Act Consequentialism, Reasons, and Morality

169 Sidgwick’s Profoundest Problem

We can now return to Sidgwick’s ‘profoundest problem’. Sidgwick asked:

How should I live? What should I care about, and what should I do?

Two answers seemed to Sidgwick to be clearly true. There are, he believed, two supremely rational aims: Our Own Good and Universal Good. As Strong Rational Egoists claim:

We always have most reason to do whatever would be best for ourselves.

As some Strong Rational Impartialists claim:

We always have most reason to do whatever would be impartially best, by being, on the whole, best for everyone.

These claims might both be true. In what Sidgwick called a ‘rational universe’, Our Own Good would never conflict with Universal Good. But Sidgwick reluctantly concluded that the actual Universe is not rational. He believed that

(A) in some cases, one of our possible acts would be impartially best, but another act would be best for ourselves.

Sidgwick’s beliefs together imply that

(B) in such cases, we would have most reason to act in each of these ways.

But this claim is a contradiction. We couldn’t have most reason, or more reason, to act in each of two different ways.

I claimed that, to avoid this contradiction, Sidgwick revised his beliefs. According to what I called Sidgwick’s

_Dualism of Practical Reason_, or DPR: We always have most reason to do whatever would be impartially best, unless some other act would be best for ourselves. In such cases, we would have sufficient reasons—-or enough reason---to act in either way.

As de Lazari-Radek and Singer point out, it is not clear that Sidgwick did revise his beliefs by accepting DPR. Sidgwick makes some remarks which seem to imply DPR. But Sidgwick never dropped his claim that, if we
sometimes have to choose between some act that is impartially best and some act that is best for ourselves, ‘Practical Reason’ would not be ‘consistent with itself’. Such cases would

force us to admit an ultimate and fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is Reasonable in conduct. . . from this admission it would seem to follow that the apparently intuitive operation of the Practical Reason, manifested in these contradictory judgments, is after all illusory.

Sharing my high opinion of Sidgwick’s Methods, de Lazari-Radek and Singer write:

If the conclusion of the best book ever written on ethics is that some of our apparently most solid and carefully examined intuitions about practical reason are illusory, this poses a serious problem for anyone who, like Parfit, defends the view that we can know some ethical judgments to be objectively true because they are based on reason.

According to what we can call this

Objective’s Problem: If there are contradictions between some of our most carefully considered normative intuitions, we cannot justifiably believe that we know some objective normative truths.

Sidgwick, I believe, overstates this problem. By revising his beliefs in the way described by DPR, Sidgwick could avoid this contradiction. He could also deny that our need to revise some of our intuitive beliefs shows that no such beliefs could be justified. When Sidgwick calls these beliefs ‘intuitive’, he is not referring to some mysterious faculty with which we can somehow be in causal contact with normative truths. He means that, as in the case of our logical and mathematical beliefs, we can reach some true normative beliefs, not by observing the world and doing experiments, but merely by thinking carefully about certain questions. When Sidgwick adds that some intuitive beliefs are self-evident, he does not mean that these beliefs could not be mistaken. He means only that what justifies these beliefs is not that we can derive them from other true beliefs, or that we have evidence in their favour, but their content, or what we are believing. Any such belief, he writes, ‘may turn out to have an element of error.’ There were such errors, he could claim, in his earlier intuitive beliefs which together implied the contradictory conclusion that we sometimes have most reason to act in each of two different ways.

Though Sidgwick could avoid this contradiction by accepting DPR, he would have found this view deeply disappointing. Sidgwick hoped that, when one act would be impartially best but another act would be best for ourselves, Practical Reason would tell us what we ought to do. If DPR were true, that would not be so. In Sidgwick’s words, Practical Reason would give us no guidance, being ‘divided against itself.’

169 de Lazari-Radek’s and Singer’s Proposed Solution
We might solve Sidgwick’s problem, de Lazari-Radek and Singer suggest, by appealing to another argument for normative skepticism. According to this evolutionary debunking argument, as put forward by Street and others, our normative beliefs were mostly produced by natural selection. Early humans came to have these normative beliefs because these beliefs were reproductively advantageous, by making these humans more likely to survive and spread their genes. These beliefs would have been advantageous, Street claims, whether or not they were true. When we realize that some of our beliefs were caused in ways that were unrelated to their truth, we cannot justifiably keep these beliefs. We should admit that, though these beliefs might be true, that would be merely an unlikely coincidence.

Of the normative beliefs that led Sidgwick to his ‘ultimate and fundamental contradiction’, one was the Rational Egoist’s belief that

\[(C)\] we always have most reason to do whatever would be best for ourselves.

