

CONSEQUENTIAL EXISTENTIALISM: QUALIFYING EXISTENTIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: Jean-Paul Sartre's 1946 essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" is a call to action. He tells us that all humanity is in an anguished state of abandonment. This means that, without God, we are left to choose our own moral choices without any divine guidance, and so must choose well for all humanity. I will argue that a good way to make these moral choices is presented in Brad Hooker's rule consequentialism. Rule consequentialism provides individuals with a decision-making procedure that can, in effect, allow them to *choose well* for all humanity. Though there are certainly metaethical disagreements between consequentialists and existentialists, I circumvent these obstacles by arguing that, regardless of this, the set of actions endorsed by rule consequentialism and that endorsed by existentialism are likely to be in extensional agreement.

INTRODUCTION

Existentialists claim that humans have a duty to choose for all humanity what the nature of humanity will be. Sartre states that in this duty, humans are in anguish. All humans live at some point in anguish because they must choose at every moment what humanity will become, since humanity has no essence. I will assume that this is true: humans in fact do not have an essence prior to choosing to become something (like a carpenter or a murderer or a population ecologist).¹ As such, I will assume that what Sartre derives from this claim is also true: humans must choose what humanity will be. Sartre does not, however, specify exactly how these choices should be made. While he does make some seemingly normative claims (outright opposition to death sentences, for example), his outline lacks a fully fleshed out normative system that can be used to make the anguished choices with which we have been saddled. I will argue that normative rule consequentialism² offers an avenue through which philosophers can qualify the kinds of and extent to which actions are necessary in order to "choose for all humanity."³ First, I will explain why rule consequentialism makes a fitting normative framework for existentialism; second, I will explain how existential responsibility can be explained in normative terms; and lastly, I will show that rule consequentialism's utility in situational decision making renders it the most plausible moral deliberative theory to deliver on "choosing well for all humanity."

WHY RULE CONSEQUENTIALISM?

Brad Hooker gives a clear and thorough exposition of rule consequentialism in "Rule-Consequentialism." I will rely on his arguments in favor of this moral framework.

¹ Actually, no human is ever *essentially* any of those things either, according to Sartre. This is not directly relevant to my argument, however.

² Brad Hooker, "Rule-Consequentialism," in *Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. by Hugh LaFollette (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 446.

³ There are, of course, striking differences in the metaethical foundations of consequentialism and existentialism. However, it is probably that the set of actions preferred by both are extensionally similar or even identical. I will rely on that latter assumption throughout this paper.

His discussion of decision procedures and consequentialism is of particular importance here. This is because much of the existentialist's anxiety comes as a result of having to *decide* what will be good or right in any given situation. Rule consequentialism can, if well formulated, ease this anxiety by offering a set of normative criteria, developed into consistent rules, by which one can evaluate an action. In section 6 of "Rule-Consequentialism," Hooker gives a decisive rebuttal to the Collapse Problem (CP), an often-cited flaw in rule consequentialism. Broadly, objectors convinced of CP state that rule consequentialism will collapse into act consequentialism because either (a) any rule will have exceptions which will result in better consequences—e.g., killing Adolf Hitler might prove an exception to the rule, "it is wrong to kill heads of state"—and so must be abandoned in favor of these better consequences, or (b) all rules in rule consequentialism are derived from the only real rule: act such that good is maximized and bad is minimized. Hooker offers the following considerations against this claim. Though compliance with a moral code is ideal, so too is internalization. That is, it would not be appropriate to have everyone forced to produce the greatest good for the greatest number. This would, paradoxically, lead to non-ideal consequences. Instead, the best consequences are likely to be produced if all agents have internalized the moral code. Yet internalization of a code requires that said code is used as a decision-making procedure. Act consequentialism, Hooker points out, is a poor decision-making procedure, as it requires implausible amounts of information and immediate calculation.⁴ So, rule consequentialism is more operationally useful to agents, and so more likely to actually produce the best consequences.

I choose to use rule consequentialism as an answer to existential anguish because it offers a means by which such momentous decisions can be made such that those decisions produce the best outcomes for humanity, thus "choosing well" for humanity. Act consequentialism would leave us no better off in our decision making.

EXISTENTIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Having thus defended rule consequentialism, I will turn for the moment to existentialism. In "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre outlines the existentialist worldview and something of its ethic. The existentialist realizes—perhaps after experiencing firsthand the horrors of World War II—that God does not exist. And without God, there "can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it."⁵ By this, Sartre means that it cannot be held necessarily true that actions are good or bad in virtue of God's deeming it as such. It is upon human beings to decide what is good and what is bad, and, in deciding so, to choose for all humanity what humanity's moral nature will be. He says, "We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does."⁶

This seems plausible, especially for one disposed toward a secular worldview. We have no excuse; humanity must make its own decisions for itself. Unfortunately, as stated in the

⁴ Hooker, "Rule-Consequentialism," 431.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1988, essay first published in 1946), 353.

