Anscombe on the shallowness of consequentialism

Craig Taylor

Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia

Correspondence
Craig Taylor, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001, South Australia.
Email: craig.taylor@flinders.edu.au

Abstract
This paper is divided into two parts. In the first I outline and defend Elizabeth Anscombe's claim that consequentialism is a shallow philosophy by considering how two contemporary consequentialists reach opposing but equally outlandish moral conclusions on a matter as fundamental as whether it is good or bad that the human race continues. In the second I argue that in order to show what is wrong with the consequentialist arguments presented in part one, we need to deploy a wider range of critical resources than what typically appears in contemporary analytic moral philosophy. One example of a relevant and under-appreciated resource I then consider is satire as a mode of moral thought.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Anscombe's article ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ has been enormously influential. At the same time, it has been seen as unreasonably dismissive of some – even most – of the modern moral philosophers she so very briefly discusses, and is in relation to at least one kind of moral philosopher downright rude. I refer of course to her discussion of consequentialism and its representative for her, Sidgwick. In this paper I will consider one specific thing she says about consequentialism, that it is essentially a shallow philosophy. One might, especially if one is a consequentialist, take offence at this remark, but for reasons I explain this response to Anscombe just serves to illustrate her point. Anscombe's point, as I understand it, has a significance that has not been properly grasped in the voluminous commentary on her paper. I turn now to the context of Anscombe's remark.
Anscombe makes her (to some, outlandish) remark in the context of suggesting there will always be borderline cases in deciding what one ought to do. She then notes that,

the consequentialist, in order to be imagining borderline cases at all, has of course to assume some sort of law or standard according to which this is a borderline case. Where then does he get the standard from? In practice the answer invariably is: from the standards current in his society or his circle. (Anscombe 1958: 11)

Unfortunately, Anscombe is not very clear about what she means by, and why there must be, borderline cases. But she does say, relevant to the argument of this paper, something about how certain moral thinkers would deal with them. So, she says,

if you are either an Aristotelian, or a believer in divine law, you will deal with a borderline case by considering whether doing such-and-such in such-and-such circumstances is, say, murder, or is an act of injustice; and according as you decide it is or it isn’t, you judge it to be a thing to do or not. (Anscombe 1958: 10)

And as she goes on to say, while such a thinker ‘raises such a question only to ask “Would it be permissible to do so-and-so?” or “Would it be permissible not to do so-and-so?”’ (Anscombe 1958: 10), the consequentialist ‘has no footing on which to say “This is permissible, this not”; because by his own hypothesis, it is the consequences that are to decide.’ (Anscombe 1958: 11) Anscombe’s point I take it is that in dealing with borderline cases the Aristotelian or the believer in divine law is clear about, and applies, a standard grounded in the moral positions they hold. Her suggestion then seems to be that the consequentialist too must in virtue of the way in which they view the situation and the moral options before them be applying some kind of standard, only that in their case they are not at all reflective about it. As she says about consequentialists ‘it is a mark of all these philosophers that that they have been extremely conventional.’ (Anscombe 1958: 11) Of course the consequentialist may reply that they are clear about their standard; their one universal standard is simply what the consequences determine. Such a claim though misses something fundamental about our moral thought and judgment about how we are to act. Let me illustrate the point by juxtaposing two lines of consequentialist thought that lead to pretty much diametrically opposed conclusions.

The first line of thought: According to the anti-natalist philosopher David Benatar, human suffering for most human beings outweighs any positive benefit in their living, which leads them to the conclusion that we should not have children at all, that it is always a serious harm to come into existence (Benatar 2008). I will not discuss Benatar’s argument in detail, but it has two independent strands. The first goes roughly like this: When we bring someone into existence, we harm that person insofar as we are then the cause of everything bad that will happen to them. At the same time, however, we do not benefit them in virtue of all the good things that happen to them. Benatar’s argument to this conclusion depends on the following supposed asymmetry. We can say that the presence of pain is bad and its absence is good, but while the presence of pleasure is good – here is the asymmetry – its absence (in the case where there is no one created to experience this pleasure) is not bad. In other words, when you are not brought into existence, the absence of pleasure is no deprivation. So, if the absence in this second case of pleasure is not bad, you would not have benefitted by being born; there is no lack here that is being made good. The second line of argument is, simply, that considering the lives of most of us, the bad aspects of those lives outweigh the good aspects, so again it is better in such cases that we had never been.

