Paul Hurley

Comments on Douglas Portmore’s *Commonsense Consequentialism*

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Douglas Portmore’s argument in *Commonsense Consequentialism* unfolds in two main stages. He first argues (chapters 1-3) that moral rationalism sets plausibility constraints on acceptable moral theories, and that all traditional forms of act-consequentialism make demands that violate such constraints. But once the heart of consequentialism – not a particular theory of value but a particular conception of practical reason -- is revealed, Portmore argues that it beats true: a plausible moral theory will incorporate this compelling idea underlying consequentialism, hence a plausible moral theory will be a form of act-consequentialism, properly understood. The second stage argues first (chs 4 and 5) that any defensible form of consequentialism will have a particular ‘dual-ranking’ structure, and second for a particular form of consequentialism that has the requisite structure (chs 6 and 7). The overall strategy is ingenious, and the arguments are as rigorous as they are provocative.

In what follows I focus almost entirely upon the first stage of Portmore’s argument. I will first sketch his argument that any plausible moral theory must be a form of act-consequentialism, highlighting the role that the teleological conception of reasons (TCR) plays in this argument. I will then focus upon a pivotal and extremely illuminating tension within his argument for TCR. Previous attempts to support such a state of affairs centered account of reasons have attempted to ground it in a state of affairs centered account of value. Portmore rightly eschews such an account of value – people and things, not (or not just) states of affairs, have intrinsic value. But why continue to defend the state of affairs centered account of reasons, TCR, after rejecting the state of affairs centered accounts of value upon which it is typically grounded? I will show that his case for TCR draws upon state of affairs centered accounts of action and desire, accounts upon which desires are understood as fundamentally attitudes towards states of affairs and actions are understood fundamentally as promotings or bringings about of states of affairs. Yet once the state of affairs centered account of value is rejected, it becomes unclear why these state of affairs centered accounts of desire and action should be accepted, hence it becomes less clear what support, if any, they can be called upon to provide for TCR. I will demonstrate that such difficulties plague Portmore’s explicit arguments in support of TCR as well: once the full implications of his rejection of a state of affairs centered account of value are made clear, his arguments for adopting a state of affairs centered account of reasons, hence for adopting consequentialism itself, lose their apparent force.

Portmore argues in the opening chapters that a plausible consequentialism must accommodate central aspects of commonsense morality, and that it must be liberated from restriction to an evaluator-neutral evaluation of outcomes in order to do so. In chapter 4 he provides a strategy for consequentializing such apparently non-consequentialist components of common sense, i.e. for incorporating them into consequentialist moral theories. The strategy is to “take whatever considerations that, on the non-consequentialist theory, determine the deontic statuses of actions and insist that those outcomes determine how their outcomes rank.” [85] Thus if the non-consequentialist theory contains an agent-centered constraint upon murdering, the consequentialized version will take the higher ranked outcome to be the one upon which I minimize the murders that I commit, not that upon which I minimize the murders that are committed.

But even if a consequentialized theory can be produced that yields the same deontic verdicts as its non-consequentalist counterpart, the former may provide a plausible explanation of such verdicts while the latter might render them utterly mysterious. Why, then, insist upon shoehorning non-consequentialist theories into such a consequentialized form?[[1]](#footnote-1) Portmore’s answer is to argue that any plausible moral theory will be a form of act-consequentialism, hence that any plausible explanation of deontic verdicts will have a consequentialist form. But why? After all, evaluator-relative consequentialism itself has encountered serious objections.

Portmore’s ingenious response to these objections is to avoid the appeal to evaluator relative goodness at which they are typically targeted -- to argue that it is teleology without goodness, an appeal to the evaluator-relative ranking of outcomes without an appeal to evaluator-relative ranking as better and worse, that lies at the heart of consequentialism. To this end he distinguishes the relationship between rightness and goodness from the relationship between reasons for actions and reasons for outcomes. Virtually all previous consequentialists take these relationships to stand or fall together, and to both be at the heart of consequentialism. It is Portmore’s radical suggestion that it is the latter alone, a distinctive conception of the relationship between reasons for action and reasons for outcomes, that is the heart of consequentialism. Thus, his account of the relevant ranking of outcomes readily allows that “sometimes agents have more reason to desire that Oi obtains…even though Oi is not better than Oj.” [81]

