

## The Objective Consequentialist vs. Karpov

Vuko Andrić

Zukunftskolleg, University of Konstanz, Germany

Frances Howard-Snyder has argued that objective consequentialism is incompatible with the principle that “ought” implies “can”. Erik Carlson has raised two objections against this argument. I want to show that Carlson’s first objection fails. While his second objection succeeds, this does not get objective consequentialism off the hook. For the very same considerations which count against Carlson’s first objection also give rise to a new argument against objective consequentialism.

Howard-Snyder has put forward the following argument:

- (1) According to objective consequentialism, you always ought to produce the best consequences.
- (2) There are situations in which you cannot produce the best consequences.
- (3) “Ought” implies “can”: if you cannot produce the best consequences, then it is not the case that you ought to produce the best consequences.
- (4) Therefore, objective consequentialism is wrong.

In support of (2), Howard-Snyder has presented cases like the following: Imagine that your beating Karpov at chess has the best consequences. You can make each of the moves which jointly amount to beating him. But you cannot beat Karpov since you do not know which moves these are.

According to Carlson’s first objection, since you can make any of the moves which jointly amount to beating Karpov, you *can* beat Karpov. According to Carlson’s second objection, objective consequentialism does *not* entail that you ought to beat Karpov. Let “e2–e4, etc.” designate the sequence of moves which will result in your beating Karpov. Objective consequentialism entails that you ought to play e2–e4, etc.

Against Carlson’s first objection, Howard-Snyder has pointed to considerations concerning *abilities* and *blameworthiness* which suggest that you cannot beat Karpov in the sense required by “ought” implies “can”. I want to present further considerations to the same effect, namely, considerations concerning *action-guidance* and *moral reasons*.

Howard-Snyder has replied to Carlson's second objection that a moral theory is very unappealing if it entails a long, detailed list of prescribed actions which we cannot identify. However, more than this can be said. I want to point out that we have as much reason for dismissing such a theory as we have for dismissing a theory according to which you ought to beat Karpov. The same considerations which count in favour of an interpretation of "ought" implies "can" according to which you cannot beat Karpov also speak in favour of a moral principle according to which you cannot have an obligation to play e2–e4, etc.

### Bibliography

Carlson, E. (1999): "The Oughts and Cans of Objective Consequentialism", *Utilitas* 11, pp. 91 – 96.

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