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# A Companion to Ethics

Edited by

PETER SINGER

## Consequentialism

PHILIP PETTIT

### 1 The definition of consequentialism

MORAL theories, theories about what individual or institutional agents ought to do, all involve at least two different components. First, they each put forward a view about what is good or valuable, though they do not all make this explicit and may even resist talk of the good: they each put forward a view about which properties we ought to want realized in our actions or in the world more generally. A theory like classical utilitarianism holds that the only property that matters is how far sentient beings enjoy happiness. A natural law theory holds that the property which matters is compliance with the law of nature. Various other theories propose that what matters is human freedom, social solidarity, the autonomous development of nature, or a combination of such features. The possibilities are endless, since about the only commonly recognized constraint is that in order to be valuable a property must not involve a particular individual or setting essentially; it must be a universal feature, capable of being realized here or there, with this individual or that.

This first component in a moral theory is sometimes described as a theory of value or a theory of the good. (This component is discussed by Robert Goodin in Article 20, UTILITY AND THE GOOD.) The second component which every moral theory involves is often described in parallel as a theory of the right. It is a view, not about which properties are valuable, but about what individual and institutional agents should do by way of responding to valuable properties. Depending on the view adopted on this question, moral theories are usually divided into two kinds, consequentialist and non-consequentialist or, to use an older terminology, teleological and non-teleological: the non-teleological is sometimes identified with, and sometimes taken just to include, the deontological. This essay is concerned with consequentialist theories, as theories of the right, but not with any particular theory of value or of the good.

Suppose I decide, in a moment of intellectualist enthusiasm, that what matters above all in human life is that people understand the history of their species and their universe. How ought I to respond to this perceived value? Is my primary responsibility to honour it in my own life, bearing witness to the importance of such understanding by devoting myself to it? Or is my primary responsibility rather to promote such understanding generally, say by spending most of my time on proselytizing and politics, giving only the hours I cannot better spend to the

development of my own understanding? Is the proper response to the value one of promoting its general realization, honouring it in my own actions only when there is nothing better I can do to promote it?

Again, suppose I decide that what is of importance in life is nothing so abstract as intellectual understanding but rather the enjoyment of personal loyalties, whether the loyalties of family or friendship. Here too there is a question about how I should respond to such a value. Should I honour the value in my own life, devoting myself to developing the bonds of kith and kin? Or should I only permit myself such devotion so far as that is part of the more general project of promoting the enjoyment of personal loyalties? Should I be prepared to use my time in the manner most effective for that project even if the cost of doing so – say, the cost of spending so much time on journalism and politics – is that my own personal loyalties are put under severe strain?

These two examples are from the sphere of personal morality but the same question arises in the institutional area. Suppose that a liberal government comes to power, a government which is primarily concerned with people's enjoying liberty. Should such a government honour people's liberty punctiliously in its own conduct, avoiding any interference that offends against liberty? Or should it pursue all measures, including offences against liberty, that make for a greater degree of liberty overall? Imagine that a group forms which begins agitating for a return to authoritarian rule: say, a rule associated with an influential religious tradition. Imagine, to make things harder, that the group has a real chance of success. Should the government permit the group to conduct its activities, on the grounds of honouring people's liberty to form whatever associations they choose? Or should it ban the group, on the grounds that while the ban interferes with people's liberty, it makes for the enjoyment of a greater degree of liberty overall; it means that there will not be a return to an illiberal society.

Consequentialism is the view that whatever values an individual or institutional agent adopts, the proper response to those values is to promote them. The agent should honour the values only so far as honouring them is part of promoting them, or is necessary in order to promote them. Opponents of consequentialism, on the other hand, hold that at least some values call to be honoured whether or not they are thereby promoted. Consequentialists see the relation between values and agents as an instrumental one: agents are required to produce whatever actions have the property of promoting a designated value, even actions that fail intuitively to honour it. Opponents of consequentialism see the relation between values and agents as a non-instrumental one: agents are required or at least allowed to let their actions exemplify a designated value, even if this makes for a lesser realization of the value overall.

This way of introducing the distinction between consequentialism and non-consequentialism, by reference just to agents and values, is unusual but, I hope, intuitively appealing. One drawback it involves is that the notion of promoting a value, and even more so the notion of honouring a value, is not carefully defined. In the next section this fault is remedied in some measure. (The section will be too philosophical for many tastes but it can be read lightly without great loss.)