⁶ Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 352.

introduction, Sartre does not give clear normative guidelines for *how* we ought to choose for ourselves. Broadly, there are some injunctions against freedom-limiting laws and regimes—but not any technical details about decision making in our abandoned, condemned world. For someone who takes Sartre and this existential duty rather seriously, it is urgent to find such a set of normative guidelines. This set of guidelines would specify what actions are morally permissible and impermissible (and therefore under what conditions an agent is worthy of praise or blame) and so can be said to be successfully choosing *well* for all humanity.

SITUATIONAL MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is clear, I think, how one can *apply* rule consequentialism in an effort to choose well. It is essentially the same as any other moral choice, though it is more systematized. I must now demonstrate the way that the existentialist ontology and conception of personhood and responsibility is compatible with the application of rule consequentialism within its system. The point of agreement I will focus on will be extensional agreement; that is, the two sets contain the same elements. I will argue that the set of actions potentially laudable under the existential view is concurrent with that advocated for by the rule consequentialist, and so the set of actions to which both would extend moral obligation is analogous.

First, I need to explain the existentialist view of ethics. Admittedly, establishing a normative system compatible with existentialism appears difficult because Sartre himself opposed moral frameworks, stating, “And that is to say that I can neither seek within myself for an authentic impulse to action, nor can I expect, from some ethic, enable me to act.”⁷ His reasoning for this is, roughly, that even if one accepts a, say, Kantian ethical framework, she will still have to choose to follow it. Further, she will still have to determine whether she should follow it under certain circumstances. To illustrate this, Sartre uses the example of his student who, as the last son of his widowed mother, must choose to either stay home to care for her or join the French resistance to avenge his brother, whom the Nazis have killed. In either choice, Sartre points out that his student is faced with the impossible task of choosing one over the other. He cannot rely on some external all-knowing authority—like God or Kant’s moral law—to make the decision for him.

I will be completely transparent about my interpretation of this parable. I suspect most existential philosophers, historical and contemporary, would object to what I am about to say precisely because, from an existentialist perspective, any kind of (erroneous) reliance on a moral framework would remove the anguish of responsibility that they believe is always part of human existence. My hope is that it I render my own view plausible and as a point of connection and conversation between existential thought and normative ethics, and show that it is a legitimate, if not perfectly faithful, interpretation of existentialism.

Sartre’s student is facing existential anguish. He is forced to choose without any cosmic safeguard about what the right thing to do is. Existentialists hold that in his choice he is not only choosing for himself and his mother and the resistance forces, but also for all of humanity, since through his particularized decision he is nevertheless deciding on behalf of all humanity about what the nature of humanity will be. “When a man commits himself

⁷ Ibid., 356.

to anything,” Sartre writes, “fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.”⁸ If this is the case, then he had better choose *well* for all humanity. It seems sensible, then, given this immense and profound task, to try and develop a measured and careful way by which one can actually choose well for all humanity.

Enter rule consequentialism. In Hooker’s exposition of the view, he specifies that an *internalized* rule-consequentialism would likely produce the best possible outcomes. If every member of a society honestly believed in and followed a set of rules crafted carefully to produce the best outcomes, it is likely that those best outcomes would come to pass. Moreover, if the best possible ends are reached by following a given system of ethics, I cannot imagine a better means by which one could choose well for all humanity. Thus, in the case of Sartre’s student, he might make his choice in virtue of the rule, “opposing tyrannical forces of evil (e.g., Nazis) is always morally obliged.”

It may seem that I am proceeding too quickly; I will qualify my stance further by expanding on Sartre’s example. He concludes the story with the following assertion:

To take once again the case of that student; by what authority, in the name of what golden rule of morality, do you think he could have decided, in perfect peace of mind, either to abandon his mother or to remain with her? There are no means of judging. The content is always concrete, and therefore unpredictable; it has always to be invented. The one thing that counts is to know whether the invention is made in the name of freedom.⁹

I am not sure whether we are meant to take this rhetorically or literally, but I will take it literally. I think, to the contrary of Sartre’s proclamation here, that if the content is always concrete, then it therefore *is predictable*. If the empirically observable outcomes of events are our concern, which I take to be roughly what Sartre means by “concrete,” then there are certainly at least *some* ways to predict what might happen. Economists, historians, and social scientists assume a certain extent of predictability with respect to human events and decisions in these researchers’ basic methodologies. While there is almost certainly not any way his student could have made this decision “in perfect peace of mind,” moral decisions are often by their very nature not easy to make.

Rule consequentialism offers a toolkit that may be employed to choose well for humanity in situational moral considerations. For this reason, it is likely that the set of actions endorsed by any existentialist and that endorsed by a rule consequentialist would be extensionally equivalent. Because the two are likely extensionally equivalent, and rule consequentialism offers a more technical and precise means by which one can make difficult moral decisions, rule consequentialism emerges as a useful tool employable in morally difficult situations while still choosing well within the existentialist’s framework.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 355.

CONCLUSION

We have seen here the usefulness that rule consequentialism can provide while still operating within the parameters of an existential ethical system. I have not here considered the metaethical reasons why an existentialist might reject whatever grounding a rule consequentialist might offer, but this is because I am not primarily interested in arguing on behalf of such foundations. Whatever disagreement there may be between consequentialists and existentialists with respect to metaethics, the application of rule consequentialism within existentialism is still plausible, as I have maintained here.

REFERENCES

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