action purports to provide such answers. The Story maintains that there is no difference between a mere movement (e.g., an arm rising) and an intentional action (e.g., my raising my arm) as bodily movements, happenings in the world. Intentional actions are instead distinguished by their antecedents, desires and beliefs that non-deviantly cause and rationalize such movements. Michael Smith characterizes the answer provided by the Standard Story as follows:

The standard story's answer is that the difference lies in the causal etiology of what happens when a body moves...we establish whether an agent acts by seeing whether this bodily movement is caused and rationalized in the right kind of way by some desire that he has that things be a certain way, and some means-end belief. (2012: 387)⁶

What distinguishes a mere rising of an arm from a raising of an arm, then, is that the movement, the rising, is caused in the latter case, but not the former, by beliefs and desires of the agent, theoretical and practical propositional attitudes that together rationalize the action. Why did I flip the switch? I desired that the room be illuminated, and believed that flipping the switch would illuminate the room. Such attitudes supply the agent's reason in acting, thereby providing an answer to Anscombe's question along with Wittgenstein's. On the standard form of the Standard Story, it is the relevant beliefs and desires of the agent that both cause and rationalize movements, distinguishing them as intentional actions. In what follows I will focus entirely on the rationalizing rather than the causal role played by such attitudes, and make this commitment to the rationalizing role of beliefs and desires explicit: Commitment (1) intentional actions are rationalized by the relevant desires and beliefs of the agent.

The standard form of this Standard Story incorporates the prevailing accounts of desires/preferences and beliefs as propositional attitudes, and of the contrasting directions of fit that distinguish these fundamental practical and theoretical attitudes. Beliefs and desires are captured in propositional form, with "that clauses" containing states of affairs as their contents. I believe that you are telling the truth, and I desire that you tell me the truth. Thus, the Standard Story maintains not only Commitment (1) intentional actions are rationalized by the relevant beliefs and desires of the agent, but also Commitment (2) these attitudes that rationalize actions are propositional attitudes, attitudes meaningfully captured in propositional form.

Moreover, on this prevalent view, the *objects* of these fundamental rationalizing propositional attitudes characteristic of the theoretical and practical spheres, beliefs and desires/preferences respectively, are in each case the states of affairs captured by these 'that clauses.' The attitudes are thus distinguished not by their objects, but by the contrasting directions of fit that such propositional attitudes take towards the states of affairs that are the contents of such clauses. The contrast, on this view, is between beliefs that aim to fit the world, and desires that aim to make the world fit

⁶ See also Harry Frankfurt's characterization of the Standard Story as maintaining that intentional actions are 'movements whose causes are desires and beliefs by which they are rationalized' (1978: 157).

them.⁷ In particular, to have the relevant practical attitude towards a proposition is to be ‘disposed to act on the world in ways calculated to make the proposition true’ (Brewer 2009: 16–17). Such an account of contrasting directions of fit can seem to manifest the virtues of both simplicity and symmetry. There are two fundamental types of propositional attitudes. They have the same objects—states of affairs captured by ‘that clauses.’ They are distinguished entirely by the contrasting directions of fit characteristic of these fundamental attitudes towards states of affairs. Thus, not only are all intentional actions rationalized by beliefs and desires, and are all of these beliefs and desires propositional attitudes, but Commitment (3) the objects of the propositional attitudes that rationalize actions are states of affairs.

Seeming desires to act rather than that some state of affairs obtains, desires *to do X* rather than *that Y obtains*, may seem to raise a problem for the view that all fundamental practical attitudes are propositional attitudes with states of affairs as their objects. In many cases, for example the desire to build a house, such a desire to X is parsed by advocates of the Standard Story as a desire that Y obtains, e.g., that my building of my house occurs. Such a propositional attitude can then rationalize my buying lumber, taking carpentering courses, etc. In the cases that most stubbornly resist such re-characterization, a desire to go for a walk, for example, or to tell the truth, the resistance is taken to indicate not that the object of such an attitude is not a state of affairs, but that the object of such a resistant attitude is the states of affairs that I perform the action in question, or in Wayne Sumner’s words ‘the state of affairs which consists in your doing it’ (1996: 124). The states of affairs desired in such cases are the occurrences of the agent’s own actions, that I go for a walk or that I tell the truth, and such an attitude provides a degenerate rationalization of the resulting action, in which my Xing is rationalized as bringing about the state of affairs that my Xing happens. In such cases of degenerate rationalization, the action, Xing, is both the state of affairs to be brought about and the action that brings it about. Following Nagel, my ‘performance of act B’ is treated ‘as a degenerate case of promoting the occurrence of act B’ (1970: 47), rationalized by my desire that my performance of act B occurs. In sum, implicit in the standard form of the Standard Story are commitments that (1) all actions are rationalized by beliefs and desires, that (2) the rationalizing attitudes are propositional attitudes, attitudes meaningfully captured in propositional form, and that (3) such propositional attitudes all have states of affairs as their objects.