The second line of thought: While Benatar argues that it would be a good thing if humans became extinct, according to a view that has been called longtermism, far from being good, such an outcome – what they term ‘existential risk’ – would be almost inconceivably bad. Consider in this vein Nick Bostrom, founder of the Future of
Humanity Institute which until recently was centred at Oxford. Bostrom is not so much concerned with the pain we suffer here and now or that is likely to be suffered by those who are born with the world as it is. Rather, Bostrom casts his consequentialist eye far into the future and the prospect of $10^{54}$ (his calculation) human minds spread out across the universe and ‘mainly implemented in computational hardware instead of biological neural wetware’ (Bostrom 2013: 18). Being implemented in computational hardware, it seems, will allow us to banish suffering forever. Thus, Bostrom suggests that given all the bliss enjoyed by this hardly imaginable number of future people, anything we can do now, no matter how small a contribution it may be to increasing the likelihood of our survival as a species into this future, and no matter how morally egregious it may seem (like letting billions starve to free up resources so we can get off this planet), would be morally the right thing to do.

I will not go into the various specific replies to both anti-natalism and longtermism: my point is a more basic one about consequentialism per se. A preliminary point I want to make is that an important difference between the two views, that may be seen to lead each to such wildly different conclusions, rests on one’s intuitions. Whereas Benatar is neutral about the pleasure of people that might have been but are not brought into existence (its absence is not bad), longtermists think that the pleasure not realized of all those countless people that will not exist if the species becomes extinct is very bad indeed, mind-boggling so it would seem. I mention this particular point because I want to look behind it to that which explains why someone might be amenable or not to such an intuition.

In the case of someone like Benatar on the one hand and Bostrom on the other, I think we can see what Anscombe had in mind when she says that consequentialists might appeal to different standards, for Benatar and Bostrom clearly have different standards in the relevant sense. Anscombe talks of the standard of one’s circle, and anti-natalism and longtermism can be seen to emerge from very different circles of thought. One might say these two views or standards indicate very different temperaments or evaluative attitudes to the world, including more specifically the human world. So, while Benatar’s attitude here strikes one as peculiarly pessimistic, bordering on nihilistic (though technically he need not be a nihilist; he does not need to think that life is meaningless or that there is no value in the world, but just that the costs outweigh the benefits), Bostrom’s attitude strikes one as utopian. Of course, it may be argued that a philosopher’s temperament is beside the point; what is important is their argument and that speculating about their temperament is to engage (unreasonably) in an ad hominem argument. Moreover, analytic moral philosophers are often at pains to try and safeguard that their temperament has little to do with the conclusions they reach, thinking that this a good (maybe even essential) thing as it serves the kind of impartial and impersonal or neutral perspective that moral thought, to moral theorists of various stripes, seems to require. Nevertheless, I want to argue that a person’s temperament and evaluative attitude cannot be totally disengaged from their moral thought or the conclusions that it leads them to. My own view, as I will argue, is that the idea that there can be any such thing as an impartial, neutral perspective from which moral thought might take place is an illusion. In particular, in the case of consequentialism, the idea that there can be any such thing as considering all the consequences is an empty one.

This takes us to the heart of Anscombe’s claim that consequentialism is a shallow philosophy. On the face of it, one might think consequentialism involves the rational and morally neutral assessment of the consequences of potential actions to determine which of these possible actions produce the best consequences. But what the above examples really show is that consequentialism per se has really nothing to say for or against the conclusions these two philosophers reach. Anscombe’s point is that there will be cases where it is by no means clear which action in these terms we should choose. Her example concerns borderline cases, and I think what she means here is that where the borderline appears to be will depend on one’s standard or, as I now want to suggest, how we frame the choice before us. I suggest then that the real difference between Benatar and Bostrom concerns how they frame the moral questions they seek to answer. Perhaps they would deny any conscious framing of their questions, but that really underscores my concern with their views and consequentialism generally, which is that they are unreflective when it comes to the way in which they frame the questions they attempt to answer.