In order to introduce our more formal approach, it will be useful to define two notions: that of an option and that of a prognosis associated with an option. An option may be a directly behavioural option such as that expressed by a proposition like 'I do A' but equally it may be only indirectly behavioural, as with options such as 'I commit myself to being faithful to this principle of benevolence' or 'I endorse this trait of competitiveness in myself: I shall do nothing to change it'. The defining feature of an option is that it is a possibility which the agent is in a position to realize or not. He can make it the case – or not – that he does A, that he lets the principle of benevolence dictate his actions, or that he remains complacently competitive.

Although an option is a possibility that can be realized, the agent will almost never be able to determine how exactly the possibility works out; that will depend on other agents and on other things in the world. I may do A and it rains or not, I may do A and there is a third world war or not: the list is open. Given the differences in how such conditions can work out, any option has different prognoses. If an option is a possibility that can be realized, its prognoses are the different possible ways in which the possibility can come to be realised. The notion of a prognosis picks up one version of the familiar notion of a consequence.

Returning now to the definition of consequentialism, we can identify two propositions which consequentialists generally defend.

1 Every prognosis for an option, every way the world may be as the result of a choice of option, has a value that is determined, though perhaps not up to uniqueness, by the valuable properties realized there: determined by how far it is a happy world, a world in which liberty is respected, a world where nature thrives, and so on for different valuable properties; the value determined will not be unique, so far as the weightings between such properties are not uniquely fixed.

2 Every option, every possibility which an agent can realize or not, has its value fixed by the values of its prognoses: its value is a function of the values of its different prognoses, a function of the values associated with the different ways it may lead the world to be.

The motivation for going into this level of detail was to give clearer content to the notion of promoting a value. An agent promotes certain values in his or her choices, we can now say, if – and indeed only if – the agent ranks the prognoses of options in terms of these values (proposition 1) and ranks the options – where the ranking determines his choice – in terms of their prognoses (proposition 2). There is an indeterminacy in proposition 2, since it has been left open how exactly the value of an option is fixed by the values of its prognoses. The usual approach among consequentialists, though not the only possible one, is to cast an option as a gamble among the different possible prognoses and borrow a procedure from decision theory to compute its value. On this approach you find the value of the option by adding up the values of the different prognoses – and we assume these

prognosis has – say, a quarter of a nail – or being the correct one; I leave open the question of whether the appropriate probability to use is objective chance, subjective credence, 'rational' credence, or whatever. Suppose that the agent's concern is to save life and that in some dire circumstances two options present themselves: one gives a fifty per cent probability of saving one hundred lives, the other a certainty of saving forty. Other things being equal – which they will rarely be – the approach would favour the first option.

We now have a better grasp of what it is the consequentialist says. The consequentialist holds that the proper way for an agent to respond to any values recognized is to promote them: that is, in every choice to select the option with prognoses that mean it is the best gamble with those values. But we can now also be somewhat more specific about what the non-consequentialist says. There are two varieties of non-consequentialism, two ways of holding that certain values should be honoured, not promoted. One variety insists that while there are respectful or loyal options, there is no sense to the notion of promoting the abstract value of loyalty or respect. This is to deny the consequentialist's first proposition, holding that values like loyalty and respect do not determine abstract scores for the different prognoses of an option; the values are irrelevant to prognoses, failing even to determine non-unique scores. The other position which the non-consequentialist may take is to admit the first proposition, acknowledging that the notion of an agent promoting values at least makes sense, but to deny the second: that is, deny that the best option is necessarily determined by the values of its prognoses. The important thing is not to produce the goods but to keep your hands clean.

One last thought, while we are being more formal, on non-consequentialism. This is that non-consequentialists assume with the properties they think should be honoured rather than promoted, that the agent will always be in a position to know for certain whether an option will or will not have one of those properties. Faced with a value like that of respect or loyalty, the idea is that I will never be uncertain whether or not a given option will be respectful or loyal. The assumption of certainty may be reasonable with such examples but it will not generally be so. And that means that with some valuable properties, the non-consequentialist strategy will often be undefined. Take a property like that of happiness. This value can lend itself to being honoured as well as being promoted: honouring it might require concern for the happiness of those you deal with directly, regardless of indirect effects. But it will not always be clear in practice what a non-consequentialist attachment to happiness requires. Non-consequentialists do not tell us how to choose when none of the available options is going to display the relevant value for sure. And there will often be cases of this kind with a value like that of happiness. There will often be cases where none of the options offers a certainty of doing well by the happiness of those you are dealing with directly; cases where one option offers a certain chance of that result and a second option offers the best prospect for happiness overall. The non-consequentialist response in such cases is simply not defined.

