

Thomas Gil

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The word “consequences” is associated with the practical world of behaviour, actions, choices and decisions. We know that our actions have consequences, we experience that expected consequences may motivate us, and we feel somehow that we can always learn from consequences. The way we behave and act has consequences, large and small. Expected consequences drive and motivate us. We learn from consequences, and neuroscientists tell us that learning from consequences expands and rewires our brain. Consequences are everywhere in the practical world of actions and interactions. Appropriate communication brings many rewards, we follow rules (or break them) because of consequences.

In philosophy, consequences are associated with moral theory, especially with consequentialist and utilitarian arguments that concentrate on beneficial effects when determining what morality is all about.

The perspective that guided the following essay, however, is not exclusively a practical or moral one. My interest is also an ontological interest. Consequently, I conceive of consequences as a fundamental part of what there is, of what is real. In the world, there are things and qualities, events and structures, powers and regularities. And there

are consequences intrinsically and essentially connected to what there is.

## Tendencies and Dispositions

Consequences are everywhere. We can see and observe some of them. Other animals do it too when they detect regularities, without knowing that or how they do it. Other consequences come about when we do something or cause something in our environment. And we can imagine what would happen if things were differently, or if we intervened and did something altering how things actually are. “Seeing”, “doing” and “imagining” are the three levels of cognitive ability Judea Pearl and Dana Mackenzie distinguish in their model of causal thinking and causal inferences (Pearl, Mackenzie, 27). These three levels of cognitive ability are our access to the real consequences that come about in the world, independently from our competence to detect them properly. We may see what consequences actually come about. We actually may cause certain consequences. And, counterfactually, we may imagine consequences that would really come about if things were differently.

Knowing how things are, we may know what may happen where these things are involved. Thomas Aquinas holds that things tend to act in a specific way because they are what they are. They become agents in certain situations the way they are.

Aquinas operates with the concepts of “tendency”, “inclination” and “appetitus”, and although his illustrations are a severe hindrance (as they are all vitiated by obsolete science), what Aquinas says and how he sees things could easily be brought up-to-date.

The term “disposition” has become prominent in many present discussions of causation and natural laws. Flexibility, fragility, inflammability and solubility (to give just four examples) are different properties things and kinds possess. And having knowledge about such properties is knowing how certain things and kinds will behave in various circumstances, that is, knowing tendencies and inclinations of those things and kinds.

“Dispositional” properties are contrasted with “categorical” properties. Most “categorical” properties are observable, but not all. “Dispositional” properties seem to exist in an intermediate realm between potentiality and actuality. Perhaps it would be better to say that they are real propensities, real tendencies of things and kinds.

Dispositional properties have causal consequences. They contribute substantially to the causal powers of the things that have them, or can be considered to be causal powers of the things that have them. Being fragile (that is, possessing the property of “fragility”) is causally relevant for an

object breaking when dropped. And being soluble (that is, possessing the property of “solubility”) is causally relevant for a substance’s dissolution upon immersion in water. Something (namely, the dispositional property) about the substance is relevant to the behaviour it exhibits when interacting with the world around it. And it is this relevant something about the substance or object that is the property that can be called the cause of certain occurrences or manifestations. Being fragile, once again, is having a property (having something) that in certain conditions can cause breakage when there is a suitable stimulus event, such as the object being dropped. Fragility is thus causally relevant in specific circumstances or situations.



## Powers and Agency

Agents intervene in what is continually happening in the world, making thus a difference. Therefore, agency transforms the world in certain ways. As such the idea of agency appears to be the paradigm of a causal idea. Whenever agents act they make something happen. They cause something.

Agents receive information from the world. They are determined by conditions that exist. They are influenced by existent circumstances so that agency implies a certain degree of passivity. But agents can react and act. They have powers according to their own nature and constitution.

There are different kinds of agents. Some agents have mental states, that is, representational and motivational states that explain their behaviour. Others have no such mental states. They are not rational practical or epistemic agents. Cleaning and corrosive agents do not represent how the world is, and they do not desire anything as they do not have mental states that motivate them to act. They have a specific profile and nature.

All agents, the mental ones and the non-mental ones, have causal powers. But what are really “powers”? In a theory that is a rejection of the Humean view that all necessary connections are in some sense mind-dependent, George Molnar

presents “powers” in a fivefold characterization. “Powers” are for Molnar “directed”, “independent”, “actual”, “intrinsic”, and “objective”.

“Directedness” means that there is something like “physical intentionality” on a par with the “mental intentionality” Brentano and others who followed him discussed. The “directedness” claim is certainly the most controversial claim of Molnar’s theory. “Independence” means that the existence of a power is independent of the existence of its manifestation. Powers exist, as a consequence, whether manifested or not. Molnar dismisses the conditional analysis of power ascriptions. “Actuality” means simply that powers are real. Such powers are “intrinsic” properties of their bearers. “Objectivity” means that physical powers do not depend on how we cognize them. Powers are mind-independent. For George Molnar, powers are the key with which we are able to unlock many other metaphysical problems.