The crux of my argument is that there is in moral thought no neutral process of rational deliberation in determining what it is right or wrong that one does. Benatar, it seems to me, looks at the human world and sees pain and...
suffering everywhere. For him, the whole business of human life just isn’t worth it. Bostrom on the other hand looks at the human world including all that history of human misery and sees the mere beginnings of what we might be, and he sees a future of almost limitless potential and happiness. The difference between them (I will call it a difference in evaluative attitude), leads them to focus on different things, indeed different things come into view for them as important or relevant to their inquiry. There are two distinct but related points I make here. First, our reflections on what we are to do in this respect do not range over a realm of neutral fact, rather this realm is conditioned and coloured by our own evaluative attitudes. On that point, does one focus on suffering in the here and now, or on the happiness of $10^{54}$ future people living in total bliss across the universe? By what further standard are we supposed to weigh these considerations? Second, the considerations that come into view at all for us, and the considerations that go unnoticed, are also dependent on our evaluative attitudes. To illustrate that second point, the idea of a possible future imagined by a longtermist like Bostrom had not (I am somewhat relieved to say) even occurred to me. But it is easy, if one has a mind to, to come up with all sorts of fantastical futures or possible societies. Indeed, this is a well-known literary trope of satirical fiction: see, for example, Samuel Butler’s Erewhon (Butler 1971/1872) or Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (Swift 2003/1726) (I will discuss Swift in particular in Part Two). What other, even more outlandish, possibility than Bostrom’s might one come up with in an idle moment? There seems to be no limit to such speculations. 3

Of course, longtermists will reply that what they see as the existential threat to humanity is no mere idle speculation but a real and urgent concern for us here and now. So, for example, in a discussion of longtermism, Peter Singer notes Derek Parfit who wrote, near the end of the second volume of On What Matters: ‘We live during the hinge of history.’ ... Parfit was thinking of the arrival of technologies that, if used wisely, would enable our species to survive ‘its most dangerous and decisive period,’ and our descendants to spread throughout our galaxy. Parfit refers to ‘the next few centuries,’ rather than just this one, as the time it may take before humans can live independently on other planets, but even that will only be a sliver of time compared to what is to come. Our most significant contribution to this development would be to ensure the survival of intelligent life on our planet. (Singer 2021) 2

Singer, who is of course himself a kind of consequentialist, seems not entirely comfortable however with where such an argument may lead. He quotes Phil Torres who has pointed out, viewing our current problems—other than our species extinction—through the lens of “longtermism” and “existential risk” can shrink those problems to almost nothing, while providing a rationale for doing almost anything to increase our odds of surviving long enough to spread beyond Earth. (Singer 2021, my emphasis) Singer talks here of the danger of ‘viewing current problems...through the lens of “longtermism”’. My point though is that we will always view our ‘current problems’ through one lens or another, and that it is a feature of consequentialist thinkers—including, and despite the emphasised text in the above quote, Singer— that they do not really reflect on this, that they do not consider that their moral thought and the conclusions they reach might just reflect the standards, or evaluative attitudes or lens, of their circle rather than some neutral or impartial standpoint. It is striking just how unreflective, even parochial, the thought of consequentialists can be here. So, Singer notes Parfit’s suggestion that our species faces ‘its more dangerous and decisive period.’ But focusing on recent advances in technology, as marvellous and dangerous as they may seem to us, can obscure the larger narrative of human history. Two points here: First, it is by no means clear that we face our most dangerous and decisive period even so far. To give just one example, recent genetic research reported in Science (Hu et al. 2023) shows that humans nearly became extinct 900,000 years ago with 98.7% of our ancestors lost and a mere 1280 individuals surviving. That seems a pretty close call to me. Second, history is peppered with predictions of our apparently imminent demise, so can we be so sure that our current position is any different? 3 Or consider Singer who concludes his discussion as follows:
When taking steps to reduce the risk that we will become extinct, we should focus on means that also further the interests of present and near-future people. If we are at the hinge of history, enabling people to escape poverty and get an education is as likely to move things in the right direction as almost anything else we might do; and if we are not at that critical point, it will have been a good thing to do anyway. (Singer 2021)

