

CBC Sunday School
Christian Ethics: Consequentialism
November 21, 2021

“Not everything that counts can be counted.” Jared Wilson, *Gospel-Driven Ministry*, p. 38

I. Discussion Question – Moral Dilemma Hypothetical

One church has a number of widowed seniors. Some of them have begun to form close relationships, and a few have considered marriage. However, the state laws in this church’s location are such that seniors who marry might actually be hindered financially, due to various factors regarding insurance and social security benefits, among others. The financial impact of marriage could be severe. Therefore, a few of these couples, who desire to be married, have chosen to live as though married, but to not “officially” be married in the eyes of the state. They claim they can be “ecclesiastically” married in the eyes of the church and before God. But by not registering their marriage with the government, they can evade financial penalty. If you were their pastor, how would you counsel them?

II. What Is Consequentialism?

A. Defining Consequentialism

1. Also called utilitarianism or pragmatism; or a “teleological” ethical system.
 - a. Telos = end, result, goal, or purpose
 - b. Pragmatism = philosophical approach that assesses the truth of meaning of theories or beliefs in terms of the success of their practical application.
2. Consequentialist ethical systems consider an action to be morally good/bad or right/wrong according to the consequence produced by the action.
3. The rightness or wrongness of an act is not inherent in or to the act itself. The act itself is inherently neutral. What makes an act right or wrong is its outcome.
4. Consequentialism asks “What works?”
5. Might be considered as the opposite of idealism.
6. “The ethical theory according to which the rightness of actions is determined by the net balance of benefits produced. The principle of utility is seen by utilitarians as the sole moral criterion by which to judge actions, this principle being that we should always produce the greatest possible balance of good over evil.” D. B. Fletcher, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 1234

B. Roots of Consequentialism

1. Is found wherever “production” is prioritized. An act is a moral good if it can be shown to produce “good.” A “good” is usually defined as a morally neutral product such as money, food, societal standing, pleasure, peace, well-being, etc. A moral thing such as truthfulness might only be good if it can be shown to produce good.
2. Aristotle’s philosophy of entelechy.
 - a. Whereas Plato distinguished between the matter (physical representation of an object that we see and touch, that are shadows of that which is truly real) and the form (the ideal, absolute, non-physical essence of that thing), Aristotle

distinguished between the potential and the actual.

- b. Aristotle didn't find much use in the idea of the world of forms, as this world in his mind was nonexistent. He sought something more concrete.
- c. Aristotle viewed the material world as needing to fulfill its potential, and in that is perfection or completion. The material world has an inherent drive to be actualized, and to fulfill potential.
- d. That which is moral, according to Aristotle, is that which propels the potential toward the actual – whatever drives the material world toward its fulfillment.
- e. Thus, his thinking had an eye toward the “end results.”

III. Two Categories of Consequentialist/Teleological Ethical Systems

A. Ethical Egoism

1. Focuses on producing greatest good or best consequences for oneself. Whatever is best for me is what is good.
2. The person acting must act in his or her own best interest. You have no right to ask another to act in your best interest. Each must act according to their own interest.
3. You are doing the right thing if it is in your best interest in the long run. This is not just about hedonism or fulfilling immediate desires, but about a long-term view of what is personally beneficial. It is about personal growth and fulfillment.
4. Different than an egotistical person who thinks everything should be about them, or a hedonist who seeks only pleasure. Ethical egoism is a disciplined perspective that holds that all should pursue their own best interest in fulfilling and benefiting self, and that the world would be better if all did so. If all the world pursued our “best self,” the world would be better.

B. Utilitarianism

1. Focuses on producing the greatest good for the most people, which might not include oneself.
2. According to utilitarianism, one must always do what is best for the most people.
3. For some utilitarians, this has meant doing that which brings the most people the most overall pleasure. Some even quantified this in “units of pleasure” called “hedones,” and developed a calculus to determine how much pleasure is produced by certain actions. That which produces the most “hedones” is the most morally good.
4. Other utilitarians are not as hedonistic, and the greatest good is defined in terms of virtue of character, knowledge, wisdom, freedom, peace, harmony, love, beauty, etc.
5. For non-hedonistic utilitarians, we are required to do that which promotes the most beauty, love, peace, freedom, harmony, wisdom, virtue, etc.

IV. Strengths and Biblical Support for Consequentialism

A. Theoretical Strengths

1. It at least seeks to do good, often for others, and desires to make the world a better place. It resonates with our Christian conviction of seeking the well-being of all.
2. The best consequentialists desire virtuous things, and want virtue for the world.
3. It deals with the world “as it is,” and recognizes the messiness of life. It is a system

that simply calls us to work for the best outcome in any situation, and not get paralyzed by theoretical right and wrong.

B. Biblical Support

1. Galatians 6:10 – ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.
2. Colossians 1:28 - ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.
3. Ephesians 4:11-16 – ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.
4. Genesis 1:28 – ²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”
5. Ephesians 2:10 – ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
6. Matthew 28:18-20 – ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
7. Philippians 1:15-18 – ¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.
8. Anywhere Scriptures calls us to focus on the outcome of our work, the fruits of our labors, or the goals to which we are to work, may support a utilitarian mindset. It is clear in Scripture that we are not simply to be good, but to do and produce good.
9. Consider Paul’s ministry. It seems that his evangelistic approach was somewhat pragmatic/utilitarian, in that he went specifically to larger cities, and in them targeted synagogues or places where religious conversation was taking place. He seemed to have a strategy to his ministry.
10. You could also say that Jesus had a pragmatic strategy to His ministry. He called some to be silent about His ministry, knowing that their outspokenness might bring unwanted attention. He also strategically targeted religious leaders, strategically invested in a few key leaders, and strategically targeted Jerusalem in His ministry.