By appealing to this evolutionary argument, de Lazari-Radek and Singer suggest, we might justifiably reject \((C)\). Most of us care about our own well-being much more than we care about the well-being of strangers. Natural selection explains this fact, since those early humans whose genes made them more self-interested would have been more likely to survive and have more descendants or close relatives with the same genes. Natural selection might also explain why human beings came to believe that they had reasons to be specially concerned about their own well-being. On this evolutionary argument, if this belief was reproductively advantageous, it would have been advantageous whether or not it was true. This fact would give us strong reasons to doubt that this belief is true.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer believe instead that

\[(D)\] all practical reasons are impartial reasons. Our reasons to promote our own well-being are no stronger than our reasons to promote anyone else’s well-being.

This belief cannot be similarly challenged, de Lazari-Radek and Singer claim, because it cannot be given any such evolutionary explanation. This belief would not have been reproductively advantageous, and would often have been disadvantageous, by making us less likely to survive and spread or genes. We may instead have this belief because, as rational beings, we can recognize the truth that everyone’s well-being matters equally. Our own suffering is not worse than the equal suffering of any stranger, or of any other sentient being. If \((D)\) were true, we could justifiably reject even weak forms of Rational Egoism. We could therefore reject Sidgwick’s Dualism of Practical Reason. As Strong Impartialists about Reasons, we could claim that

\[(E)\] whenever one of our possible acts would be impartially best, but another act would be best for ourselves, we would have more reason to do what would be impartially best. It would be contrary to reason to do what would be best for ourselves, since we have no reason to
care more about our own well-being.

This argument for Impartialism has, I believe, considerable force. As de Lazari-Radek and Singer would agree, however, this argument is not decisive. Summing up their claims, they write:

If the rationality of egoism can thus be put in doubt, we can tentatively conclude that all reasons for action are impartial.

It is unclear whether Sidgwick would have accepted this conclusion. Near the end of his life, Sidgwick wrote:

No doubt it was, from the point of view of the Universe, reasonable to prefer the greater good to the lesser, even though the lesser good was the private happiness of the agent. Still it seemed to me undeniably reasonable for the individual to prefer his own. The rationality of self-regard seemed to me as undeniable as the rationality of self-sacrifice.

Even if Sidgwick would have rejected this argument for Impartialism about Reasons, de Lazari-Radek and Singer rightly claim that, if this argument succeeds, it would solve Sidgwick’s profoundest problem.

Sidgwick’s problem took another form. Sidgwick believed that, as Strong Moral Rationalists claim:

We always have most reason to do our duty, by doing whatever we ought morally to do.

He also reluctantly believed that

(F) in some cases, we ought morally to act in one way, but another possible act would be best for ourselves.

When combined with Strong Rational Egoism, these beliefs imply that

(G) in such cases, we would have most reason both to do our duty and to act wrongly by doing what would be best for ourselves.

This claim restates Sidgwick’s Dualism so that it applies to morality. (G) states another contradiction, since we could not have most reason to act in each of two different ways. It is worth quoting more of Sidgwick’s conclusion to his first edition. Sidgwick wrote that, if duty and self-interest sometimes conflict,

the whole system of our beliefs as to the intrinsic reasonableness of conduct must fall, without a hypothesis unverifiable by experience reconciling the Individual with the Universal Reason, without a belief, in some form or other, that the moral order which we see imperfectly realized in this actual world is yet actually perfect. If we reject this
belief, we may perhaps still find in the non-moral universe an
decent object for the Speculative Reason, capable of being in some
sense ultimately understood. But the Cosmos of Duty is thus really
reduced to a Chaos: and the prolonged effort of the human intellect to
frame an adequate ideal of rational conduct is seen to have been
foredoomed to inevitable failure.

These magnificently sombre claims are, I wrote, overstatements. Sidgwick
would avoid this contradiction if, as I suggested, he revised his beliefs.
According to what I called Sidgwick’s

Dualism of Duty and Self-Interest, or DDS: When we ought morally to
act in one way, but another act would be best for ourselves, we would
have sufficient reasons—or enough reason—to act in either way.

Sidgwick believed that in most cases duty and self-interest do not conflict.
DDS would then imply that, in most cases, we would have most reason to
do our duty, at no cost to ourselves. On this view, the Cosmos of Duty
would not be a Chaos. Nor would our whole system of beliefs about the
reasonableness of conduct fall if we concluded that, when duty and self-
interest conflict, we could reasonably, or rationally, act in either way. But
DDS would leave us with two lesser problems. It would be bad if, in such
cases, we and others would have sufficient reasons to act wrongly. The
moralist’s problem, I wrote, is whether we can avoid that conclusion. It
would also be disappointing if, in such cases, reason gave us so little
guidance. We may hope that, in at least some of these cases, there
would be something that we had most reason to do. The rationalist’s
problem, I wrote, is whether that is true.