Existent things have powers, causal powers. But they do not have them as additional things. The powers they have are the specificity of their own nature and constitution. To be something is to have certain properties. And some of such properties are powers that may explain what happens in the world, and what is the specific contribution of individual things to what happens in the world.

In his theory of powers, Molnar distinguishes “basic” and “derived” properties and powers. This seems to be an important distinction. Some things are complex. They have simpler parts or constituents. Some properties or powers are such that having them by a thing depends either on some other intrinsic properties of the thing, or on some intrinsic properties of the thing’s parts. Such properties or powers are “derivative”. Properties and powers that are not “derivative” are “basic”. Molnar arrives at the following definition: “A power is derivative if the presence of this power in the object depends on the powers that its constituents have and the special relations in which constituents stand to each other” (Molnar, 144). Derivation is for Molnar a way of limiting the powers that have to be postulated as independently existing to a few pervasive and general types.



## Consequences

Consequences are always consequences of something, consequences of “x”. “X” as a variable may be satisfied by “facts”, “states”, “events” etc. And consequences can be facts, states, events, constraints, conditions, possibilities and options.

Speaking of consequences means dealing with time. Due to past events something in the present comes about, and we may try to predict what is going to be the case in the future as a consequence of what is now the case.

Expected consequences introduce uncertainty in our reasoning. Therefore, “consequences” bring together ontology and epistemology. Consequences are something real, coming about and happening independently from our beliefs. But, somehow, our beliefs play an important role when we observe, expect or anticipate consequences.

Beliefs are indeed important when observing and anticipating consequences. Not in the sense that they create the observed and anticipated consequences, but in the sense that they (when they are true) make us sensitive for what there is: the objective consequences already existing, or those objective consequences that are going to come about.

Beliefs serve us in several ways. Some beliefs help us make predictions. Others help us understand a subject in more detail. In medicine, for instance, physicians use beliefs that they have acquired in medical school, from scientific journals, and on-the-job practice to diagnose and predict the course of a disease and to prescribe appropriate therapies to cure or mitigate it. Companies and business organizations use beliefs to predict likely results of new strategies, and all sorts of actions that might be taken. In everyday life, we all make belief-based predictions. Beliefs help us make decisions about career choice, mate selection, health practices, friendships, and many other aspects of our personal lives.

Beliefs are important when perceiving current situations, identifying appropriate actions, and predicting effects and consequences of those actions. Beliefs help us explain what we observe in daily life and in science. Science, after all, is about finding adequate explanations for things observed. And some beliefs just make us feel good, that being one reason why people hold them. Such beliefs are then comforting. Many comforting beliefs may be fairy tales, but fairy tales can be quite seductive. Comforting beliefs can certainly influence our abilities in the practical world and thus be self-fulfilling. But beliefs do not create

or transform the objective consequences of what there is, and what happens. Psychologically (there is no doubt about it) beliefs can make objective consequences bearable.



## Ethical Consequentialism

For the defenders of ethical consequentialism the criterion of right and wrong can only be the beneficial effects or consequences of our actions. Acts or actions are good, morally speaking, if they contribute positively to our moral well-being, that is, if they have good effects or results. A good effect or result is a “utility” for the subspecies of consequentialists called “Utilitarians”.

Many Utilitarians from Epicurus to Jeremy Bentham identified “utility” with pleasure or the exemption of pain. In John Stuart Mill’s (masterly found) own words: “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure” (Mill, 257). Pleasure and freedom from pain are indeed for classical Utilitarians the only things desirable as ends, so that all desirable things are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in them, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

As such a view excited in many minds considerable dislike, John Stuart Mill stressed that the pleasure

meant by Utilitarians could not be the pleasure experienced by beasts but the pleasure or pleasures that correspond to human beings who have many mental faculties more elevated and subtle than animal appetites. There are different kinds of pleasure (intellectual pleasures, emotional pleasures and pleasures of the imagination), and all of them were included, so Mill, in the concept of pleasure used by Utilitarians.

Pleasure when a being of higher faculties is concerned means something else than the pleasure characteristic of beings of an inferior type. The cultivated man's pleasures are the ones meant when Utilitarians talk about pleasure. The pleasures of persons who find sources of interest in all that surrounds them: in the objects of nature and the achievements of art, in the imaginations of poetry and the incidents of human history. And it is not the pleasures of a single individual that count, but the pleasures that result for all individuals. What counts is the promotion of the general good conceived of as happiness. Therefore, particular motives that lead to beneficial actions are less important than the obtained results arrived at. Saving someone from drowning is the morally right thing to do, whether the motive is duty or the hope of being paid.

Utilitarianism is a morality of right, beneficial actions and results. The promotion of total happiness is what really counts for it. Utilitarians are aware of the fact that sometimes right actions do not necessarily indicate a virtuous character. But having to choose, they let the moral quality of an action depend on the factual results achieved by it, and not on the agent's motives that lead to it. And they believe that in the long run the best proof of a good character is good actions, refusing to consider mental dispositions as good of which the predominant tendency is to create bad conduct.