Why consequentialize? Because the heart of consequentialism is the teleological conception of reasons (TCR), upon which reasons for intending to act are determined entirely through appeal to reasons for desiring that outcomes obtain. With moral rationalism, acceptance of TCR mandates that a plausible moral theory must be a form of act-consequentialism that incorporates central components of commonsense morality, and consequentializing is the strategy for incorporating such commonsense components. The case both for consequentializing and for consequentialism, then, pivots on the case for TCR. Those who are persuaded by Portmore’s first stage arguments, however, are left with reasons both to accept act-consequentialism and to reject all forms of act-consequentialism that have been put forward to date. What form of act-consequentialism can they accept? Outlining an answer to this question takes up the remaining chapters of the book.

But does Portmore successfully make the case for TCR? TCR, recall, is a state of affairs centered account of practical reasons upon which person S has more reasons to perform action Ai than to perform action Aj if and only if, and because, S has more reason to desire that the outcome of Ai obtains. [58] If TCR is the heart of consequentialism, then non-consequentialists such as myself now know how to get this normative ethical vampire off our backs; undermine TCR, and we have ripped out the heart of consequentialism. Why, then, accept TCR? Standard defenses of such a state of affairs centered account of reasons appeal to a state of affairs centered account of value upon which “the sole primary bearers of intrinsic value are certain abstracta – facts, outcomes, states of affairs,” [66] and “the only proper response to value is to desire and promote it.” [66] But Portmore explicitly distances himself from such an account of value, allowing that “the fundamental bearers of intrinsic value are concrete entities (e.g. persons, animals, and things)” [66] and that “as rational beings…we appropriately respond to rational persons by respecting them.” [67]

Yet if we join Portmore in rejecting a state of affairs centered account of value, and with it the tired old assumption that the only proper response to value is to promote it, and we grant with him both that persons and things are primary bearers of intrinsic value, and that we appropriately respond to such persons, for example, by respecting them, then it can seem natural on this basis to reject TCR, as Tim Scanlon, Stephen Darwall, and so many others do.[[2]](#footnote-2) Recognition of the intrinsic value of persons seems naturally to be understood as providing us with reasons to do and not to do certain things in our interactions with them. We value persons, for example, by keeping the promises that we make to them. To the extent that an agent has any reason to “desire the outcome in which her promise is fulfilled” on such an approach, it seems natural to think that she will have this reason “in virtue of the fact that she has a reason to fulfill her promise.” [63] Niko Kolodny concludes that the move to such a non-state of affairs centered account of value reveals that it to be 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 reason to do so.”[[3]](#footnote-3) It can seem natural, in short, to dismiss TCR, the state of affairs centric account of reasons, as an unfortunate vestige of the misplaced fixation on state of affairs centered accounts of value.

Portmore, of course, wants to reject the misguided reasons, grounded in state of affairs centered accounts of value, for endorsing TCR, but also wants to resist this natural line of thought leading from the rejection of such a state of affairs centered account of value to the rejection of a state of affairs centered account of reasons. But why? At points he suggests that such a state of affairs centered account of reasons flows naturally from the state of affairs centered nature of action, properly understood:

“If our actions are the means by which we affect the way the world goes, and if our

intentional actions necessarily aim at making the world go a certain way, then it is only

natural to suppose that what we have most reason to do is determined by which way

we have most reason to want the world to go.” [56, see also p. 5]