If all practical reasons were impartial, as de Lazari-Radek and Singer
suggest, these problems would be solved. We could claim that

(H) whenever we ought morally to act in one way, but another act
would be best for ourselves, we would have most reason to do what
we ought morally to do. It would be contrary to reason to act
wrongly, by doing what would be best for ourselves, since we have
no reason to care more about our own well-being.

Compared with my suggested DDS, Sidgwick would have greatly
preferred this solution. (H) states another version of Strong Moral
Rationalism, giving us what Sidgwick would have called ‘a perfect ideal of
rational conduct’.

We could be Strong Moral Rationalists whatever our moral beliefs. But
this view is more plausible, and easier to believe, if we accept one of the
overlapping sets of widely held beliefs that Sidgwick called Common Sense
Morality. Such moral views permit us to give greater weight to our own
well-being. We are not morally required, for example, to give up our life
when we could thereby save the lives of several strangers, nor are we
required to bear other great burdens whenever such acts would save
strangers from greater burdens. As a Utilitarian Act Consequentialist,
however, Sidgwick believed
AC: We always have a moral duty to do whatever would make things go in the way that would be impartially best.

If we accept this view, it is harder to accept Strong Moral Rationalism. It is harder to believe that we always have decisive moral reasons to do what would make things go better, even when such an act would sacrifice our life, or our own happiness. Most of us could believe that we have such decisive moral reasons only by greatly weakening the connection between our beliefs about such decisive reasons and what we actually do, or intend to do.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer are also Utilitarian Act Consequentialists. They suggest that, to defend this view, we can appeal to another evolutionary debunking argument. Many of our moral beliefs, we can claim, were reproductively advantageous. When early humans believed that they ought to promote the well-being of their children, and to give lesser benefits to their less close relatives and to other members of their group, tribe, or community, these beliefs would have led these humans to act in ways that would spread the genes that caused them to have these beliefs. Natural selection can also explain how we became reciprocal altruists, or grudgers, who benefit only those other people who reciprocate by benefiting us in return. Reciprocal altruists also act in ways that spread their genes. Since these moral beliefs would have been reproductively advantageous whether or not they were true, this evolutionary explanation would undermine or at least weaken the justification of these beliefs.

Natural selection cannot, however, explain how we came to have some other widely held moral beliefs. On the Golden Rule, for example, we ought to treat other people as we would want other people to treat us. Most of us would want other people to benefit us whether or not we benefit them. The Golden Rule therefore tells most of us to be, not grudgers, but suckers, who benefit everyone, including people whom we know will never benefit us. Nor can natural selection explain how we came to have several other impartial moral beliefs, such as the beliefs of Act Utilitarians. It was not reproductively advantageous to believe that the suffering of all sentient beings matters, and matters equally. Since these impartial beliefs were not advantageous, they are not challenged by this evolutionary debunking argument.

These claims about this argument are, I believe, plausible. As de Lazari-Radek and Singer point out, however, though this argument challenges some widely held moral beliefs, it cannot by itself show that we ought to become Act Utilitarians. This argument applies to ‘many of our common moral judgments’, which include ‘all kinds of partial moral judgments’, and all moral judgments that are based on ‘evolved evaluative attitudes’. But there are several widely held Non-Utilitarian moral beliefs that are not in these ways partial or based on such evolved attitudes. As de Lazari-Radek and Singer write elsewhere:

Other principles, including deontological principles, might be equally impartial—for instance, the principle that lying is wrong, whether one is
lying to strangers or to members of one’s own community.

Other examples are some of the beliefs that are defended by Kantians or Contractualists. Since this evolutionary argument does not apply to these Non-Utilitarian moral beliefs, Act Utilitarians would have to defend their view by giving other arguments against these beliefs.

Return now to the question whether we can justifiably believe that there are some objective, irreducibly normative truths. Many moral skeptics claim that, given the deep disagreements between many people’s moral beliefs, we cannot justifiably believe that there are any such moral truths. Sidgwick was greatly disturbed by such disagreements. As I have said, Sidgwick wrote:

if I find any of my intuitions in direct conflict with an intuition of some other mind, there must be error somewhere: and if I have no more reason to suspect error in the other mind than in my own, reflective comparison between the two intuitions necessarily reduces me. . . to a state of neutrality.

If we have such deep disagreements with other people, and we seem to have no reason to believe that we are the people who are much more likely to be getting things right, we cannot justifiably keep our beliefs, except in significantly weaker forms. We may even be led to doubt that any of us might be getting things right, by having true beliefs, since there may be nothing to get right. I called this the Argument from Disagreement.

Sidgwick’s Act Utilitarian beliefs often conflict with the beliefs of Common Sense Morality. In the longest part of his Methods, Sidgwick argues that these disagreements are not deep enough to count strongly against his Utilitarian beliefs. Summing up his claims, Sidgwick writes:

the Utilitarian argument cannot be fairly judged unless we take fully into account the cumulative force which it derives from the complex character of the coincidence between Utilitarianism and Common Sense.