How does Singer know that ‘enabling people to escape poverty and get an education is as likely to move things in the right direction as almost anything else we might do.’ I like the sentiment, but that is of course a reflection of my evaluative attitude to the world. But are Singer’s reasons for thinking as he does any different from that? Isn’t it just maybe that Singer cannot quite stomach the atrocities that a single-minded, no holds barred, attempt to get off the planet might lead to?

I said above that there is in moral thought no neutral process of rational deliberation and that such deliberations always reflect to some degree one’s own evaluative attitude to the world. But that attitude is not just a given; we are in a position to reflect on and to change that attitude, and engaging in such reflection – which may open up different possibilities of moral choice – is itself a moral choice. Another way to put Anscombe’s point that consequentialism is a shallow philosophy is to say that it does not accommodate the idea that moral thought occurs at this level: it fails to recognise that our attitudes to the world, the way we individually look at the world, are in themselves moral decisions, decisions that we may be properly held accountable for.

3 | PART TWO

Coming to think about and to critically assess our evaluative attitudes and the frame of thought to which they lead cannot, I now want to argue, be just a matter of running again through the arguments that such attitudes lead us to focus on in the first place. One relevant feature of contemporary moral philosophy I suggest is that it operates with a very restrictive set of tools for engaging in moral thought. So, for example, while many philosophers may think that either Bostrom’s or Benatar’s conclusions are absurd, they generally focus their attention on the details of arguments in an attempt to find the flaw. But given their assumptions (Bostrom’s and Benatar’s) or more broadly the frame within which their consequentialist calculations take place there may not be any such flaw. But even if we were to find one, it cannot simply be just that that is wrong with their position; the problem with their theories cannot be something like a mistake in the detail of their argument. To explain, the failures of ethical thought I am suggesting are not like the kind of mistake one might discover in a physical (as opposed to ethical) theory. While one can imagine that an error, maybe quite a small and simple one, might lead to a physical theory returning an absurd result in some situations, ethical thought cannot be quite like that. While it may be absurd to suppose that it is morally alright, even just the right thing to do, to allow one billion people now to starve to make it a tiny bit more likely that there be countless future people living in bliss throughout the universe, that absurdity, it seems to me, cannot really rest on some mere detail of the relevant theory. Rather, it is the whole theoretical approach that is absurd. The problem, the moral problem, I am suggesting is with the frame itself. And my point is now that there are, as history shows, other tools of thought through which we might expose the kind of failure that I am suggesting here. An obvious tool to mention is one I have already alluded to: satire.

It is a remarkable feature of contemporary moral theorising that it basically discounts the value of satire as a serious mode of moral thought and argument to the point where such theorising seems completely inoculated against its influence. But while satire is certainly at the most general level a literary mode, historically it was seen as a mode that can also make a serious contribution to moral thought and argument; that is, it can also be (though is not always) a moral mode. But if satire is a serious mode of moral argument, how does it work? Satire, of course, serves different purposes, but one of them is to morally shock. Put that way it may be objected that satire so deployed is a purely rhetorical device and for that reason not a form of genuine moral argument at all. The claim of this part of the
paper is that this is too quick. The purpose of satire is indeed to morally shock, but to shock us out of what I have called certain frames of thinking that, so the satirist believes, have become, for example, too complacent or too callous or even slightly unhinged. Put another way, the purpose of satire in such cases is an attempt to return us to moral seriousness where, as the satirist believes, our thought has gone badly wrong in ways that are not merely about some flaw in the argument, at least as argument is understood in contemporary analytic philosophy.