Yet although it does seem non-controversial that it is through our actions that “we affect the way the world goes,” (Who could disagree?) it is something very different, and quite controversial indeed, to claim that all actions are means for promoting states of affairs – that the aim of every action is necessarily to bring it about that the world goes a certain way. Every action affects the way the world goes – such a claim is as plausible as Portmore suggests. Moreover, some actions are actions of bringing about, promoting, or in some other way making causal contributions to some state of affairs obtaining. But why claim that all actions are such promotings or bringings about? I might bring it about that my neighbor goes for a walk, but don’t I just go for a walk, keep a promise, treat another person with respect, etc? When the natural, plausible claim that our actions affect the way the world goes is disambiguated from the alternative claim, that our actions are all promotings of states of affairs in the world, the natural response is to reject such an alternative claim, and with it Portmore’s account of action as necessarily aimed at making the world go a certain way, just as the natural response is to reject TCR itself.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Portmore also appeals at various points to what I will label the ‘assimilationist move’. Such a move interprets apparently fundamental reasons, intentions and desires to act, e.g. to run or to keep one’s promise, as reasons for “bringing it about that one runs,” [56] and desiring “that her promise is fulfilled.” [63] In short, an agent’s reasons to act are assimilated to TCR as reasons to bring it about that she acts. But as Talbot Brewer has pointed out in a related context,[[5]](#footnote-5) such assimilations can go both ways. On the countervailing assimilationist interpretation, reasons to bring something about are assimilated as a subset of the set of reasons to act, and whether I have most reasons to perform an action of bringing something about, e.g. that you go for a run, or to perform some other action, e.g. to go for a run myself, is determined by the relative strengths of these various reasons to act. Brewer argues that assimilations of this latter sort are more plausible, and they would seem to undermine rather than support TCR.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So appeal to the state of affairs centered nature of action does not seem to provide support for TCR, absent additional argument. Nor, I would suggest, does the appeal to a state of affairs centered account of desires hold out the prospect of being any more successful – again, absent additional argument. The only desires discussed by Portmore are desires that some state of affairs/outcome obtains. If it is plausible that what I have reason to do is what I have most reason to desire, and desires are all properly understood as fundamentally attitudes towards states of affairs, then it is plausible that I have most reason to do what promotes the states of affairs the obtaining of which I have the most reason to desire. But again, why adopt a state of affairs centered account of desire, upon which all desires are that some state of affairs obtains? If I have reasons to intend to phi, and to phi, then presumably I have reasons to want to phi. But it seems most natural to take the object of an intention to phi to be an action (phiing), not a state of affairs, and it seems most natural to take the object of the desire or want that reflects this intention also to be an action (phiing), not a state of affairs.[[7]](#footnote-7) Portmore has provided no ground for taking such reasons to phi, to intend to phi, and to want to phi to be determined by reasons to desire that the state of affairs in which I phi obtains.

Nor, it seems to me, does his attempt to preempt Scanlon’s worries about TCR succeed. Pace Scanlon, Portmore suggests that TCR can allow that “a person who values friendship will see that what she has reason to do, first and foremost, is to be a good friend.”[68] But on his account my reasons for acting are always “primarily, a matter of promoting certain states of affairs,” e.g. my reasons to fulfill my promise are fundamentally my reasons to bring it about that my promise is fulfilled. Scanlon’s point, as I understand it, is that this is backwards: reasons that I might have to bring it about that my promise is fulfilled seem most naturally to be understood, on an account that recognizes the intrinsic value of persons, as reflecting the reasons that I have to fulfill my promise in the first place. But this is what Portmore, as I understand him, is ultimately denying.

For those non-consequentialists who are as skeptical about Portmore’s state-of-affairs-centered accounts of action and desire as they are about his state-of-affairs centered account of reason, his positive arguments for TCR will also prove unpersuasive. TCR, recall, is the position that “S has more reasons to perform Ai than to perform Aj if and only if, and because, S has more reason to desire that Oi obtains than to desire that Oj obtains.” [58] But consider, for example, his argument for the commitment “to the right-hand side of that bi-conditional having explanatory priority.” [78] Portmore argues that the contrasting view, upon which it is the left-hand, ‘reasons to do’ side that is explanatorily prior, is revealed to be “clearly false” [78] by cases in which “what an agent has reason to do depends on what she has reason to desire.” [78] For example, I have more reason to put money in a savings account that yields 2% than in one that yields 1%, because I have more reason to desire that the 2% outcome obtains. But with the rejection of the state of affairs centered account of value kept clearly in view, such cases seem to pose no problem for opponents of TCR. They can readily allow both that the value of states of affairs, e.g. as better for me or better overall, provides me with reasons to act, in particular to promote, and that the value of persons and things provides me with other reasons to act – to treat people respectfully, preserve valuable things, etc. All such reasons are relevant to the determination of what I have the best reasons to do – to the left-hand side of the bi-conditional. In short, it is unclear why such examples cannot readily be accommodated by the opponent of TCR in an account upon which it is the left (reasons to do) side of the bi-conditional that in the relevant sense has explanatory priority. Although commitment to a state of affairs centered account of value may well support state of affairs centered accounts of reasons, desires, and actions, Portmore, in rejecting such an account of value, inadvertently undermines the case for a state of affairs centered account of reasons, in the process undermining the case for act-consequentialism.