Although intentional actions are on such an account rationalized by propositional attitudes, attitudes that supply reasons to bring about the states of affairs that are their objects, it need not follow that such rationalizing attitudes are themselves the agent’s reasons. They will be the agent’s reasons on what Parfit characterizes as subjectivist or desire-based accounts, upon which our reasons for acting ‘are all provided by...certain facts about what would fulfill or achieve our present desires or aims’ (2011: 45). It is the desires themselves that provide practical reasons on such accounts, reasons to bring about the desired states of affairs. But on what Parfit characterizes as objectivist or value-based accounts, ‘reasons are given by the facts

⁷ For presentations of this prevailing form of the contrast, see Platts (1979: 256–257), Smith (1994: 111–119), Boyle and Lavin (2010: 171ff), and Pettit and Smith (1990: 574).

about the *objects* of these desires' (2011: 45), facts in virtue of which such objects are worth producing or preventing. The relevant propositional attitudes are understood as responsive to or sensitive to such reasons, such that citing the attitudes is, *ceteris paribus*, invoking the relevant facts that count in favor of the states of affairs that are their objects. The Standard Story in its standard form suggests that whether one adopts a subjectivist or an objectivist account of reasons, all reasons to act are fundamentally reasons to produce or bring about the occurrence of the states of affairs that are the objects of the relevant practical propositional attitudes. Crucially, on this standard form of the Story, such rationalization through appeal to the beliefs and desires of the agent provides what the agent takes to be her justification, at least *ceteris paribus*.⁸ An action is justified if these purported reasons for action provided by the agent's beliefs and desires are in fact the good reasons that the subject takes them to be.

These three commitments implicit in the Standard Story, taken together, entail that the reasons supplied by propositional attitudes rationalize actions as bringing about the states of affairs that are their objects, reasons 'to realize them, to prevent them from occurring, or to make their occurrence more or less likely' (Scanlon 1998: 80). The actions themselves, on such an account, are rationalized as bringings about of these states of affairs. But this is just to say that the commitments implicit in the Standard Story establish a version of what has come to be known as a teleological conception of reasons (Scanlon 1998: 84; Portmore 2011: 56):

Teleological Conception of Reasons: All reasons to act are reasons to bring about the states of affairs that are the objects of the desires that rationalize them.

This teleological conception of reasons provides the same account of the rationalizing role of my desire to go for a walk as it does of my desire that you go for a walk. In both cases, what rationalizes is a practical attitude with a state of affairs as its object. Although I appeal to my desire *to go for a walk*, such apparent attitudes towards actions only rationalize, strictly speaking, as attitudes with states of affairs as their object. In these first person 'degenerate' cases, however, the action that is rationalized is itself the object of the propositional attitude that rationalizes it—my going for a walk is rationalized as bringing it about that I go for a walk—that my going for a walk happens. My actions thus rationalize, but only, as Scanlon points out, 'as components of states of affairs—as things that *occur*' (1998: 80). My reason to act in the first person case is to bring it about that I go for a walk; my reason to act in the second person case is to bring it about that you go for a walk. My object in the first person case is to bring about the state of affairs that I go for a walk; my object in the second person case is to bring about the state of affairs that you go for a walk. In the first as well as the second person case my action is one of bringing it about that someone goes for a walk, making such a 'walk going' happen.

⁸ David Velleman, for example, emphasizes that on such an account of action 'these attitudes also justify the behavior that they cause, that behavior eventuates not only *from causes* but *for reasons*.' (2000: 5) and that this is the element of the story that Velleman challenges, see Section IV.

Within the context of such a teleological conception of reasons, it is difficult to avoid the adoption of a consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions:

Consequentialist Framework for the Evaluation of Actions: The normative status of actions and reasons for action is determined through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as more or less valuable/desirable.

The teleological conception is entailed by the Standard Story because it holds that we determine the agent's reasons to act by appeal to the states of affairs that are the objects of the desires that rationalize them; the agent's reasons to act are reasons to bring about such states of affairs. But these reasons purport to be good reasons; reasons that justify the action of bringing about the state of affairs in question. Good reasons to act, within the context of the teleological conception, are plausibly understood as reasons to bring about states of affairs that are not just desired, but desirable or valuable. Indeed, Scanlon incorporates the consequentialist framework for evaluating actions into the teleological conception of reasons itself, suggesting that on such a conception all such reasons to bring about states of affairs "must appeal to the desirability or undesirability of having that result occur (1998: 84).⁹ Agents will have more reasons to bring about states of affairs that are more desirable/valuable, and the most reason to bring about the state of affairs that is most desirable/valuable, should there be such a uniquely desirable/valuable state of affairs.

Implicit in this consequentialist framework are a commitment to ranking states of affairs as more or less desirable/valuable and a commitment to the explanatory priority of the evaluation of states of affairs to the evaluation of actions. It is the value/desirability of states of affairs that provides our *rationale* for performing any action, and the comparative strength of reasons to act reflects rankings of states of affairs as more or less desirable/valuable. The Standard Story thus dictates the teleological conception of reasons, and this conception of reasons, in turn, supports a consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions, upon which the normative status of reasons for actions, and of actions themselves, is determined through appeal to rankings of the states of affairs that they bring about as more or less desirable/valuable. On subjectivist accounts the strength of the agent's desires for states of affairs will generate rankings of states of affairs along various dimensions, which will in turn indicate the strength of reasons to bring them about. The agent will on such accounts have the strongest reasons to bring about the available state of affairs supported by the strongest desires, the state of affairs ranked highest on this strength of desire/preference continuum, and in this sense the highest ranked states of affairs. On objectivist accounts the considerations that count in favor of the preferred/desired states of affairs generate rankings of states of affairs reflecting the strength of such considerations. States of affairs that are ranked higher

⁹ See also Portmore's characterization of the teleological conception as maintaining that what the agent "has most reason to do" is to bring about the state of affairs that she "has most reason to want to be actual" (2011: 56).

have weightier considerations counting in favor of them. On both approaches, attitudes towards states of affairs reflect a ranking of states of affairs, and the strength of reasons is determined through appeal to the ranking of states of affairs. The higher ranked the state of affairs, the stronger the reasons to bring it about.