Consider the argument of Bostrom, whom I have already mentioned:

Even if we use the most conservative of these estimates, which entirely ignores the possibility of space colonisation and software minds, we find that the expected loss of an existential catastrophe is greater than the value of $10^{16}$ human lives. This implies that the expected value of reducing existential risk by a mere one millionth of one percentage point is at least a hundred times the value of a million human lives. The more technologically comprehensive estimate of $10^{54}$ human-brain-emulation subjective life-years (or $10^{52}$ lives of ordinary length) makes the same point even more starkly. Even if we give this allegedly lower bound on the cumulative output potential of a technologically mature civilisation a mere 1 per cent chance of being correct, we find that the expected value of reducing existential risk by a mere one billionth of one billionth of one percentage point is worth a hundred billion times as much as a billion human lives.

One might consequently argue that even the tiniest reduction of existential risk has an expected value greater than that of the definite provision of any ‘ordinary’ good, such as the direct benefit of saving 1 billion lives. (Bostrom 2013, 18-19)

I will focus not on the details of Bostrom’s argument – I won’t for example question the math indicated above – but rather on its style and the kind of evaluative attitude to the human world that it expresses. Bostrom’s style of argument is consequentialist, calculative and dispassionate, and these to such an extreme that he can describe saving a billion lives as an ‘“ordinary” good.’ His paper, the one I have been quoting from, is littered with numerous matter-of-fact reports, sometimes presented in tables, about the fragility of our mortal lives. So, concerning one table plotting global population growth from 1900 and 2010 Bostrom invites his readers to observe that ‘Calamities such as the Spanish Flu pandemic, the two world wars, and the Holocaust scarcely register.’ (Bostrom 2013: 18) Bostrom’s style and his way of approaching the facts of our mortal lives is not new. What is new is that this style of thinking passes now, largely, without challenge or protest.8 So, I turn now to one such historical challenge and protest, that presented by Jonathan Swift in his pamphlet A Modest Proposal. (Swift 2018/1729) The pamphlet is a work of the harshest satire, one concerning the extreme poverty of the Irish peasantry and the callous indifference to it by the British establishment, and perhaps more specifically the Irish landowners of the time. Swift’s proposal is that this poverty might be alleviated if the children of the poor were to be sold at the age of one as a luxury food item for the rich. I focus on Swift’s proposal because of the similarities between the methodology and style of an author he is clearly satirising and the methodology and style of Bostrom.

First of all, the target of Swift’s satire is a kind of consequentialist thinking strikingly similar to Bostrom’s. Indeed, as Renee Prendergast has noted, Swift’s proposal can be seen as a critique of consequentialism (Prendergast 2015). Of course, Anscombe marked Sidgwick, writing in the late nineteenth century, as the founder of the kind of unrestricted consequentialism that is her target. In this she distinguishes consequentialism from what she terms ‘old fashioned’ utilitarianism as propounded by John Stuart Mill. As Anscombe notes, whereas for Mill ‘there is no question of calculating particular consequences of an action such as murder or theft’ (Anscombe 1958: 7) for Sidgwick such a calculation was not ruled out from the start. Nevertheless, as Prendergast points out, such consequentialist calculation was present much earlier in the political/economic writings of such thinkers as William Petty and, as she goes on to say, Swift in his Proposal uses the ‘political arithmetic style’ of Petty to satirical effect. To quote directly from Prendergast:
The essentials of Petty's approach are set out in the preface to his *Political Arithmetic*, where he wrote:

> The method I take to do this, is not very usual; for instead of using only comparative and superlative words and intellectual arguments, I have taken the course... to express myself in terms of number, weight, or measure; to use only arguments of sense, and to consider only such causes, as have visible foundations in nature; leaving those that depend upon the mutable minds, opinions, appetites and passions of particular men the consideration of others (Prendergast 2015: 290-1).

