

Consequentialism and Evaluative Conflict between Actions

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Consequentialism is criticized for allowing evaluative conflict between motive and action: a right motive might lead an agent to perform a wrong act. This might be unproblematic, but Consequentialism allows another evaluative conflict, the one between actions. Suppose your sending a check to a certain charity, say, Oxfam, would have the best consequences if performed. Then, according to Consequentialism, you ought to send a check to Oxfam. Now consider whether the act of writing a check or even bringing the check in front of a post office would have the best consequences if performed. Perhaps it wouldn't: you might fail to post the check to Oxfam for, say, the weakness of will. Then, you ought not to write or bring the check. Thus, it is possible that you ought to perform an action while you ought not to perform its part or prerequisite, because they can have different consequences. This is problematic because one cannot perform an action without performing its parts and prerequisites, and evaluative conflict between the action and its part or prerequisite leaves us wondering what to do. This paper considers several responses to this performative evaluative conflict, such as: (1) the action you might fail to perform is not an option, i.e., what one can judge whether to perform; (2) the deontic status of action is determined by its parts and prerequisites; and (3) the deontic status of action determines the status of its parts and prerequisites. After repudiating these responses, I present the best solution.