### iii The main argument against consequentialism

It is usually said against consequentialism that it would lead an agent to do horrendous deeds, so long as they promised the best consequences. It would forbid nothing absolutely: not rape, not torture, not even murder. This charge is on target but it is only relevant of course in horrendous circumstances. Thus if someone of ordinary values condoned torture, that would only be in circumstances where there was a great potential gain – the saving of innocent lives, the prevention of a catastrophe – and where there were not the bad consequences involved, say, in state authorities claiming the right to torture. Once it is clear that the charge is relevant only in horrendous circumstances, it ceases to be clearly damaging. After all the non-consequentialist will often have to defend an equally unattractive response in such circumstances. It may be awful to think of torturing someone but it must be equally awful to think of not doing so and consequently allowing, say, a massive bomb to go off in some public place.

Probably in view of this stand-off, the charge against consequentialism usually reduces to the associated claim that not only would it allow horrendous deeds in exceptional circumstances, it would allow and indeed encourage the general habit of contemplating such deeds: or if not of actively contemplating the deeds, at least of countenancing the possibility that they may be necessary. Consequentialism, it is said, would make nothing unthinkable. It would not allow agents to admit any constraints on what they can do, whether constraints associated with the rights of other people as independent agents or constraints associated with the claims of those who relate to them as intimates or dependants.

The idea behind this charge is that any consequentialist moral theory requires agents to change their deliberative habits in an objectionable fashion. They will have to calculate about every choice, it is said, identifying the different prognoses for every option, the value associated with each prognosis and the upshot of those various values for the value of the option. Doing this, they will be unable to recognize the rights of others as considerations that ought to constrain them without further thought to consequences; they will be unable to acknowledge the special claims of those near and dear to them, claims that ought normally to brook no calculation; and they will be unable to mark distinctions between permissible options, obligatory options and options of supererogatory virtue. They will become moralistic computers, insensitive to all such nuances. F. H. Bradley made the point nicely in the last century, in *Ethical Studies* (p. 107). 'So far as my lights go, this is to make possible, to justify, and even to encourage, an incessant practical casuistry; and that, it need scarcely be added, is the death of morality.'

But if this sort of charge was made in the last century, so it was also rebutted then, particularly by writers like John Austin and Henry Sidgwick. Such writers defended classical utilitarianism, the consequentialist moral theory according to which the only value is the happiness of human, or at least sentient beings. Austin picked a nice example when arguing in *The Province of Jurisprudence* (p. 108) that the utilitarian does not require agents to be incessant casuists. 'Though he approves of love because it accords with his principle, he is far from maintaining

that the general good ought to be the motive of the lover. It was never contended or conceived by a sound, orthodox utilitarian, that the lover should kiss his mistress with an eye to a common weal.'

The point which Austin is making in this passage is that a consequentialist theory like utilitarianism is an account of what justifies an option over alternatives – the fact that it promotes the relevant value – not an account of how agents ought to deliberate in selecting the option. The lover's act may be justified by its promotion of human happiness, in which case the utilitarian will applaud. But that does not mean that the utilitarian expects lovers to select and monitor their overtures by reference to that abstract goal.

The line which non-consequentialists generally run against this response is to deny that it is available to their opponents. They say that if a consequentialist thinks that an agent's choices are justified or not by whether they promote certain values, then the consequentialist is committed to saying that the moral agent – the agent who seeks to be justified – should deliberate over how far in any setting the different options promote those values. In saying this, they assume that such deliberation is the best way for an agent to guarantee that the choice made promotes the values espoused.

This non-consequentialist rejoinder is unpersuasive, however, because that assumption is clearly false. Consider again the lover and his mistress. If the lover calculates his every embrace, fine-tuning it to the demands of the general happiness, there will probably be little pleasure in it for either party. A condition of the embrace's producing pleasure, and therefore of its contributing to the general happiness, is that it is relatively spontaneous, coming of natural and unreflective affections. The point hardly needs labouring.