That Portmore does not provide arguments for state of affairs centered accounts of desire and action, hence for his state of affairs centered account of reasons, does not establish that such arguments cannot be provided. The state of affairs centered account of action, for example, seems to find support from commitment to what has come to be known as the standard story of action, upon which the difference between an arm rising that is a raising of my arm (an action) and an arm rising that is a mere happening, not a raising of my arm, is that the arm rising in the one case is caused in the relevant way by the relevant sort of mental state, and is caused in the other case by something else. It seems natural to hold that on such a standard story actions all do aim at promoting some outcome, e.g. a rising of my arm, and that it is the *way* that a state of affairs is caused to happen that makes it a an action – a raising of my arm.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Similarly, one prevailing characterization of the direction of fit contrast appears to lend support to Portmore’s state of affairs centered account of desire, upon which the fundamental practical attitudes are desires that states of affairs obtain. The contrast, on this view, is between beliefs that aim to fit the world and desires that aim to make the world fit them.[[9]](#footnote-9) This contrast takes desires that phi to play an analogous and equally fundamental role in the practical sphere to the role played by beliefs that phi in the theoretical sphere. Like beliefs, such desires are taken to be propositional attitudes; the objects of desires and beliefs are states of the world. Within the context of this characterization of the contrast it can seem natural to take all reasons to act to be reasons to promote the states of affairs that are the objects of such desires.

Has Portmore offered a persuasive defense of TCR, hence of consequentialism? I have suggested that he has not. But he has rejected certain problematic defenses of TCR, and his own defense, relying on accounts of actions and desires either or both of which many non-consequentialists will reject, can at least draw upon the standard story of action and a common interpretation of the direction of fit contrast for support. I am far from alone in finding the standard story of action deeply suspect and in finding the common interpretation of the direction of fit contrast highly problematic. But to make a compelling case against TCR, Portmore has shown me that I need to substantiate these suspicions. I am suggesting, by contrast, that in order to counter-balance the natural line of argument that leads from the rejection of a state of affairs centered account of value to the rejection of TCR, Portmore needs to defend the state of affairs centered accounts of actions and desires upon which he draws in this illuminating book.

1. The question becomes particularly pressing with the realization that all consequentialist theories can also readily be ‘deontologized.’ See my “Consequentializing and Deontologizing: Clogging the Consequentialist Vacuum,” in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics, Vol. 3*, ed. Mark Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 123-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 95, and Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Aims as Reasons,” in *Reasons and Recognition*, R. J. Wallace, R. Kumar, and S. Freeman eds (New York: Oxford, 2011): pp. 43-78, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Annette Baier, “Act and Intent,” *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 67 (1970): 648-658. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 19-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*., pp. 19-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, on this point, Matthew Boyle and Douglas Lavin, “Goodness and Desire,” in *Desire, Practical Reason, and the* *Good*, Sergio Tenenbaum ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 161-201, esp. 170-74; Michael Thompson, *Life and Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 208): 97-105; and Richard Moran and Martin Stone, “Anscombe on Expression of Intention,” in *Essays on Anscombe’s Intention*, A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011): 33-75, e.g. 72-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lavin and Boyle, “Goodness and Desire,” pp. 168-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For presentations of this prevailing form of the contrast, see Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1979), pp. 256-7, and Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 111-119. There are multiple versions of this prevailing contrast, but it is the elements common to them that are relevant here. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)