If systematic reflection upon the morality of Common Sense thus exhibits the Utilitarian principle as that to which Common Sense naturally appeals for that further development of its system which this same reflection shows to be necessary, the proof of Utilitarianism seems as complete as it can be made.

In one passage De Lazari-Radek and Singer suggest that Utilitarians need not discuss the conflicts between their moral beliefs and Common Sense Morality. Act Utilitarians, they write, could

draw on evolutionary theory, as well as on Sidgwick’s normative arguments in order to reject many widely-shared moral intuitions, while retaining the principle of universal benevolence. Although those who make use of reflective equilibrium in normative and applied ethics typically assume that they should try to achieve an equilibrium between
a plausible normative theory and most, or at least many, of our commonly accepted moral judgments, there is no need for them to make this assumption.

These claims are, I believe, too strong. De Lazari-Radek and Singer acknowledge the force of the Argument from Disagreement. They suggest that, to defend our moral beliefs, we should try to defend the view that, in ideal conditions, we would reach agreement with all other ‘careful thinkers’. Nor is it enough, as they themselves claim, to appeal to an evolutionary debunking argument. And as my last quotations suggest, Sidgwick’s normative arguments mainly consist in his many detailed claims about the relations between his Utilitarian principle and Common Sense Morality.

170 Non-Moral Act Consequentialism

There is, however, another possible response to the Argument from Disagreement. Different people disagree only when they have conflicting beliefs about the same questions. For these beliefs to conflict, these people must be using words or phrases with the same or sufficiently similar meanings. When any two people use the same words with different meanings, or in different senses, these people may merely seem to disagree, because their apparently conflicting beliefs are not in fact about the same questions.

When we claim that we ought morally to act in some way, we mean that every other possible act would be wrong. Some people seem to use ‘wrong’ in an indefinable sense, which we can also express with such words as ‘impermissible’ or ‘mustn’t-be-done’. There are several other, definable senses of ‘ought’ and ‘wrong’. For example:

in the blameworthiness sense, ‘wrong’ means ‘blameworthy’,

in the reactive-attitude sense, ‘wrong’ means ‘an act of a kind that gives its agent reasons to feel remorse or guilt, and gives others reasons for indignation’,

in the justifiabilist sense, ‘wrong’ means ‘could not be justified to others’,

in the divine command sense, ‘wrong’ means ‘forbidden by God’.

These are some of the distinctively moral senses of the words ‘ought’ and ‘wrong’.

We can define some other normative words and concepts by using the indefinable concept of a normative reason. If we claim that one of two events would be

better in the impartial-reason-implying sense, we mean that everyone would have, from an impartial point of view, stronger reasons to want this event to occur.

It would be in this sense better, for example, if some plague or earthquake
killed fewer people, since we would all have impartial reasons to want or hope that this is what happens. Some possible event would be in this sense best if we would all have the strongest impartial reasons to want this event to occur. Since every act is also an event, some possible act would be in this sense best if we would all have the strongest impartial reasons to want this act to be done. We would all have such reasons when and because this act would make things go best in this impartial-reason-implying sense. When we have impartial reasons to want ourselves to act in some way, we also have such reasons to act in this way.

We can next define two other senses of ‘ought’. If we claim that some act is

what we ought to do in the decisive-reason-implying sense, we mean that we have decisive reasons to act in this way.

This sense of ‘ought’ is not moral. It could be used by Rational Egoists, for example, when these people claim that each of us has decisive reasons to do whatever would be best for ourselves. There is another, less familiar, non-moral sense of ‘ought’. If we claimed that some act is

what we ought to do in the impartial-reason-implying sense, we would mean that we have the strongest impartial reasons to act in this way, because this act would make things go best.

Act Consequentialists claim

AC: We ought always to do whatever would make things go best.

If some of these people use both ‘ought’ and ‘best’ in their impartial-reason-implying senses, they hold the view that I called Impartial-Reason Act Consequentialism, and shall here call Non-Moral Consequentialism. When these Consequentialists claim AC, they mean

IR: We always have the strongest impartial reasons to do whatever would make things go in the ways in which we all have the strongest impartial reasons to want things to go.

This claim is close to being a tautology, since it tells us only that we have such impartial reasons to do what we and others have such impartial reasons to want us to do. But these Consequentialists can make other, more important claims. These people might be Strong Rational Impartialists, who also claim

IR2: We always have decisive reasons to do whatever we have the strongest impartial reasons to do.