Moreover, advocates of this conception of reasons and this evaluative framework need not deny that things other than states of affairs have intrinsic value. Because all reasons are reasons to bring about states of affairs, any relevance of the intrinsic value of things other than states of affairs to reasons for action must be manifested in the ranking of the states of affairs that an agent has more or less reasons to bring about, and in this sense in the evaluation of states of affairs.¹⁰ Recognition of the intrinsic value of rights, for example, will be manifested in the reasons that agents have to bring about certain states of affairs, such as minimizing rights violations overall or maximizing respect for rights by the agent. There is thus a powerful argument from the standard form of the Standard Story to the teleological conception of reasons, and from the teleological conception of reasons, thus bolstered by the Standard Story, to the consequentialist framework for evaluating actions, upon which the normative status of actions and reasons to act is determined through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as more or less desirable/valuable.

Commitment to the consequentialist framework does not directly entail moral consequentialism, the theory that the distinctively *moral* evaluation of actions, as right or wrong, morally required or prohibited, is determined through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as more or less desirable. But it does rule out most traditional alternatives to consequentialist moral theories, and it does generate a strong presumption in favor of such consequentialist moral theories. To see why, consider that actions are by their nature *performed*, and the end of any performance of an action is the completion of the relevant performance guided by the agent's reasons for undertaking it. The action becomes intelligible as an action, and in particular as the action that it is, in light of these reasons to perform it.

These reasons appear in many cases to be provided not by appeal to states of affairs, but to other actions that rationalize the actions in question as component parts (Thompson 2008: ch. 8; Moran and Stone 2011; Anscombe 2000; Frey and Frey 2017). My reason to break these eggs is that I am making an omelet; my reason for catching the bus is that I am going to work, etc. In other cases, reasons to act appear to be provided by the value of persons rather than states of affairs. Thus, my primary reason to keep my promises and tell the truth appears to be respect for the persons with whom I interact (Scanlon 1998: ch. 7; Darwall 2006: 10–11). In addition to such actions rationalized through appeal to other actions and through appeal to the value of persons, certain actions do appear to be rationalized through appeal to the value of states of affairs. Such actions will be bringings about of the states of affairs that rationalize them. Needless suffering is a bad thing to happen,

¹⁰ Thus Portmore (2011: 66–67) and other consequentialists can consistently allow that things other than states of affairs can be fundamental sources of value, while maintaining that within the context of the standard form of the Standard Story such sources of value will always be manifested in the ranking of states of affairs that agents have reasons to promote, such that agents have more reason to promote the higher ranked, and in this sense better, state of affairs.

for example, and I donate to famine relief to bring it about that less such suffering happens.

In the cases of reasons of the first two sorts, bringing about some state of affairs simply does not seem to be the type of action that I am performing. My primary reasons are reasons to perform the relevant action, to keep my promise, not to bring it about that my promise keeping occurs, and to go for a walk, not to bring it about that my going for a walk happens.¹¹ Thus only some reasons to act appear to be responsive to the value of states of affairs rather than to the value of persons, more comprehensive actions, relationships, etc., and only some actions appear to be bringings about of states of affairs, in particular those rationalized through appeal to the value of states of affairs.

The consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions maintains, by contrast, that all reasons to act are reasons to bring about states of affairs, and all reasons to act are determined through appeal to the value of states of affairs. Thus, it rejects all reasons to act that are not reasons to bring about states of affairs and all reasons to act that are determined through appeal to the value of something other than states of affairs. Such apparent reasons must either be explained away as merely apparent, or accounted for through indirection, or interpreted as having a deeper structure as reasons to bring about states of affairs. Traditional alternatives to consequentialism, including Kantian, virtue ethical, and many contractualist moral theories, appeal to these fundamental moral reasons that are not reasons to bring about, and to rationales for such reasons that are provided through the appeal to the value of persons, relationships, and traits of character, not through appeal to the value of states of affairs. Thus, such moral theories, at least in their standard forms, entail the rejection of a consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions, and vice versa. In part, then, the consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions militates strongly in favor of consequentialism because it militates strongly against standard alternatives to consequentialist moral theories, e.g., standard Kantian, virtue ethical, and many contractualist theories. For the Kantian, promise breakings are bad things to happen because they are bad things to do, actions that fundamentally disrespect persons in our interactions with them. If the rationale for my keeping my promise must be supplied within the consequentialist framework, within which it is understood as but one among other states of affairs that I have reasons to bring about, the traditional Kantian rationale is lost.¹² The occurrence of such a promise keeping by me is often neither better for me nor better overall. A more recent suggestion is that it is somehow better *relative to me* to maximize the occurrence of my promise-keepings or even the occurrence of my promise-keepings now (Louise 2004), but it is unclear whether such an evaluator-relative ranking can

¹¹ Nye, Plunkett, and Ku highlight this distinction between our motives “that are state-directed, or motives to bring about certain states of affairs,” and motives “that are act-directed...motives simply to do certain things” (2015: 5). Much of my argument complements their defense of such reasons to do things that are not reasons to bring about against the charge that they are theoretically ‘mysterious’ (2015: 4). See also Kolodny’s arguments both that states of affairs are not the only thing of value, and that it is simply a “mistake...to think that things of value are sources of reasons only in the sense that, when we are able to bring about something of value, we have reasons to do so” (2011: 68).

