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Are most people consequentialists?

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ABSTRACT

Welfare economics relies on consequentialism even though many philosophers have questioned this assumption. Survey evidence, based on a representative sample in Sweden, is presented here suggesting that most people's ethical perceptions are consistent with consequentialism.

1. Introduction

The most fundamental ethics assumptions in mainstream welfare economics are based on *consequentialism*, i.e., that the consequences rather than, say, some inherent rights are what matter intrinsically.[1] This assumption, which is so frequently made in economics that it is rarely even mentioned,[2] is nevertheless frequently questioned by philosophers. For example, "philosophical libertarians" claim that freedom, which depends crucially on the protection of individual rights, is the overriding moral consideration (e.g., Lomasky, 1987). Narveson (1988, 7) puts it as follows: "The only relevant consideration in political matters is individual liberty". Similarly, Nozick (1974, ix) writes: "Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights)". Moreover, just as one can argue for rightwing politics based on rights-based ethical arguments, leftwing politics are also often supported by rights-based arguments. For example, it can be, and it has been, argued that people have certain rights independent of the market outcome, such as having an acceptable minimum living standard. According to Rawls (1971, 3): "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override".

Yet, one may argue that what *should* matter in public policy are neither the views of economists nor the ones of philosophers or policy makers, but rather the fundamental values of people in general. However, somewhat surprisingly, there appears to be limited empirical research on this subject. Perhaps economists have largely considered the consequentialism assumption to be uncontroversial (to the extent that it has been thought of as an assumption), whereas philosophers, until recently, have shown little interest in using empirical methods at all.

There are still related empirical studies, including a rapidly growing literature that tries to infer people's underlying values or "social preferences" from their behavior in economic experiments; see, e.g., Fischbacher and Gächter (2010) and Messer et al. (2010) for some recent contributions. A subset of this literature has looked at the role of perceived intentions of others for individual behavior (e.g., Dufwenberg and Kirchsteiger, 2004; Falk et al., 2008), while other studies have been concerned with the role of procedures for perceived fairness (e.g., Kahneman et al., 1986;

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1 This, of course, does not mean that economists do not care about rights or freedom at a personal level. According to Hausman and McPherson (2006, 159) "it is ironic that normative economics focuses on welfare, because economists value freedom very highly. Indeed, we would conjecture that economists value freedom more than do most noneconomists".

2 Yet, in the social choice literature there exist several studies where consequentialism is not taken for granted; see, e.g., Suzumura and Xu (2001, 2003).

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Table 1
Response distribution on the following question: *one can have different opinions about what determines whether an action, from an ethical point of view, is "bad". Mark the alternative that you think corresponds best with your view. How bad an action is, from an ethical point of view, depends primarily on….*

How bad the consequences of the action are for myself	5.3%
How bad the consequences of the action are for other people and for society	62.7%
The extent to which the action infringes upon someone else's rights	17.5%
The extent to which the action violates what is natural	10.6%
The extent to which the action violates Christianity according to the New Testament in the Bible	3.7%
The extent to which the action violates the rules given by any other religion (such as Islam or Buddhism)	0.3%

Note: number of observations = 985.

Konow, 2000, 2003). There is also a relatively small but rapidly growing literature on experimental philosophy, which is often based on thought experiments such as the famous trolley problem; see, e.g., Cushman et al. (2010) or Knobe and Nichols (2008). Yet, the present note is concerned with the underlying ethics at a more fundamental (or at least different) level than the problems dealt with in experimental economics, and uses a different methodology than typically used in the experimental philosophy literature.

The questions of concern here are: Is an action ethically bad primarily because the overall consequences of the action are bad? Or is it bad primarily because someone else's rights are violated? Or are there other reasons that are even more important, such as religious obedience?[3] Section 2 presents the results from a survey where a representative sample in Sweden are asked about their ethical perceptions, Section 3 attempts to explain econometrically the differences in values, and Section 4 concludes.