But though the point is clear, and though it clearly applies in a variety of cases, it raises a question which consequentialists have been too slow to tackle, at least until recently. The question is this. Granted that consequentialism is a theory of justification, not a theory of deliberation, what practical difference – what difference in deliberative policy – is made by being a consequentialist? Suppose the lover in Austin's example were to become himself a utilitarian. What sort of policy could he then adopt, granted he would not tie himself to considering the utilitarian pros and cons of his every action?

The answer usually offered by consequentialists nowadays is motivated by the observation in the last section that the options that call for assessment in consequentialist terms – the possibilities over which an agent is decisive – include options which are only indirectly behavioural as well as alternative actions he may take in any context. They include options such as whether or not to endorse a certain motive or trait of character, letting it have its untrammelled way in some settings, and options such as whether or not to make a commitment to a certain principle – say, the principle of respecting a particular right in others – giving it the status of an automatic behavioural pilot in suitable circumstances.

The fact that the option-sets faced by agents include many of this kind means that if they become consequentialists, their conversion to that doctrine can have a practical effect on how they behave without having the clearly undesirable effect

of turning them into incessant calculators. It may have the effect of leading an agent to endorse certain traits or principles, traits or principles that lead him or her in suitable contexts to act in a spontaneous, uncalculating way. It will have this effect, in particular, if choosing to go in thrall to such pre-emptors of calculation is the best way to promote the values that the agent cherishes.

But won't it always be best if agents keep their calculative wits sharpened, having an eye in every case as to whether following the automatic pilot of trait or principle really does best promote their values? And in that case shouldn't the consequentialist agent still remain, in a sense, an incessant calculator?

This is a question at the forefront of contemporary consequentialist discussions. The answers canvassed among consequentialists are various. One answer is that agents are so fallible, at least in the heat of decision-making, that the calculative monitoring envisaged here would probably do more harm than good. Another is that some of the relevant pre-emptors of calculation, for example certain traits that the agent may nurture – say, the trait of being obsessed about completing tasks – are such that once in play they are incapable of being controlled via monitoring. Yet another answer, one particularly favoured by the present writer, is that many values are such that their promotion is undermined if habits of deliberation – pre-emptors of calculation – which are designed to promote them are subjected to calculative monitoring. Suppose I commit myself to the principle of saying what first comes to mind in conversation in order to promote my spontaneity. I will undermine the promotion of that value if I attempt to monitor and control my remarks. Or suppose I commit myself to the principle of letting my teenage daughter have her way in a certain sphere – say, in her choice of clothes – in order to promote her sense of independence and self. Again I will subvert the promotion of that value, at least assuming that I am relatively scrutable, if I try to monitor and moderate the tolerance I offer. In each case, within suitable contexts, I must put myself more or less blindly on automatic pilot if I am to promote the value in question.

The brand of consequentialism which is explicit about the possibility that being a consequentialist may motivate an agent to restrict calculation over consequences is sometimes described as indirect, sometimes as strategic, sometimes as restrictive. Such restrictive consequentialism promises to be capable of answering the various challenges associated with the main argument against consequentialism, but that claim can hardly be documented here. In concluding our discussion of that argument the only point that calls to be made is that restrictive consequentialism in this sense should not be confused with what is called restricted or rule-consequentialism, as distinct from extreme or act-consequentialism. That doctrine no longer much in vogue, claims that rules of behaviour are justified by whether compliance or attempted compliance best promotes the relevant values, but that behavioural options are justified in other terms: specifically, by whether they comply or attempt to comply with the optimal rules. The restrictive consequentialism to which we have been introduced is not half-hearted in this way; it is a form of extreme or act-consequentialism. It holds that the test for whether any option is justified is consequentialist, whether the option be directly or

indirectly behavioural: the best option is that which best promotes the agent's values. What makes it restrictive is simply the recognition that agents may best promote their values in behavioural choices, if they restrict the tendency to calculate, abjuring the right to consider all relevant consequences.