¹² I elaborate upon this claim in the concluding section.

be generated without undermining the explanatory priority of states of affairs, and even whether such a ranking is coherent (Schroeder 2007; Hurley 2013). The Kantian and the virtue ethicist take each agent to have reasons to tell the truth and keep their promises whether or not the resulting state of affairs is better overall or better for her, and whether or not it is even coherent to claim that it is better relative to her. But the distinctively moral reasons to act that they take us to have are not reasons to bring about states of affairs and are not rationalized by appeal to the value of states of affairs. The consequentialist evaluative framework dictated by the Standard Story rules out such reasons, ruling out such main alternatives to consequentialist moral theories in the process.

Such an evaluative framework also provides positive grounds for expecting that an adequate moral theory must be some form of consequentialism. Because such a framework dictates that all good reasons are rationalized through appeal to good states of affairs, the obvious account of distinctively *moral* reasons is that they rationalize through appeal to states of affairs that are ranked from a distinctively impartial point of view, as impersonally, agent-neutrally better and best. At the very least, the determination of any reasons that can plausibly claim to be distinctively moral will involve a prominent role for such an impartial evaluation of states of affairs, perhaps interacting with other rankings of states of affairs in the determination of distinctively moral reasons (Parfit 2011; Scheffler 1982; Portmore 2011). Such parameters for an adequate moral theory restrict candidates to the range of alternative moral theories that fall within the consequentialist moral tradition, theories that determine the moral status of actions through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as better or worse. The standard form of the Standard Story thus entails the teleological conception of reasons. The teleological conception of reasons provides a powerful presumption in support of the consequentialist evaluative framework, and such a framework, in turn, rules out traditional alternatives to consequentialist moral theories, and strongly favors moral theories that fit within the broadly consequentialist tradition.

3 The Skewing of the Debate in Normative Ethics

This presumptive support for consequentialism by the standard form of the Standard Story plays a pervasive role in normative ethics. In some cases these commitments implicit in the Standard Story are explicitly deployed as grounds for adopting a consequentialist moral theory. Michael Smith, for example, holds that actions are mere bodily movements distinguished from other such movements by their antecedents, and that the desires and beliefs that cause and rationalize actions are propositional attitudes with states of affairs as their objects, desires “he has that things be a certain way” (1–3) (2012: 387). All actions are rationalized as bringing about the states of affairs that are the objects of such practical propositional attitudes, and, although Smith takes such rationalizations to provide only what he characterizes as motivating reasons, the structure of such motivating reasons, on his account, is the structure for all justifying reasons as well: all reasons, motivating or justifying/normative, are reasons to bring about states of affairs—the teleological conception of reason. What the agent has most

justifying reasons to do, on Smith's account, i.e., what she ought to do, is to bring about the state of affairs that she 'would desire to be the case...if she had a psychology that eludes all forms of rational criticism,' i.e., were her desires 'maximally informed and coherent and unified' (2003: 592, 596). But this is just to say, he concludes, that the agent ought to do what 'produces the most good and the least bad' (2003: 576), thereby providing an analysis of 'ought to do' that reduces 'one moral concept (the concept of what we ought to do) to another pair of moral concepts (the concepts of goodness and badness)' (2003: 576). This is the consequentialist framework for evaluating actions, and Smith grounds his argument for it in the standard form of the Standard Story of Action. Within the context of such a consequentialist framework, he argues, traditional alternatives to consequentialist moral theories come to seem implausible, because the framework leaves no way 'of analyzing the stringency of an obligation except by way of considering the amount of good that acting on that obligation will produce' (2003: 587). It thus becomes difficult to see how any plausible account of deontic obligation can be articulated that does not explain obligation through appeal to the production of better or worse states of affairs, hence difficult to see how a plausible moral theory can be anything other than some form of consequentialist moral theory.

The central commitments of the Standard Story are also incorporated into rational choice theory. As Elizabeth Anderson points out, rational choice theory is often presented 'as if it is the inevitable conceptual framework within which inquiry must proceed' (2001: 22). Yet the three commitments that entail the teleological conception and the consequentialist framework are all implicit in rational choice theory. One of the roles played by preferences in rational choice theory is to provide the underlying motives behind action,¹³ rationalizing the action performed. (1) Unlike desires, preferences are essentially comparative; like desires, they have states of affairs as their objects. (2 and 3) It is preferences, for such a rational choice theorist, that rationalize choices among actions. Reasons to act are reasons to bring about a preferred state of affairs, and an agent has more reason to bring about higher ranked states of affairs. What it is rational for the agent to do is to perform the action that brings about the most preferred state of affairs that is available,¹⁴ the highest ranked state of affairs. The transition from such an endorsement of the teleological conception of reasons to the consequentialist evaluative framework is seamless. Thus, Amartya Sen suggests that an agent who prefers state of affairs *x* to state of affairs *y*, i.e., who ranks the former higher than the latter, 'must regard himself as better off with *x* than with *y*' (1973: 253). All reasons to act are reasons to promote preferred states of affairs, and agents evaluate actions through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as better or worse.¹⁵

The skewing effect of framing normative ethical debates within the Standard Story also undermines efforts by critics to develop coherent arguments against

¹³ For discussions of this role for preferences, see Anderson (2001: 22–23) and Sen (1973: 241–259). For a general presentation of rational choice theory, see Briggs (2016).