This claim is far from being a tautology. Suppose that, after some shipwreck I could save either my own life, or the lives of five strangers. We would all have stronger impartial reasons to want me to save these strangers, since four fewer people would then die. IR2 therefore implies that I would have decisive reasons to sacrifice my life so that I could save these strangers. That is a demanding claim. These Non-Moral Consequentialists might make other substantive claims. For example, if they are Hedonistic Act Utilitarians, they might claim
IR3: What everyone has the strongest impartial reasons to do, and to want everyone else to do, is whatever would minimize the total net sum of suffering minus happiness. ¹

Sidgwick sometimes seems to use ‘ought’ in this impartial-reason-implying sense. When he states his principle of *Rational Benevolence*, Sidgwick writes that

the good of any one individual is of no more importance. . . than the good of any other,

and that

as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally. . . I ought not to prefer my own lesser good to the greater good of another. ²

What Sidgwick calls *Our Own Good* is what we would each have most reason to want if we considered only our own life. What Sidgwick calls *Universal Good*, or *good generally*, is what we would all have most reason to want if we considered everyone’s lives from an impartial point of view. When Sidgwick writes that he *ought* not to prefer his own lesser good, but is bound as a rational being to aim at good generally, he may be using ‘ought’ in the impartial-reason-implying sense. Sidgwick’s claims do not imply that, if he fails to aim at Universal Good, his acts would be blameworthy, or unjustifiable to others, or that such acts would give him reasons for guilt or remorse or give others reason for indignation.

These quotations do not show that Sidgwick was a Non-Moral Consequentialist. In several other passages, Sidgwick seems to use the words ‘wrong’ and ‘duty’ in their ordinary moral senses. But Sidgwick did not even distinguish clearly between the decisive-reason-implying sense of ‘ought’ that Rational Egoists could use, and any other, distinctively moral sense of ‘ought’. This fact makes it likely that Sidgwick could have stated some of his beliefs more precisely by using the impartial-reason-implying sense of ‘ought’.

Because this sense of ‘ought’ expresses beliefs about impartial reasons, it could not be used by Rational Egoists, and is closer to the distinctively moral senses. Though Sidgwick did not commit himself to Non-Moral Consequentialism, that does not make this view less worth considering.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer make some similar remarks. For example, they write:

Looking at things ethically is a way of transcending our inward looking concerns, and identifying ourselves with the most objective point of view.

ethical judgments must be made from a universal point of view.

¹ Acts that minimize this total net sum can also be described as maximizing the total net sum of happiness minus suffering. My less familiar statement of HAU better expresses, I believe, what makes this view plausible.

² *The Methods of Ethics*, 382-3.
Moral acts, understood as acts that are justifiable from an impartial perspective... are rationally required.

In summing up their view, they write:

when one of two possible acts would make things go impartially better, that is what we have decisive normative reason to do.

These are not distinctively moral claims, and they suggest that we have decisive reasons to do whatever we have the strongest impartial reasons to do.

Near the start of their recent book, de Lazari-Radek and Singer state that they will ignore the distinction between the decisive-reason-implying sense of ‘ought’ and any other, distinctively moral sense. When they say that we ‘ought morally’ to do something, they will mean that we have decisive reasons to do this thing, and when they call some act ‘wrong’, they will mean that we have decisive reasons not to act in this way. But de Lazari-Radek and Singer do not always use the words ‘wrong’ and ‘right’ in these decisive-reason-implying senses. For example, they write:

For morality to have its full importance we have to have decisive reasons to avoid doing what is wrong... If we lack decisive reasons to do what is right, the significance of morality is seriously diminished.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer do not here mean that, for morality to have its full importance, we must have decisive reasons to avoid doing what we have decisive reasons not to do. That would not be worth claiming. Nor would it be worth claiming that, if we lacked decisive reasons to do what we had decisive reasons to do, the significance of these decisive reasons would be diminished.

Consider next my imagined case in which some man could save his own life and the lives of his two children by stealing from some woman the medicine that this woman needs to save her life and the lives of her four children. This man, I claimed, might have sufficient reasons---or enough reason---to act wrongly, by stealing this medicine. De Lazari-Radek and Singer comment that, if we could have sufficient reasons to act wrongly in such ways, that would undermine morality. If they were using ‘wrong’ in the decisive-reason-implying sense, they ought instead to claim that, if we had sufficient reasons to act in such ways, these acts would not be wrong.

When they make these claims, de Lazari-Radek and Singer may, I believe, be assuming that we ought morally to do whatever we have the strongest impartial reasons to do, because our acts would make things go best in the impartial-reason-implying sense. In the passage just quoted, they would then be making this non-trivial claim:

For morality to have its full importance, we must have decisive reasons to avoid doing what would make things go worse in the impartial-reason-implying sense. If we lacked decisive reasons to do what would make things go best, the significance of morality would be seriously diminished.

As we have seen, De Lazari-Radek and Singer also claim that, by appealing to
an evolutionary debunking argument, we might be able to show that all practical reasons are impartial reasons. If we never had conflicting personal reasons, morality might have what they call its full importance, since we might always have decisive reasons to do whatever would make things go best. The decisive-reason-implying sense of ‘ought’ would then coincide with the impartial-reason-implying sense.