#### iv The main argument for consequentialism

The key to the main argument for consequentialism is a proposition which we have so far taken for granted, that every moral theory invokes values such that it can make sense to recommend in consequentialist fashion that they be promoted or in non-consequentialist that they be honoured. The proposition is fairly compelling. Every moral theory designates certain choices as the right ones for an agent to make. In any such case, however, what the theory is committed to recommending is not just this or that choice by this or that agent but the choice of this type of option by that sort of agent in these kinds of circumstances: this is a commitment, as it is sometimes said, of universalizability. (See Article 40, UNIVERSAL PRESCRIPTIVISM, for more on this aspect of moral judgement.) The commitment means that every moral theory invokes values, for the fact that such and such choices are made is now seen as a desirable property to have realized.

The other aspect of our key proposition is that with any value at all, with any property that is hailed as desirable, we can identify a consequentialist and a non-consequentialist response. We can make sense of the notion of promoting or honouring the value. I hope that this claim can be supported by the sorts of examples introduced at the beginning. We saw there that an agent might think of honouring or promoting values to do with intellectual understanding, personal loyalty and political liberty. It should be clear by analogy that the same possibilities arise with all desirable properties. As we also saw, I can think of honouring a value traditionally associated with consequentialism such as that of people's enjoying happiness, though uncertainty about options may sometimes leave the strategy undefined; to honour this will be to try not to cause anyone unhappiness directly, even if doing so would increase happiness overall. And I can think of promoting a value as intimately linked with non-consequentialist theories as that of respect for persons: to promote this will be to try to ensure that people respect one another as much as possible, even if this requires disrespecting some.

Our key proposition motivates an argument for consequentialism, because it shows that the non-consequentialist is committed to a theory which is seriously defective in regard to the methodological virtue of simplicity. It is common practice in the sciences and in intellectual disciplines generally to prefer the more simple hypothesis to the less, when otherwise they are equally satisfactory. Consequentialism, it turns out, is indisputably a simpler hypothesis than any form of non-consequentialism and that means that, failing objections such as those rejected in the last section, it ought to be preferred to it. If non-consequentialists have not seen how much their view loses on the side of simplicity, that may be because they do not generally assent to our key proposition. They imagine that

there are certain values which are susceptible only to being promoted, others that are susceptible only to being honoured.

There are at least three respects in which consequentialism scores on simplicity. The first is that whereas consequentialists endorse only one way of responding to values, non-consequentialists endorse two. Non-consequentialists all commit themselves to the view that certain values should be honoured rather than promoted: say, values like those associated with loyalty and respect. But they all agree, whether or not in their role as moral theorists, that certain other values should be promoted: values as various as economic prosperity, personal hygiene, and the safety of nuclear installations. Thus where consequentialists introduce a single axiom on how values justify choices, non-consequentialists must introduce two.

But not only is non-consequentialism less simple for losing the numbers game. It is also less simple for playing the game in an *ad hoc* way. Non-consequentialists all identify certain values as suitable for honouring rather than promoting. But they do not generally explain what it is about the values identified which means that justification comes from their being honoured rather than promoted. And indeed it is not clear what satisfactory explanation can be provided. It is one thing to make a list of the values which allegedly require honouring: values, say, like personal loyalty, respect for others, and punishment for wrongdoing. It is another to say why these values are so very different from the ordinary run of desirable properties. There may be features that mark them off from other values, but why do those features matter so much? That question typically goes unconsidered by non-consequentialists. Not only do they have a duality then where consequentialists have a unity, they also have an unexplained duality.

The third respect in which consequentialism scores on the simplicity count is that it fits nicely with our standard views of what rationality requires, whereas non-consequentialism is in tension with such views. The agent concerned with a value is in a parallel position to that of an agent concerned with some personal good: say, health or income or status. In thinking about how an agent should act on the concern for a personal good, we unhesitatingly say that of course the rational thing to do, the rationally justified action, is to act so that the good is promoted. That means then that whereas the consequentialist line on how values justify choices is continuous with the standard line on rationality in the pursuit of personal goods, the non-consequentialist line is not. The non-consequentialist has the embarrassment of having to defend a position on what certain values require which is without analogue in the non-moral area of practical rationality.