¹⁴ Thus Elizabeth Anderson points out that on rational choice theory "the rational act is the act that maximally satisfies the agent's individual preferences" (2001: 21).

¹⁵ A point made by Anderson (2001: 26). Not surprisingly, economists who approach normative ethics from within the framework of rational choice theory tend to be consequentialists. See, for example, Sen (1983), Frank (2004), and Harsanyi (1978).

consequentialism. Thomas Nagel's anti-consequentialist arguments are among those seriously compromised by commitment to the Standard Story. Nagel sets out to vindicate certain fundamental commitments of Kantian moral theory (1970, 1987). Yet he characterizes actions through recourse to the background context provided by the standard form of the Standard Story. Every action, he assumes, is the promoting of the occurrence of some event or state of affairs, hence even the performance of some act B by the agent is properly treated as a 'case of promoting the occurrence of act B.' It is thus natural to take every reason to act as a reason to promote the occurrence of some event/state of affairs:

Every reason is a predicate R such that for all persons p and events A,
if R is true of A, then p has prima facie reason to promote A. (1970: 47)

Such a formulation commits Nagel to the teleological conception of reasons by interposing events/states of affairs into an account of reasons for action, such that all reasons R to act are understood as reasons to promote the occurrence of some A. But as Nagel himself realizes, the deontic constraints that are the centerpiece of Kantian ethics appeal to reasons that are not reasons to promote states of affairs; indeed, to reasons to act that function as constraints upon acting on such reasons to promote states of affairs. All such reasons to act that are not reasons to promote thus come to seem 'paradoxical' and 'formally puzzling' (1987: 179) to Nagel.¹⁶ His adoption of central elements of the Standard Story of Action drives him towards the teleological conception of reasons, hence towards a consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions that cannot be reconciled to the broadly Kantian moral theory to which he aspires.

4 Consequentialism and Challenges to the Standard Story

I have demonstrated that unpacking the standard form of the Standard Story of Action yields the following three commitments:

1. Intentional actions are rationalized by beliefs and desires.
2. The attitudes that rationalize actions are propositional attitudes, attitudes meaningfully captured in propositional form.
3. The objects of the propositional attitudes that rationalize actions are states of affairs.

These claims, in turn, yield the teleological conception of reasons, upon which all reasons to act are reasons to bring about states of affairs that are the objects of the desires that rationalize. The teleological conception of reasons, in turn, supports adoption of the consequentialist framework for evaluating actions, upon which the normative status of actions and reasons for action is determined through appeal to rankings of states of affairs. The rationale for all reasons to act is based in the evaluation of states of affairs. In what follows I will demonstrate that each of the

¹⁶ For example, 'their paradoxical flavor tempts one to think that the whole thing is a kind of moral illusion' (1986: 179).

first two commitments embedded in the standard form of the Standard Story has been challenged by recent work on actions and the reasons that rationalize them. I will then introduce a new, comparatively modest, and *prima facie* plausible challenge to the third commitment. This final challenge demonstrates that even granting that desires rationalize actions, and that desires are properly capturable in propositional form, it does not follow that the objects of such desires are states of affairs. Each of these challenges, I will show, is sufficient, if adopted, to derail the argument from the theory of action to the teleological conception of reasons and the consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions.¹⁷

The first strategy is simply to deny Commitment (1); in particular to deny that desires play a substantive role in rationalizing intentional actions. Tim Scanlon, for example, argues that desires, properly understood, are ‘desires in the directed-attention sense’ (1998: 39), and denies that such desires play the fundamental role in the practical sphere that beliefs play in the theoretical sphere. In particular, he argues that we ‘should not take “desires” to be a special source of motivation, independent of our seeing things as reasons’ (1998: 40). By denying the fundamental rationalizing role for practical propositional attitudes that is claimed for desires by the Standard Story, Scanlon eliminates any presumption towards the claim that all actions are rationalized as bringing about the states of affairs that are the objects of the relevant attitudes. He focuses instead upon intentions, attitudes naturally taken to have actions rather than states of affairs as their objects, arguing that ‘in order to intend to do something I must take myself to have a reason for *doing* that thing’ (1998: 21). Practical reasons are fundamentally reasons to intend to X and to X, but there is no presumption on Scanlon’s account in favor of the teleological conception’s claim that all such reasons to act are reasons to bring about some state of affairs, hence there is no presumption in favor of the consequentialist framework. Scanlon’s rejection of the consequentialist evaluative framework follows from his rejection of core elements of the Standard Story, paving the way for a non-consequentialist theory of value that incorporates reasons to act and