2. The survey and results

The survey was mailed to 2450 randomly selected adults above the age of 18 years in Sweden during the spring of 2004; the overall response rate was 45%, of which 985 respondents (40%) answered the main question of interest, i.e., the question regarding ethical perceptions with respect to what matters intrinsically. The sample analyzed is fairly representative of the overall underlying sample of adults in Sweden with respect to measured characteristics; the last column of Table 2 provides mean values and standard deviations of the explanatory variables used. We have an over-representation of university-educated people and a slight over-representation of women.

Table 1 presents the main question asked and the corresponding basic results. The guiding principles regarding the question and the choice alternatives have been generality and simplicity, implying that we have to limit the number of alternatives, and it is also unavoidable that respondents may interpret the question somewhat differently. For example, we have not considered deontological approaches beyond those motivated by rights. Nor have we included what are considered natural and religious rules, or dealt with the question of intentions (or degrees of intentions) explicitly; rather it is taken for granted that the action mentioned refers to an *intentional* action. Moreover, we have not included virtue ethics (see, e.g., Hursthouse, 1999) among the alternatives, primarily because it is difficult to describe such a motivation succinctly. An alternative approach would be to base the ethical questions on concrete examples (see, e.g., Konow, 2009), which would presumably be easier to respond to but would also have disadvantages with respect to generalizations; different approaches should mainly be seen as complements rather than substitutes.[4]

As seen in Table 1, the result is quite consistent with the consequentialist ethics underlying conventional economic welfare theory, since almost two-thirds chose this alternative. Still, a non-negligible fraction of the respondents appear to have other fundamental ethical views, of which the rights-based motivation is the second most common. Whether the support for consequentialism is sufficiently large to motivate welfare economics to rely on it almost exclusively, and hence large enough to ignore alternative rights-based approaches is, of course, an open question that is beyond the scope of the present note.

Note that the question asked is in terms of what constitutes an ethically bad action, and not what constitutes an ethically good one. The motivations based on rights and on what is unnatural behavior, and to a perhaps somewhat smaller extent also on religious rules, are primarily related to what constitutes morally blameworthy actions. Consequentialism, on the other hand, is presumably less asymmetric, in the sense that it emphasizes not only that one should not conduct bad actions but that one also ought to undertake good ones. Hence, one may conjecture that the domination of the consequentialist choice alternative would have been even larger had the question been framed in terms of good actions rather than bad ones.

Yet, and needless to say, interpreting survey-based evidence is not without problems; see, e.g., Bertrand and Mullainathan (2001). However, it is far from obvious how one could obtain the kind of conclusion made here in a reliable way by inferring it from observed behavior, i.e., what is typically seen as the preferred empirical methodology in economics. Moreover, it is hard to see why people's responses would systematically be biased due to self-signaling reasons, which is sometimes a problem with survey responses, i.e., in order to signal to themselves that they are in some dimension "better" than they really are. Thus, for issues of this kind, it is easy to agree with Sen (1973, p. 258) that "we have been too prone, on the one hand, to overstate the difficulties of introspection and communication and, on the other, to underestimate the problems of studying preferences revealed by observed behavior".

3. Econometric analysis

In order to look into the determinants of the variation in people's ethical perceptions with respect to what matters intrinsically, we ran a multinomial logit regression.

Table 2 reveals that the probability of choosing the "consequences for others" alternative increases with the respondents' income. The 0.048 parameter associated with the equivalent

[3] Sometimes the distinction between consequentialism and "proceduralism", where also procedures have intrinsic ethical significance regardless of the final outcome, is considered to be the most basic one. Yet, while there is much evidence that people tend to care about procedures (e.g., Konow, 2003, 2009), this does not answer the question of why certain procedures are perceived to be more acceptable than others.

[4] Yet other alternatives attempt to quantify ethical preferences, such as how much the society should value a saved life of a child compared to an elderly person (e.g., Johansson-Stenman and Martinsson, 2008).