If these considerations of simplicity are not sufficient to motivate a consequentialist outlook, the only recourse for a consequentialist is probably to draw attention to the detail of what the non-consequentialist says, inviting reflection on whether this really is plausible. In the second section above we saw that non-consequentialists have to deny either that the values they espouse determine values for the prognoses of an option or that the value of an option is a function of the values associated with those different prognoses. The consequentialist can reasonably argue that either claim is implausible. If one prognosis realizes my

values more than another then that surely fixes its value. And if one option has prognoses such that it represents a better gamble than another with those values, then that surely suggests that it is the best option for me to take. So how can the non-consequentialist think otherwise?

Of course, the consequentialist should ideally have an answer to that question. The consequentialist should be able to offer some explanation of how non-consequentialists come mistakenly to think the things they believe. It may be useful to say a word on this in conclusion.

There are at least two observations which ought to figure in a consequentialist explanation of how non-consequentialists come to hold their views. The first has already been suggested in this essay. It is that non-consequentialists probably focus on deliberation rather than justification and, noticing that it will often be counter-productive to deliberate about the promotion of a value involved in action – a value like loyalty or respect – conclude that in such cases choices are justified by honouring the values, not by promoting them. Here there is a mistake but at least it is an intelligible mistake. Thus it may help the consequentialist to make sense of the commitments of opponents.

The second observation is one that we have not made explicitly before and it offers a good ending note. This is that many deontological theories come from acknowledging the force of the consequentialist point about justification but then containing it in some way. One example is the rule-consequentialist who restricts his consequentialism to choices between rules, arguing that behavioural choices are justified by reference to the rules so chosen. Another example, more significantly, is the non-consequentialist who holds that each agent ought to choose in such a way that were everyone to make that sort of choice then the value or values in question would be promoted. Here the thought is that consequentialism is suitable for assessing the choices of the collectivity but not of its members. The collectivity ought to choose so that the values are promoted, the individual ought to choose, not necessarily in the way that actually promotes the values, but in the way that would promote them if everybody else made a similar choice. Here as in the other case the non-consequentialist position is motivated by the consequentialist thought. That will not make it congenial to the consequentialist, who will think that the thought is not systematically enough applied: the consequentialist will say that it is as relevant to the individual agent as to the collectivity. But the observation may help consequentialists to make sense of their opponents and thereby reinforce their own position. They can argue that they are not overlooking any consideration that non-consequentialists find persuasive. What non-consequentialists find persuasive is something which consequentialists are able to understand, and to undermine.

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Utility and the good

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THEORIES of ethics are standardly partitioned into theories of the right and theories of the good. The latter style of ethical theory, insisting as it does that good consequences be promoted, clearly needs a theory of the good in order to say which consequences are good and to be promoted and which are not. But even the former style of ethical theory often finds itself needing some theory of the good, if only to flesh out the 'duty of beneficence' that is standardly included among the 'right things' to be done: obviously, we will need a theory of the good to tell us how, exactly, to go about discharging that duty to do good for others. So a theory of the good seems pretty well indispensable, whatever your fundamental ethical stance.

Naturally, however, there is much less agreement on the content and the source of a theory of the good than there is on our need for some such theory in the first place. Even a thoroughly ugly world, some would say, might display excellence of a sort. Still, beneath it all, most theories of the good seem ultimately to appeal to broadly similar standards of goodness. Most ultimately have recourse to a broadly Aristotelian principle which analyses excellence in terms of a rich complexity that has been somehow successfully integrated. The good, it is standardly said, consists essentially in the organic unity of a complex whole.

That broad agreement, though, comes basically in the realm of aesthetics. The crucial question is whether any such theory really can do the work cut out for it in our ethical theories. Where our ethics require a theory of the good, is that the sort of thing that can plausibly be plugged in to fill the gap?

Arguably it is not. Ethics is not aesthetics, and no more. We may well have a duty, among our many other duties, to promote truth and beauty, as ends in themselves and even if that quest does no good for anyone. The last person on earth may well have a duty not to destroy it all as he or she dies, even though by so doing no-one's good will have suffered. But promoting things that are good in themselves, without being good for anyone, is not what ethics is principally about.

Ethics is a theory of social relations. The injunctions of ethics are principally injunctions to do good for people, and for sentient beings more generally perhaps. Henry Sidgwick may have exaggerated when asking rhetorically in his *Methods of Ethics* whether anything can really be good if it has no effect — direct or indirect, actual or potential — on any being's state of consciousness. Perhaps we can contrive contorted examples to show some such things to be good, in that more abstract sense. But our duty to promote that good would be severely attenuated