¹⁷ David Velleman raises a distinctive challenge that also blocks the presumption in favor of the consequentialist framework. He grants Claims 1–3 in some form, the “traditional account of how desire and belief motivate behavior,” but argues that they only provide an account of the motivation of behavior, not of reasons justifying actions (2000: 197). Such belief-desire motivation cannot provide the agent’s justifying reasons, he argues, because it does not yet account for the role of the agent in action (2000: 198). The agential role requires, in addition, a desire to act in accordance with reasons that ‘produces behavior, in our name, by adding its motivational force to that of whichever motives appear to provide the strongest reasons for acting’ (2000: 141). It is our reasons for acting, a ‘rational influence distinct from the motivational influence of the desire that it’s about’ (2000: 199), that we take to justify our actions. Even desire-based reasons, on such an account, derive their influence qua reasons ‘from something other than the desires upon which they are based.’ But the account also allows for other reasons for acting ‘that aren’t based on desires at all’ (2000: 199). Because the reasons that justify actions are not, and need not be based upon, the propositional attitudes that motivate actions, there is no presumption in favor of the teleological conception, upon which all such reasons are reasons to bring about the states of affairs that are the objects of such desires, hence no presumption in favor of the consequentialist evaluative framework and its claim that all reasons to act are determined through appeal to antecedent rankings of states of affairs.

refrain from acting that are not reasons to bring about, reasons that are rationalized by appeal to things other than the value of states of affairs.¹⁸

Many recent Anscombean accounts of action focus upon Commitment 2.¹⁹ Such accounts do not deny that practical attitudes, including desires, can play an important rationalizing role. They argue instead that the relevant rationalizing practical attitudes are performative attitudes with actions as their objects, not propositional attitudes with states of affairs as their objects (Thompson 2008: ch. 8). This challenge to the second commitment is itself grounded in a deeper challenge to the Standard Story. These critics follow Anscombe in arguing that reason does not stop short of the movements that are actions, as the Standard Story suggests. Rather, reason reaches “all the way into the constitution of what happens,” marking off intentional action as a “categorically different form of event or process” (Lavin 2013: 280).²⁰ Actions are thus not mere movements distinguished from other such movements by their causal antecedents, they are intrinsically intentional processes, performances undertaken for reasons, guided to completion by reason, and identified by soliciting the agent’s reasons.

Such complex, reason-guided performances have purposive sub-parts, actions undertaken in order to complete these more comprehensive actions. I am making pancakes, but breaking eggs is a sub-part of my making pancakes, and what rationalizes this sub-part, such Anscombeans maintain, is the desirability of the performance of which it is a part. Why am I breaking eggs? Because I am making pancakes. Just as typical actions rationalize other actions that are their subparts, such rationalizing performances are themselves in turn often rationalized as sub-parts of more extended, unfolding performances. Why am I making pancakes? I am cooking my sons their favorite breakfast. Actions provide the reasons to undertake other actions. Such actions are not rationalized by appeal to states of affairs, but by appeal to other actions and performative attitudes, attitudes that have actions to be performed as their objects.²¹

¹⁸ Kieran Setiya also denies Commitment 1, albeit on different grounds. What rationalizes an action, he argues, is not a belief-desire pair, but a ‘desire-like belief’ (2007: 51), a single state that is both ‘motivational and cognitive’ (2007: 40). Contra (1), intentional actions, for Setiya, need not be rationalized by beliefs and desires with contrasting directions of fit; rather, it is the belief that I am acting for a reason, e.g., that I am going for a walk because the weather is fine, that motivates action in his paradigm case. The state is like a desire, in that it has ‘the power to cause or motivate the action it depicts, and to cause it to be done for the reason in question’ (2007: 40). But unlike the role of desire in the Standard Story, the desire-like belief in Setiya’s account need not provide a reason to bring about some state of affairs. The weather, in his example, is a reason for him *to go for a walk*, not to bring it about that he does. Any presumption to adopt the consequentialist evaluative framework, or a consequentialist moral theory, is eliminated by these modifications to the standard form of the Standard Story.

¹⁹ There has been an explosion of work recently developing various aspects of the alternative theory of action defended by G.E.M. Anscombe in *Intention* (2000). See, for example, Moran and Stone (2011), Frost (2014), Thompson (2008), Rodl (2007), Frey and Frey (2017), and Fernandez (2016).

²⁰ See also the case developed by Moran and Stone (2011: 50–55) that this is Anscombe’s own view of action, and Fernandez’s similar claims on behalf of Aristotle’s account of action, particularly his claim that in contrast with a mere movement, ‘an intentional action is internally constituted through practical reasoning’ (2016: 890).

²¹ Moran and Stone demonstrate that for Anscombe ‘the basic psychological item must be: X-ing to do something. That is, X-ing, whatever it is, must inherit through its object (a performance), just the

Such Anscombeans point out that intentions are such practical attitudes that take actions (performances) as their objects (Moran and Stone 2011: 48), and that such intentions to act rationalize actions: I'm buying a ticket now because I intend to go to the concert tomorrow. Insofar as desires and wants also play such a rationalizing role, these accounts suggests that they too are performative attitudes—desires to X with actions rather than states of affairs as their objects. It is because I prefer to drive that I am getting my keys, for example, and because I want to improve the taste of the stew that I am adding salt (Moran and Stone 2011: 54; Thompson 2008: 127–130). The resulting theory of action can thus readily grant that desires rationalize actions. But because it takes desires to be performative attitudes with actions as their objects, the reasons provided by such desires are not reasons to bring about states of affairs. They are instead reasons to act provided by more comprehensive actions, actions that are in turn guided to completion by the reasons that we have to undertake them. Such an account provides no support for the teleological conception of reasons, or for evaluating actions within the consequentialist's state of affairs centered framework.