Petty's approach, his ‘political arithmetic style’ with number, weight and measure, then leads him to a scheme for dealing with the extreme poverty of the Irish peasantry that is morally outrageous. As Prendergast notes, the scheme Petty puts forward in *Political Arithmetic* was ‘for the transportation of the people of Ireland and the highlands of Scotland into the rest of Great Britain.’ (Prendergast 2015: 291) Transportation, that is, for misfortune of being poor and, from the point of view of a certain kind of political economy, useless. Turning to Swift's *Proposal*, his parody of Petty is very clear as Prendergast shows. Prendergast begins by quoting the following passage from Petty's *Political Anatomy of Ireland*:

> Whereas the present proportion of the British is as 3 to 11; But before the wars the proportion was less, viz. as 2 to 11. and then it follows that the number of British slain in 11 years was 112 thousand souls; of which I guess 2/3 to have perished by war, plague and famine. So as it follows that 37,000 were massacred in the first year of tumults: so as those who think that 154,000 were so destroyed, ought to review the grounds of their opinion. It follows that about 504M. of the Irish perished and were wasted by sword, plague, famine, hardship and banishment, between the 23 October 1641, and the same day 1652 (cited by Prendergast 2015: 291).

As Prendergast goes on to say,

> As can be seen from the above extract, the approach allowed Petty to discourse on war, plague, famine and massacres in a completely dispassionate manner. In *A Modest Proposal*, Swift parodies the style of *Political Anatomy* and other works of this type by expressing himself in terms of number, weight or measure whenever possible and by adopting a dispassionate, economical style of expression, though one that is somewhat more eloquent than Petty's:

> The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two hundred thousand couple whose wives are breeders; from which number I subtract thirty thousand couple, who are able to maintain their own children, (although I apprehend there cannot be so many, under the present distresses of the kingdom) but this being granted, there will remain an hundred and seventy thousand breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand, for those women who miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease within the year. There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born. The question therefore is, How this number shall be reared, and provided for? which, as I have already said, under the present situation of affairs, is utterly impossible by all the methods hitherto proposed (Swift cited in Prendergast 2015: 291)

Swift’s satire was intended to shock his audience out of their indifference to the plight of the Irish poor, but it was also, I would argue with Prendergast, to show the limits of rationality understood in an entirely abstracted and
dispassionate, or as I have put it supposedly morally neutral, way.10 Bostrom (in the paper I have quoted from) may be dispassionate but what he has to say there is not morally neutral. Within the frame of reference from which Bostrom argues, all the needless death and suffering of human history barely registers as a blip, but it is no neutral thing to argue from that frame of reference. One might look at that human history, and more generally the human world over which all our moral choices range, in different ways than Bostrom – and my suggestion is that moral seriousness requires us to do so.

I recognise that my suggestion above will remain unconvincing to such consequentialist thinkers as Bostrom and Benatar. So, it will be argued that all I can mean by looking at things differently is to have a certain evaluative attitude to some realm of neutral facts in the limited sense that one is just disposed to feel a certain way about them. Benatar in this connection sees nothing wrong with being an optimist or a pessimist about the facts of human life just so long as that does not conflict with the evidence. As Benatar says,

optimism cannot be the right view merely because it is cheery, just as pessimism cannot be the right view merely because it is grim. Which view we adopt must depend on the evidence. (Benatar 2008: 210)

Benatar talks about optimism and pessimism as if they were merely a kind of simple isolable psychological trait. But looked at that way there is no reason to suppose, as David Hume might put it, that cheerfulness is always conjoined with optimism or grimness always conjoined with pessimism.11 We can, with Albert Camus, imagine Sisyphus as cheerful just as Martin Luther’s view of our condition was grim while, as he thought, Christ’s gift to us of salvation is sublime optimism. Beyond being a mere trait though, optimism and pessimism can constitute a broader attitude toward the world. But in that sense, for Benatar it seems they amount to kinds of cognitive failure. So, in connection with optimism Benatar discusses the psychological phenomenon called the ‘Pollyanna Principle,’ a failure of self-assessment which manifests for example in ‘an inclination to recall positive rather than negative experiences.’ (Benatar 2008: 65) On that way of thinking it will seem irrational, for example, to look for and focus on the best in people. It might look that way if assessing people’s lives was simply a matter of tallying up the good elements in a life with the bad. What this leaves out is that in assessing other people’s lives we are also learning about the good, about what the human good consists in. To put the point another way, in reflecting on the lives of others it is possible to find value, kinds of value, that we did not previously recognise. Again, it is a feature of consequentialism that it tends to take to idea of the human good, or simply the good, as something settled. The consequentialist might reply that theirs is a theory of the right, not of the good. But the problem with that way of dividing up the moral is that it discounts the idea that a particular theory of the good might be incompatible with the consequentialist theory of the right. And that was precisely Anscombe’s point, which is clear from her account of the Aristotelian virtue of justice. As she says,