Though de Lazari-Radek and Singer here use the word ‘morality’, they say earlier that they won’t use the word ‘ought’ in any distinctively moral sense. They may use the phrase ‘what we ought morally to do’ to mean ‘what we have the strongest impartial reason to do’. They would then accept what I have called the Non-Moral version of Act Consequentialism.

This view has one distinctive merit. There are some deep disagreements between Moral Act Consequentialists and many Non-Consequentialists. When we and others disagree, as Sidgwick claimed, we cannot justifiably be confident that our beliefs are true if we have no reason to believe that we are the people who are more likely to be getting things right. De Lazari-Radek and Singer similarly claim that, to defend our moral beliefs, we should try to reach agreement with other careful thinkers. Of those who reject Act Consequentialism, many seem to be careful thinkers, whom Act Consequentialists cannot plausibly believe to be much less likely to get things right. This Argument from Disagreement also applies to Non-Consequentialists, who should similarly concede that some Act Consequentialists seem to be careful thinkers. Both Act Consequentialists and their opponents may therefore have strong reasons to doubt that some of their own moral beliefs are justified.

This argument does not apply, however, to Non-Moral Impartial-Reason Act Consequentialists. Like other Act Consequentialists, these people claim

\[ \text{AC: We ought always to do whatever would make things go best.} \]

But since these people use ‘ought’ in the impartial-reason-implying sense, they mean

\[ \text{IR: We always have the strongest impartial reasons to do whatever would make things go best.} \]

Of those who reject Act Consequentialism, many believe that things can go better or worse in the impartial-reason-implying sense. These Non-Consequentialists would claim

\[ \text{NC: Of the acts that would make things go best, some would be wrong.} \]

IR and NC do not conflict, so these claims might both be true. Suppose for example that, in

\[ \text{Transplant, if some doctor secretly killed one of his patients, this person’s organs would be used to save the lives of five other people.} \]

Suppose next that, if this doctor acted in this way, he would be making things go better in the impartial-reason-implying sense, since it would be better if
four fewer people died. These Non-Moral Act Consequentialists would then claim that

(I) if this doctor secretly killed his patient, he would be doing what, in the impartial-reason-implying sense, he ought to do.

Non-Consequentialists could accept (I). These people could agree that, if this doctor killed his patient, he would be making things go better in the impartial-reason-implying sense, and he would therefore be doing what in the impartial-reason-implying sense he ought to do. These people are not Consequentialists because they would also believe that

(J) though this doctor’s act would make things go better, this act would be wrong.

These people would be using ‘wrong’ in some distinctively moral sense, such as the senses that mean ‘blameworthy’ or ‘unjustifiable to others’, or the indefinable sense that we can also express with the words ‘impermissible’, or ‘mustn’t-be-done’. Non-Moral Consequentialists would not reject (J), since these people do not use ‘wrong’ in any of these senses. If these people claimed that

(K) this doctor’s act would not be wrong,

they would mean that this doctor would not be doing something that, in the impartial-reason-implying sense, he ought not to do. Non-Consequentialists could agree that, in this sense, (K) is true. Since (J) and (K) use ‘wrong’ in these different senses, these claims do not conflict.

Similar remarks apply to other cases. Because these Non-Moral Consequentialists do not use ‘ought’ or ‘wrong’ in any of the distinctively moral senses, they would never disagree with Non-Consequentialists about which acts are right or wrong in these senses. When these Consequentialists claim

AC: We ought always to do whatever would make things go best,

they mean

IR: We always have the strongest impartial reasons to do whatever would make things go in the way in which we all have the strongest impartial reasons to want things to go.

As I have said, Non-Consequentialists could accept IR. Since this Non-Moral version of Act Consequentialism is in these ways uncontroversial, this view cannot be challenged by the Argument from Disagreement. That makes this view much easier to defend.

There may, however, be some other, closely related disagreements. These Act Consequentialists might also claim

IR2: We always have decisive reasons to do whatever we have the strongest impartial reasons to do.

Many Non-Consequentialists would claim
NC2: When it would be wrong for us to do what we have the strongest impartial reasons to do, we would have decisive reasons not to act in this way.

Unlike IR and NC, these claims conflict. We could not have decisive reasons both to do and not to do the very same thing. Since these claims conflict, this stronger version of Non-Moral Consequentialism would be challenged by the Argument from Disagreement.