I will now present and motivate a new challenge that results from a very conservative modification to the Standard Story. This modest modification is nonetheless sufficient to eliminate a presumption in favor of the teleological conception of reasons and the consequentialist evaluative framework. The challenge grants both the first commitment, that actions are rationalized by beliefs and desires, and the second commitment, that desires are appropriately captured in propositional form. But it denies that the states of affairs the occurrence of which makes such propositional contents true must be the objects of such attitudes. Although I believe that more radical departures from the Standard Story are warranted, I will argue here that even this comparatively modest and independently appealing modification is sufficient to eliminate any presumption in favor the teleological conception and the consequentialist framework.

Talbot Brewer's distinction between Weak and Strong Propositionalism opens the conceptual space for such a modification.²² The standard form of the Standard Story is committed to Strong Propositionalism, the position that 'the real intentional *object* of a desire is always a proposition' (2009: 21). Strong Propositionalism holds not only that every desire has a propositional form, but that the aim or object of every desire is the truth of this proposition, obtained by bringing about the state of affairs that makes it true. Strong Propositionalism is thus committed to Commitment 3 as well as to 1 and 2, hence commits its advocates to the teleological conception of reasons. But endorsement of Claims 1 and 2 is also consistent with Weak Propositionalism, the view that 'the object of any desire is capturable in propositional terms, in the sense that the truth of the relevant proposition is a necessary and sufficient condition for the attainment of the desire's end' (2009: 21).

Footnote 21 continued

distinctive structure characteristic of intention action' (2011: 74). See also Thompson's accounts of naïve rationalization of actions by other actions and of sophisticated rationalization by performative practical attitudes. (2008: Ch. 8).

²² Although the distinction to which I appeal in what follows is Brewer's (2009: 21), the position that I harness it to argue for is not.

Weak Propositionalism can allow that a desire's propositional form captures the object of a desire only in the sense that it captures a necessary condition for the successful realization of the desire's object.

Consider again our example of keeping a promise. I desire to keep my promise. An action, keeping my promise, appears to be the object of such a desire. If I achieve the object of this desire, that is, if I perform the action of keeping my promise, it will be the case that I keep my promise. This condition of successfully achieving the object of my desire, that my keeping my promise occurs, is captured in its propositional form, as a desire that I keep my promise. But on this modified view the object of the desire is the action, keeping my promise, which is appropriately captured in the performative form of the desire—as a desire to keep my promise with the action as its object. Only if the object of every desire is a state of affairs does it follow that rationalizing actions through appeal to desires is always rationalizing actions as bringing about states of affairs. But this is precisely what Weak Propositionalism allows us to deny. Even though every desire is capturable in propositional form, the Weak Propositionalist can allow that the object of my desire to act is often an action rather than a state of affairs.

For such a Weak Propositionalist the object of my desire to keep my promise is, as it appears to be, the action of keeping my promise, not the state of affairs that my promise is kept. If I successfully achieve the object of such a desire (if I keep my promise guided by the reasons that I have to perform such an action) it will be the case that I keep my promise, and 'that I keep my promise' will be true. It is this condition of achieving the object of my desire to keep my promise, that if I keep my promise, the event that I keep my promise happens, that is captured by the propositional form of the desire as a desire that I keep my promise.

With this choice between Weak and Strong Propositionalism in view, the Weak option has much to recommend it in comparison with the Strong (see Darwall 2002: 93).²³ We have already seen that agents often seem to have reasons to perform actions that are not bringings about of states of affairs, reasons to keep our promises, help our friends, and go for walks. Many such reasons appear to be directly responsive to the value of persons, relationships, and traits of character, not only to the value of states of affairs. It is Strong Propositionalism that drives us to deny that there are such reasons to act and that they are directly responsive to values other than the value of states of affairs. Weak Propositionalism, by contrast, readily accommodates such intuitive reasons to act, because it allows that the object of my desires and intentions is often an action to be performed. The standard form of the

²³ The contrasting directions of fit of theoretical and practical attitudes might also seem to provide support for Strong Propositionalism. In particular, the contrast is taken to establish that practical attitudes are distinguished by their contrasting directions of fit towards the same objects—states of affairs. But this direction of fit contrast need only be understood by the Weak Propositionalist as mandating contrasting directions of fit towards the states of affairs that are the contents of such attitudes in their propositional forms. Even if the object of a desire is an action, it will be true that successfully realizing this object will make the world fit the state of affairs that is captured in its propositional form. Such an understanding of this direction of fit contrast dovetails with Anscombe's arguments that there is a relevant contrast between the objects of wants/intentions (actions) and beliefs (states of affairs) that is reflected in the very different mistakes to which attitudes with such contrasting objects are susceptible (Anscombe 2000: 56; Moran and Stone 2011: 67–69).

Standard Story assumes that the commitment to all desires having a propositional form is a commitment to Strong Propositionalism, and with it to Commitment 3 along with 1 and 2, and these three commitments taken together entail the teleological conception of reasons.²⁴ But the commitment to such a propositional form for desires requires only a commitment to Weak Propositionalism, and such a view readily accommodates the views that the objects of many desires are actions rather than states of affairs, that such desires to act provide agents with reasons to act that are not reasons to bring about states of affairs, and that the things of value to which such reasons to act are responsive are not only states of affairs, and are not captured in antecedent rankings of states of affairs.²⁵ There is thus no presumption in favor of a teleological conception of reasons or a consequentialist evaluative framework on the Weak Propositionalist account.