the flourishing of a man qua man consists in his being good (e.g. in the virtues); but for any X to which such terms apply, X needs what makes it flourish, so a man needs, or ought to perform, only virtuous actions; and even if ... he flourishes less, or not at all, in inessentials by avoiding injustice, his life will be spoiled in essentials by not avoiding injustice. (Anscscombe 1958: 15)

But regardless of whether one agrees or not with Anscombe’s particular Aristotelian conception of the human good, a moment’s reflection on the ways and ends according to which different people have chosen to live their lives shows us that there are various conceptions of the human good that are incompatible with consequentialism simply because for any version of that theory the good is to be understood as comprising distinct elements (there may be more than one) that can somehow be additively summed so as to indicate an overall best state of affairs.12 Moreover, reflecting on what different people have made of the human good gives us a basis for comparing different conceptions of the good. And that is what Anscombe is doing in Modern Moral Philosophy. She is comparing...
consequentialism with, for example, old fashioned utilitarianism and Aristotelian virtue; she is attempting to show how one line in moral thought can be shallow by comparing it with another that isn’t. But for her argument to convince you, you need to be open to the idea that moral thought can fail in that kind of way, that is, by being shallow. Again, I recognise that for those who deny this, all I may be seen to be doing is to insult my consequentialist peers. But to be insulted, in other words, to be morally offended, requires that one can provide the moral standard that has here been transgressed. Which really returns me to Anscombe’s point. For of course the consequentialist cannot reply now simply by saying something like ‘around here we don’t call a fellow philosopher’s theory shallow,’ for that would just be to illustrate her point.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Open access publishing facilitated by Flinders University, as part of the Wiley - Flinders University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

**ORCID**

Craig Taylor https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7186-2674

**ENDNOTES**

1 One point a consequentialist might make that would rule out Bostrom’s kind of argument would be to restrict their calculus to just those consequences that are highly likely. Two thoughts on that though. First, this would be a very restricted form of consequentialism, whereas the most significant arguments by consequentialists are not so restricted. So, for example, Singer revisiting his famous analogy between helping a child drowning in a pond and helping impoverished children globally (Singer 1972) now concedes that ‘in the pond case you can see for yourself that your action is very likely to save a life, whereas when you donate to an aid organization you have to rely on information gathered by someone else about the likely impact of your donation.’ (Singer 2016, pp. xxii-xxiii). Second, even if it was highly likely that getting us off the planet would require us to, say, abandon the global poor, the consequentialist decision to do so would not seem any less outrageous to those who were already inclined to think so.

2 It is important to note that since longtermists like Bostrom frame our situation as one of crisis and potential catastrophe, one standard defence of consequentialism will not work. To explain, as Philip Petit puts it, the main argument against consequentialism is:

> That it would lead an agent to do horrendous deeds, so long as they promised the best consequences. ... The charge is on target but it is only relevant of course to horrendous circumstances. Thus if someone of ordinary values condoned torture, that would only be in circumstances where there was a great potential gain – the saving of innocent lives, the prevention of a catastrophe – and where there were not the bad consequences involved, say, in state authorities claiming the right to torture. (Petit 1993: 234)

But since for Bostrom and other longtermists human extinction amounts to an almost unimaginable catastrophe, horrendous deeds here and now would seem to be justified. Consequentialism is always going to be vulnerable to this kind of point, which is about the way a given consequentialist frames the choices before us.