There are several ways in which these Consequentialists might respond to this disagreement. One response would be to reject NC2 by appealing to a bolder version of the evolutionary debunking argument. As de Lazari-Radek and Singer admit, though this argument has some force when applied to several moral beliefs, it cannot show that we ought to accept some moral version of Act Consequentialism. If this argument does not undermine Consequentialist moral beliefs, it would also not undermine some Non-Consequentialist moral beliefs. But this argument might instead be claimed to undermine all distinctively moral beliefs. When they discuss such arguments, de Lazari-Radek and Singer write:

Street thinks that a sound scientific understanding of evolution shows that our moral judgments are highly unlikely to be objectively true. We agree that this evolutionary debunking does apply to many of our common moral judgments, and this includes all kinds of partial moral judgments.

They also write:

it is quite plausible that these evolutionary forces have produced evaluative attitudes that fail to conduce to ultimate moral truths such as ‘Maximize the utility of all sentient beings.’ We can therefore reject any particular judgments based on these evolved evaluative attitudes.

If some Act Consequentialists accept the Non-Moral version of their view, they might claim that all of our common moral judgments could be debunked in this way. These distinctively moral judgments, they might say, are all based on various evolved evaluative attitudes, such as anger, resentment, envy, jealousy, and desires for revenge. Some examples might be judgments about blameworthiness and what people deserve, and the judgments that are involved in feelings of guilt, remorse, and indignation. Several writers claim that, since these attitudes were reproductively advantageous, we cannot justifiably believe that judgments which involve these attitudes are true. According to this evolutionary argument for moral skepticism, we should conclude that no acts are right or wrong in any distinctively moral sense.

Remember next that, as de Lazari-Radek and Singer point out, this evolutionary debunking argument does not apply to wholly impartial normative beliefs, such as the belief that the suffering of all sentient beings matters equally. Such wholly impartial beliefs would not have been reproductively advantageous. Though these beliefs are about normative truths, these are not distinctively moral truths. We can believe that all suffering is bad, in the impartial-reason-implying sense, without having any of the moral beliefs about blameworthiness that are involved in, or based upon, feelings of
guilt, remorse, and indignation. Since Non-Moral Consequentialism does not depend on such evolved attitudes, this view could not be undermined by any evolutionary debunking argument. These Consequentialists might claim that, though there are no moral truths about what is right or wrong, there are some important non-moral normative truths about what we all have the strongest impartial reasons to want and to do. If these people could defend this claim, they could reject the challenge to their view that is stated by NC2.

Of the claims that I have just described, one seems to me both true and important. It is well worth pointing out that, even if evolutionary arguments succeeded in undermining all distinctively moral beliefs, these arguments would not undermine some other irreducibly normative beliefs, such as beliefs about impartial practical reasons. Non-Moral Consequentialism would not be challenged by these arguments for moral skepticism. Similar remarks apply to some other non-moral normative beliefs, such as beliefs about epistemic reasons. I believe, however, that this bolder argument could not support moral skepticism, by undermining all distinctively moral beliefs.

There are some other ways in which some Non-Moral Consequentialists might state and defend their view. These people believe

**IR:** We always have the strongest impartial reasons to do whatever would make things go best.

As we have seen, Non-Consequentialists could accept this claim. What Non-Consequentialists reject is

**IR2:** We always have decisive reasons to do whatever we have these strongest impartial reasons to do.

Some Non-Moral Consequentialists might also reject IR2. These people may not accept the evolutionary debunking argument for Impartialism about Reasons. They may believe, as Sidgwick did, that we have strong reasons to be specially concerned about our own well-being. Rather than claiming IR2, these people might claim

**IR4:** When we have the strongest impartial reasons to act in one way, but some other possible act would be better for ourselves, we would often have sufficient reasons to act in either way.

I might have sufficient reasons, for example, to save either my own life or the lives of several strangers. We may have other, non-self-interested reasons which might conflict with, but not be outweighed by, some impartial reasons. Some examples would be our reasons to benefit or save from harm our close relatives and those we love. These Non-Moral Consequentialists may also believe that, though many such personal reasons would not be outweighed by impartial reasons, none of these personal reasons would decisively outweigh our impartial reasons. These people would claim

**IR5:** We always have sufficient reasons to do whatever we have the strongest impartial reasons to do.

Return now to the objection to Act Consequentialism that is stated by
NC2: When it would be wrong for us to do what we have the strongest impartial reasons to do, we would have decisive reasons not to act in this way.

If these Non-Moral Consequentialists could defend IR5, they could reject NC2. Compared with IR2, IR5 is easier to defend. Whenever certain acts would make things go in ways in which we would all have these impartial reasons to want things to go, we could more plausibly believe that these facts would give us sufficient reasons to act in these ways. Unlike IR, which is close to being a tautology, IR5 is a significant substantive claim. It would be of great importance if we always had sufficient reasons to do whatever would make things go best.

Since most of us have some distinctively moral beliefs, these Non-Moral Consequentialists cannot merely ignore these beliefs. These people might restate IR5 so that it applies to these beliefs. According to what we can call *Weak Rational Impartialism*: We always have sufficient reasons to do whatever would make things go best, whether or not this act would be wrong.