5 Conclusion

I demonstrated in Sects. 1–3 that the standard form of the Standard Story of Action dictates the adoption of the teleological conception of reasons and the consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions, a framework that is at once fertile ground for consequentialist moral theories and hostile to traditional alternatives. In Sect. 4 I demonstrated that various modifications to the Standard Story eliminate any such presumption in favor of consequentialism. In closing, I will briefly demonstrate the importance of these results for the current debate in moral theory.

Among the most striking developments in recent moral theory is the move by consequentialists away from much of the substantive content of traditional versions of the theory. New wave consequentialists maintain the consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions. But they reject the traditional restriction to an impersonal, agent-neutral ranking of states of affairs, paving the way for appeal to evaluator relative rankings of states of affairs that incorporate content, such as deontic constraints, traditionally thought to be the exclusive domain of non-consequentialist alternatives.²⁶

²⁴ Weak Propositionalism also accounts for why desires have both a proposition form (desire that X) and a performative form (desire to X), suggesting that the performative (desire to X) form often captures the object of the desire, while the propositional (desire that X) form captures a necessary condition for the attainment of the desire's object.

²⁵ There is, I believe, space for a rapprochement between this more conservative modification and those proposed by many Anscombeans. Such Anscombeans insist that the relevant desires have a performative form, and that the action captured by this form is the object of the desire. The Weak Propositionalist can readily agree that such desires have a performative form, i.e., that the relevant desire is a desire to keep my promise, and that the action captured by this form is the object of the desire. But they deny that such a performative form precludes appropriately capturing such desires as well in a propositional form, a form that captures the state of affairs the occurrence of which is a necessary condition for the realization of the desire's object. Some Anscombeans appear to argue that the performative form of desire precludes a propositional form (Thompson 2008: 122–138). But other Anscombeans do not deny that desires are capturable as well in propositional form; indeed, Anscombe herself often invokes cases of wanting that have as their objects states of affairs (2000: 70–72 and 91).

²⁶ See for example the evaluator-relative consequentialist accounts developed by Sen (1983), Portmore (2005, 2011), Louise (2004), Smith (2003), and Dreier (1993, 2011).

Incorporation of this intuitive, traditionally non-consequentialist content within the consequentialist account, however, comes at the price of plausible rationales for the resulting moral reasons. Deontological reasons to do and not to do, for example reasons to keep our promises and not to lie, must be shoehorned, on such an approach, into the form of reasons to bring about states of affairs that are in some sense better relative to the evaluator. Even if we can make sense of evaluator relative rankings of states of affairs (Schroeder 2007), the reason that I keep my promise, for example, does not seem to be to bring about a state of affairs—to minimize *my* promise breakings, for example, or even *my* promise breakings *now* (Schroeder 2017). I should keep my promise because doing so respects the dignity of the person to whom I made it and because I value my integrity as a person, but not, seemingly, because doing so brings it about that I minimize promise breakings by me that happen now. The obvious question, given the apparent implausibility of such evaluator-relative rationales, is why the consequentialist framework for evaluating actions should not be jettisoned along with the content of traditional consequentialism. Why embrace the content of traditional deontology, but insist on an evaluative framework that precludes the apparent rationales for that content? Why, in short, continue to insist that all plausible candidate theories must be ‘consequentialized’?²⁷

I want to suggest in closing that the preceding arguments have supplied both the deep answer to this question, and reasons for viewing this answer with skepticism. The answer is that if we approach moral theory equipped with the standard tools for inquiry in the practical sphere, in particular with the Standard Story of Action and rational choice theory, we are already committed to the teleological conception of reasons and the consequentialist framework for evaluating actions. Shoehorning, despite the apparent implausibility, will be the right way to go, because any plausible moral theory must, within the parameters implicit in such fundamental tools of inquiry, be consequentialized.

The arguments in the previous section have provided grounds for viewing this answer with considerable skepticism. Many recent modifications to the Standard Story free us from this requirement to shoehorn plausible candidate theories into a consequentialist form. Indeed, even a modification that maintains core commitments of the Standard Story, the claims that every action is rationalized by a desire and that every desire is properly captured in propositional form, need only avoid the apparent excesses of Strong Propositionalism to eliminate any presumption in favor of a teleological conception of reasons and a consequentialist framework for the evaluation of actions.

My suggestion, then, is that although the content of traditional consequentialism has been largely purged from modern versions of the theory, commitment to the fundamental tools of inquiry in the practical sphere supports a requirement that all candidate theories must be forms of consequentialism, upon which the moral status of actions as right or wrong, morally required, permitted, or prohibited, is

²⁷ The demand to consequentialize is a demand to adopt the consequentialist framework, a demand that whatever is relevant “to determining deontic statuses of actions” is ‘relevant to determining the proper ranking of outcomes’ (Portmore 2007: 39), coupled with the claim that it is the facts about the ranking of outcomes that explain the facts about the deontic status of actions (Schroeder 2007: 287).

determined through appeal to rankings of states of affairs as better or worse. Any one of the modifications of these tools discussed in the previous section paves the way for abandoning this seemingly distorting form of consequentialism along with its substance. These arguments for and against the standard form of the Standard Story thus are not peripheral to the current case for consequentialism, they are the crucial arguments upon which the current case for consequentialism turns.

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