

Combinative Consequentialism and the Problem of Act Versions

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In the 1960's Lars Bergström and Hector-Neri Castaneda noticed a problem with alternative acts and act-consequentialism. The source of the problem is that acts have versions and these versions need not have the same consequences as the original act. If all of these are among the agent's alternatives, act-consequentialism will lead to some deontic paradoxes.

Suppose for example that the acts, A = 'go to the the movies' and the more specific A&B = 'go to the movies and buy popcorn' both are performable by the agent in the situation. Suppose further that the consequences of A are worse than those of A&B and that A&B has the uniquely best consequences in the situation. However, then act-consequentialism yields that A&B is obligatory but that A is wrong. This violates the plausible principle that if X&Y is obligatory then X is obligatory.

This discovery of this problem gave rise to a search of an adequate criterion for the relevant set of alternatives for act-consequentialism. A standard response has been to restrict the application of act-consequentialism to certain relevant sets of alternatives. Many of such proposals are based on some variation of maximalism, that is, that act-consequentialism should only be applied to maximally specific acts. Two representative proposals are due to Holly M. Smith and Krister Bykvist. Maximalism avoids the problem of versions since maximally specific acts do not have any more specific versions. In this paper I shall argue that maximalism yields the wrong recommendation in cases where the only way to achieve the best consequences is to perform a non-maximally specific act. Also maximalism violates normative invariance, that is, the condition that if X is performable by P in S, then the normative status of X does not depend on what acts P performs in S. In Bykvist rendition maximalism also violates alternative invariance, that is, that the relevant set of alternatives for P in S does not depend on what act P performs in S.

Instead of maximalism, I propose that the relevant alternatives should be the exhaustive combinations of acts the agent may jointly perform without performing any other act in the situation. In this way one avoids the problem of versions without violating normative or alternative invariance. Also one can adequately handle cases where all maximally specific acts leads to sub-optimal consequences.