Strong Moral Rationalists would reject this view, since they believe that we always have *decisive* reasons not to act wrongly, even when such acts would make things go best. I doubt that we always have such decisive reasons. I asserted only

*Weak Moral Rationalism*: We always have sufficient reasons to do whatever we ought morally to do, and to avoid acting wrongly.

Because these two views are in one sense weaker, by asserting less, they are in another sense stronger, by being easier to defend, and more likely to be true. These two views, we can note, do not conflict. Even if we believe that it would sometimes be wrong for us to do what would make things go best, we might believe that, in all such cases, we would both have sufficient reasons to do what we ought morally to do, and have sufficient reasons to act wrongly, by doing what would make things go best.

171 Moral Disagreements and the Convergence Claim

Though de Lazari-Radek and Singer make some claims which suggest that they are Non-Moral Act Consequentialists, they make several other, distinctively moral claims. For example, in his very forceful article ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, Singer writes:

People do not feel in any way ashamed or guilty about spending money on new clothes or a new car instead of giving it to famine relief. . . This way of looking at the matter cannot be justified.

Singer assumes that we *ought* to feel ashamed or guilty about acting in these ways. He also writes:

The outcome of this argument is that our traditional moral categories are upset. The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be
drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it. Giving money to the Bengal Relief Fund is regarded as an act of charity in our society. These are not acts of charity, Singer means, but moral duties. Scanlon writes:

when I feel convinced by Peter Singer’s article on famine, and find myself crushed by the recognition of what seems a clear moral requirement. . . in addition to the thought of how much good I could do for people in drought-stricken lands, I am overwhelmed by the further seemingly distinct thought that it would be wrong for me to fail to aid them when I could do so at so little cost to myself.

That is how Singer hoped that his readers would respond. Sidgwick also makes some distinctively moral claims. As we have seen, Sidgwick writes:

as a rational being, I am bound to aim at good generally. . . I ought not to prefer my own lesser good to the greater good of another.

But Sidgwick also writes that we are morally bound to have no such preference, and he refers to the duty of Benevolence. These claims are not merely about impartial reasons.

Most Act Consequentialists make similar claims. These people have beliefs about which acts are right or wrong in distinctively moral senses. Since it matters greatly whether these beliefs are true, we can now return to these more familiar, moral versions of Act Consequentialism.

Unlike the impartial-reason version, these moral versions of Act Consequentialism conflict with many people’s moral beliefs. These conflicts return us to the Argument from Disagreement. Whether we are Act Consequentialists or Non-Consequentialists, we know that we and our moral opponents cannot both be right, since it cannot be both true and false that we ought morally to do whatever would make things go best. We may also justifiably believe that some of our opponents are at least close to being our epistemic peers, who are not, compared with us, much less likely to get things right. In such cases, we could not rationally be confident that we are the people whose beliefs are true.

When I earlier discussed this Argument from Disagreement, I defended the Convergence Claim that, in ideal conditions, we would nearly all have sufficiently similar normative beliefs. Many actual moral disagreements can be explained in ways that are untroubling in the sense that they do not cast doubt on this Convergence Claim. Some of these disagreements depend on disagreements about non-normative facts. Other disagreements are about borderline cases, where we would expect some people to have conflicting beliefs. Two examples are disagreements about abortion and euthanasia. These disagreements do not cast doubt on the nearly universally accepted view that it is wrong to kill innocent people. Other disagreements depend on conflicting religious beliefs, or on distorting factors, such as people’s assumption that, if certain moral beliefs were widely accepted, that would be good or bad for them.

Some disagreements cannot yet be explained in these and other untroubling
ways. But these are early days. As Rawls and Nagel claim, our moral theories ‘are primitive, and have grave defects’, and ‘ethical theory... is in its infancy.’ In responding to this argument for moral skepticism, we should therefore ask whether we can rationally hope to make progress in ways that make our disagreements less deep. In considering this question, we should try to avoid wishful thinking, by believing what we hope is true.

In Parts Three and Five of *On What Matters*, I try to show that if three of the main systematic moral theories are revised in ways that seem to be clearly needed, these theories converge. In Parts Seven and Eight above, I try to show that, as Railton and Gibbard suggest, if three of the main meta-ethical theories take their best forms, these theories also converge. But the most worrying disagreements are not between different systematic moral theories or between different meta-ethical theories, but disagreements about what matters, and about which acts are right or wrong. The deepest disagreements of this kind are between Act Consequentialism and some parts of Common Sense Morality. We should therefore ask whether these disagreements can be resolved. If this attempt succeeds, that would support the view that there are some objective normative truths, some of which are moral truths.

I hope to start this attempt in what would be my *Volume Four*. 