3 For an amusing survey of such predictions see Mark Strauss’s ‘Ten Notable Apocalypses That (Obviously) Didn’t Happen.’ Here is my favourite, which seems rather apt given my discussion of Bostrom and his playing around with very small probabilities and impossibly vast numbers of people across the universe. Talking of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) Strauss says,

> some skeptics worry that the high-energy collision of protons could create micro black holes. One reason this doomsday rumor persists is that quantum physicists have a tendency never to say never. As long as some physical laws are obeyed, potential events are placed in the rather broad category of ‘non-zero’ probability. Or, as Amherst physicist Kannan Jagannathan explains: ‘If something is not forbidden, it is compulsory... In an infinite universe, even things of low probability must occur (actually infinitely often).’ However, by that same standard, Jagannathan adds, quantum physics dictates that it is theoretically possible to turn on your kitchen faucet and have a dragon pop out. (Strauss 2009)

4 On longtermism see for example Tarnsey (2023), while Benatar himself has responded to many of his mainstream critics in Benatar (2013).

5 Which is not to say that it hasn’t seemed to me on occasion and at first glance that a philosopher was attempting something like satire in a philosophical paper. So, for example, that was my initial thought in reading Harris (1975) whose...
solution to the problem of a chronic shortage of organs available for transplant is to propose that the organs of all, sick and healthy alike, should be regarded as a kind of public resource to be drawn upon as and when needed via a lottery. But in that case, alas, I was mistaken. Perhaps a more promising candidate is Smilansky (2020) who makes the interesting suggestion that utilitarians, given their view that we ought to sacrifice the one to save the many, maybe should be sacrificed first.

6 So, for example, François Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* has no such moral aspiration.

7 Which indicates an important feature of satire; that it need not be funny. And, indeed, there is nothing at all funny about the work of satire I will be focussing on in this section of the paper, Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*.

8 Though, for an exception, see Crary (2023).

9 If the comparison I am making with longtermism is starting to look unfair, consider this: Alice Crary notes the following conclusion from Nick Beckstead, a research fellow at Boston’s Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford. As Crary paraphrases, Beckstead argues in his 2013 PhD thesis *On the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future* that ‘inhabitants of rich countries are generally more “innovative” and “economically productive” and that saving their lives is hence substantially more important for humanity’s future than saving lives in poor countries.’ (Crary 2023: 54).

10 So according to Prendergast:

Swift was unequivocal in his rejection of the view that mathematics and other sophisticated forms of rationality provided a sufficient basis for understanding human society. At the same time, Swift’s own use of economic data and reasoning especially in his Irish writings indicates that his objection was not to rationality per se, but to rationality that took wings of its own and ignored important aspects of human life (Prendergast 2015: 294)

11 Discussing the relations between the emotions of love and hatred and certain desires, Hume notes that while love is usually conjoined with benevolence and hatred with anger, ‘I see no contradiction in supposing desire of producing misery annexed to love, and of happiness to hatred’ (Hume 1985/6 [1739]: 368).

12 So, for example, Samuel Scheffler has pointed out in this context how agent-centred restrictions on action, for example a prohibition on killing the innocent, can seem paradoxical. As he says, how can it be rational to forbid the performance of a morally objectionable action [say, killing an innocent person] that would have the effect of minimizing the total number of comparable objectionable actions that were performed and would have no other morally relevant consequences? (Scheffler 1988: 244)

For Scheffler, the difficult to dismiss conception of practical rationality that lies behind such consequentialist reasoning is what he calls ‘maximising rationality.’ (Scheffler 1988: 252) But there are other conceptions of practical rationality that in turn suggest different conceptions of the good that are incompatible with consequentialism. Consider for instance the case of a person who lives their life according to certain moral ideals. In such a person would be found themselves in a situation where the best state of affairs can only be brought about by them betraying those ideals, they might nevertheless conclude that they morally cannot betray them. In such a case it would miss the point of their moral judgment and the nature of their conception of the good to reply that because of their judgment ten other people will betray those same moral ideals. Of course, this kind of case depends for its plausibility on the existence, just flagged, of certain moral modalities, specifically moral necessities and incapacities, and connected with this that moral judgment may be essentially personal. For a discussion of such modalities and the very different conception of practical rationality that they suggest, see Winch (1972), Williams (1993) and Raz (2000).

REFERENCES


---

**How to cite this article:** Taylor, C. (2024). Anscombe on the shallowness of consequentialism. European Journal of Philosophy, 1–11. [https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12995](https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12995)