

24.231 Ethics – Handout 14 Notes on Lenman, “Consequentialism and Cluelessness”

The Epistemic Argument:

- (1) Massive and inscrutable causal ramification is plausibly the norm for identity-affecting actions, and actions that feature in the causal ancestry of identity-affecting actions.
- (2) Many of the most morally significant actions are patently identity-affecting, and a very large number of actions that seem relatively insignificant feature in the causal ancestry of identity-affecting actions.
- (3) (From 2 and 3) Therefore, many of the most morally significant actions and a very large number of actions that seem relatively insignificant have massive and inscrutable causal ramifications. The foreseeable consequences of these actions are a drop in the ocean of their actual consequences.
- (4) Consequentialism holds that the right act is the one that has the best actual consequences.
- (5) (From 3 and 4) If consequentialism is true, then for very many of our actions, and most of our morally significant actions (particularly identity-affecting ones) it will be (very nearly) inscrutable whether we are acting rightly.
- (6) Hitler’s initiating the Holocaust was a dramatically identity-affecting action.
- (7) (From 5) If consequentialism is true, then it will be (very nearly) inscrutable whether Hitler acting wrongly.
- (8) It is not even nearly inscrutable whether Hitler acted wrongly in initiating the Holocaust.
- (9) So (from 7 and 8), Consequentialism is not true.

Another worry: Consequentialism isn’t a usable decision procedure (even for deciding on a decision procedure).

Possible responses:

- (i) Perhaps history doesn’t work like that – maybe Hitler’s birth wasn’t a necessary condition for the Holocaust.
- (ii) If Lenman grants us the Principle of Indifference, then his argument is a lot weaker than he makes it out to be, because there’s no reason we should “scale down” the strength or importance of the reasons we know about just because

we suspect there are very strong reasons we don't know about: a human life does not become less valuable just because other lives are also at stake.

(iii)Objective v. Subjective Consequentialism: Lenman says that the only justification for favoring subjective consequentialism as a decision procedure would be based on objective consequentialism – favoring it would actually produce the best results. But, he suggests, then we'll need to employ Obj. Consequentialism to guide our choice of decision procedures. And, if his Epistemic Argument is right, then we can't do this, because we're (largely?) clueless. But (a) "largely" may make an important difference here (see (ii) above); and (b) there may be independent grounds for favoring subjective consequentialism, not just as a decision procedure but as a criterion of rightness (as opposed to what's best) – it may better reflect the subject of morality.

(iv)The Epistemic Argument might depend on an implausibly broad conception of consequences. Say we understand the "consequences" of my action to be the effects my action *causes*. Then the extent to which distant future effects count amongst the consequences will depend on how we understand causation. In our ordinary use of the concept of cause, we often treat a causal chain as broken by the intervention of the voluntary actions of others or of coincidences. (E.g., steak-knives examples). If we think only "caused" effects count amongst consequences, this will be a way of holding on to the consequentialist thesis while blocking the argument for cluelessness. But it may stray too far from the spirit of consequentialism (consider again my example of the reasons for giving to famine relief, which don't seem to depend on whether the famine was caused by another agent (corrupt gov't) or by, say, drought).

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.231 Ethics
Fall 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.