The happiness Utilitarians want to promote is not the happiness of single individuals but total happiness, the happiness of wholes. Impartiality between persons or agents belongs therefore as an essential principle to Utilitarianism. In Bentham's words: "Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one." All persons are to be treated equally, except when some recognized social expediency requires the reverse. Neutrality concerning individual agents characterizes utilitarian ethics. In his book "The Methods of Ethics", in which Utilitarianism is contrasted with "Egoism" and "Intuitionism" Henry Sidgwick calls Utilitarianism "Universal Hedonism" and defines it in the following way: "By Utilitarianism is here meant the ethical theory, that the conduct which,

under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct” (Sidgwick, 411).

Utilitarianism assumes that all pleasures that get into the calculation are capable of being compared with one another and with all pains so that the greatest possible surplus of pleasure over pain can be determined. That is not going to be always possible in a precise way. Practical Utilitarian reasoning will sometimes be rough. But that is no reason for not making it as accurate as the case admits.

Utilitarianism is, in principle, compatible with the morality of common sense. It sustains the general validity of well established moral judgments. But it intends to supplement possible defects which reflection may find in the intuitive recognition of their stringency so that Utilitarianism may be presented as the scientifically complete and systematically reflective form of traditional regulation of conduct which through the course of human history has always tended to prevail.

Utilitarianism pretends to be able to cope with hard, difficult cases that may imply that certain established rules may be outweighed by strong

special reasons: cases traditional morality would not be able to deal with or properly handle. However, Utilitarianism does not want to eliminate traditional morality at all. Well aware of its positive effects for ordinary men in ordinary circumstances, Utilitarianism intends to revise it only whenever and wherever it is necessary or beneficial to do it.

As a moral theory Utilitarianism is flexible and creative enough to accept and to integrate possible critical objections inducing like that processes of improvement and refinement.

One of the main objections put forward against Utilitarian ethics is that we cannot tell how what will become reality as a consequence of our doings and decisions is going to be actually experienced. "We never know!" We cannot actually tell now whether expected utilities will be real utilities for us in the future. Things, circumstances, and acting individuals do really change so that there is a fundamental difference between now and then, between anticipated desire satisfaction and experienced desire satisfaction. Daniel Gilbert summarizes his research on this difference (or disparity) in the following lines: "I've claimed that when we imagine our futures we tend to fill in, leave out, and take little account of how differently we will think about the future once we actually get there"

(Gilbert, 245). Things always look different once they happen. And anticipated consequences never are actually experienced consequences, as laws that bind numbers to numbers never bind objective events to actual experiences.

Laurie A. Paul operates with the concept of “transformative experience” in order to explain the difference between desiring, expecting selves and actually experiencing selves: a difference that manifests the restrictive perspective of rational decision models that concentrate exclusively on objective probabilities and present subjective desirabilities.

Reality is, indeed, full of consequences. What these consequences mean depends on many factors and conditions. Some of these conditions are related to the way human agents actually feel and experience.

## Going Beyond Ethical Consequentialism

If real consequences are not always consequences of human actions and human doings, and if in reality not all agents are human agents, the position of an exclusive ethical consequentialism seems to be a restrictive philosophical approach. There are consequences everywhere. Consequences are a fundamental part of reality. Much more: actual reality could be considered to be a result of consequences or, better, the class of all consequences. Philosophy as the intellectual effort to grasp conceptually world structure would be then a study of consequences.

Concentrating on consequences is bringing together ontology and epistemology. Consequences do happen even if we don't arrive at knowing them. World structure exists, indeed, independently of our ideas and states of consciousness. But for philosophy, the question about how we do grasp consequences is fundamental. There are many ways and methods to know consequences, depending on the consequences in question and the sciences that track them. Philosophical consequentialism would be the philosophy interested in real consequences and in finding out how we track them. As a realist philosophy, philosophi-

cal consequentialism wants more than apt instruments for systematization and prediction of observable phenomena. It wants to get to what there is and to what follows from what there is. Its firm conviction is that, thinking properly, we can (to use Plato's, David Lewis' and Theodore Sider's pertinent expression) "carve at reality's joints". In philosophy, like in everyday life and in the sciences, we are concerned with objects and events in the world "outside the head". We want to know them, and we want to know how we can know them. "Empirically adequate" models and theories are not enough. Reality is not dependent on the believer. Reality is not dependent on human epistemic powers. Reality, however, is epistemically accessible, and philosophical consequentialism tries to get epistemic access to it through real consequences.

Consequences are not posited. They occur independently of our ability to know, verify, and recognize that they do. The empirical success of our explanations and theories is not enough. Although certainly in the right direction, the empirical success account is incomplete. We want to know, and we can actually know what there is, what happens, and how it happens, that is, how something follows from something, or how something leads to something.

The consequences that interest philosophical consequentialism are real consequences. They depend on what there is, on facts of the world. They go, therefore, beyond formal derivability or mere provability within a given deductive system. They go beyond all such independent deductive systems. They belong to the stuff reality is made of.



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