

Combinative Consequentialism and the Problem of Act Versions

Johan E. Gustafsson

Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, France

In the 1960's, Lars Bergström and Hector-Neri Castaneda noticed a problem with alternative acts and 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. A standard response is to restrict the application of act-consequentialism to certain relevant alternative sets. Many proposals are based on some variation of maximalism, that is, the view that act-consequentialism should only be applied to maximally specific acts. In this talk, I shall argue that maximalism is unable to yield the right prescriptions in cases where one might either (i) form at once the intention to do an immediate act and form at a later time the intention to do a succeeding act or (ii) form at once the intention to do both acts and where the consequences of (i) and (ii) differ in value. Also maximalism violates normative invariance, that is, the condition that if an act is performable in a situation, then the normative status of the act does not depend on what acts are performed in the situation. Instead of maximalism, I propose that the relevant alternatives should be the exhaustive combinations of acts the agent might jointly perform without performing any other act in the situation. In this way, one avoids the problem of act versions without violating normative invariance. Also one can adequately differentiate between possibilities like (i) and (ii).