V. The Weakness in Consequentialism

- A. The ministry of Jesus cannot be defined as “pragmatic.”
 - 1. Jesus did not choose disciples most likely to produce the best results.
 - 2. Jesus ministered to the least influential of His time – the poor, outcasts, women, children, despised, unclean, etc. When the disciples thought ministering to such as these was beneath Jesus or a waste of His time, Jesus challenged the disciples and welcomed children (Luke 18:15-17; Mark 10:13-16).
 - 3. Jesus taught an ethic that seemed decidedly anti-pragmatic. Consider the beatitudes, which directly contradict the pragmatism of the world.
 - 4. Jesus often did what seemed illogical and counter-intuitive. Where He was offered a kingdom by Satan, or called to remain in towns and establish His ministry, His actions were determined only by what His Father asked, not by what potential “good” He might do in any given area. Note: “Think of all the good you could do” seems like a particularly effective means of temptation by Satan, in trying to convince humans to engage in sinful actions.
 - 5. Jesus of course insisted on following the will of the Father, regardless of perceived outcome or benefit (see Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 6:38).
 - 6. Consider Jesus’ words to the churches in Revelation. He does not call the churches to be large and successful, and produce the most good for the world. Rather, He calls them to be faithful and virtuous, even if that leads to persecution and death.
- B. We are called first and foremost to do what is right and loving, not what “produces.”
 - 1. Our ultimate command is to love God, and love neighbor as ourselves.
 - a. Our first obligation is to be faithful to God, not to pursue results.
 - b. Specifically arguing against ethical egoism, we are not called to first seek our own good. We are to love others as ourselves. Ethical egoism does not allow us to lay down our lives for the worship of God and the love of others.
 - 2. God calls us to lay down our lives in sacrifice for Him. Utilitarianism does not seem to allow for this.
 - 3. Consider Old Testament Israel, and their following of God. They were often called to do what was illogical and what would not obviously do the most good. God calls them to defy Egypt, which would not have seemed good. God called them to fight with 300 men and not thousands. God called them to take over the promised land that seemed to be filled with giants. They were to fight their battles not based on what would seem to produce the best results, or by what seemed to be strategically sound, but what was in line with God’s will and word.
 - 4. Consider 2 Timothy 4:3, and Paul’s condemnation of those who only listen to teachers that speak to their itching ears. The implication is that it doesn’t matter how successful our ministry is if what we are teaching is not obedient and faithful, and that it is an evil thing to seek to gain an audience by less-than-righteous means.
 - 5. Consider Satan’s temptation of Adam and Eve. He tempted them with a seemingly beneficial and pragmatic result, enticing them to go against a moral command.
 - 6. Even in Paul’s seemingly strategic ministry, he ultimately went to where the Spirit of God called him. Even when it seemed like his following of God would not end well, practically speaking, Paul insisted on following the Lord’s will (see Acts 21:10-14).
 - 7. We are called to pick up our cross and die for Jesus if need be. Dying doesn’t seem

like a very pragmatically effective way to bring good to the world. In fact, dying most often eliminates further capacity to produce. Yet we are called to faithfulness before “fruitfulness,” even unto death.

- C. Consequentialism overestimates our ability to determine cause and effect, and to assess good and bad.
 - 1. How do we know what will produce most good? Can we know? How can we factor all the potential variables?
 - 2. Is it humanly possible to base all of our decisions, which are often impulsive, on some ability to calculate net good?
 - 3. How can we predict who will benefit most from our actions?
 - 4. We cannot even perfectly know what actions will always be best for us. How could we possibly know what actions will bring the greatest good to the most people?
 - 5. True, helpful consequentialism would require omniscience, which we don't have.
 - 6. “The nuisance of not being omniscient is going to be a bummer for any consequentialist system.” Todd Miles, Western Seminary
 - 7. Beyond the problem of omniscience, our hearts and minds often want the wrong things. We are not infallibly trustworthy guides as to what is good and right.
 - 8. Who determines what is right and beneficial, for an individual or for a whole? We need an external code, that sees beyond what we see, to determine what is good and right and beneficial.
- D. Consequentialism does not account for motive or “heart.”
 - 1. We cannot do something with wrong or hateful hearts, or by objectively immoral action, then call it good if it happens to work out well in the end.
 - 2. For example, if I total your car while drunk-driving, and you are not injured, but actually benefit because your insurance allows you to purchase a better car, I cannot then say my action was good.
 - 3. Scripture everywhere calls us to evaluate our heart and motive, and to do that which is obedient to God's will. Consequentialism explicitly dismisses personal motivation.
- E. Consequentialism ultimately leads to wickedness.
 - 1. When we focus solely on the “ends,” we will eventually justify any means to reach those ends.
 - 2. Our sinful hearts are skilled at justifying sin, and consequentialism only catalyzes that sinful tendency.
 - 3. Consider Moses angrily striking the rock to produce water in Numbers 20:1-13. God was very much concerned with Moses' heart and obedience as he produced water out of the rock, not just the simple act of getting water for the people.
- F. God doesn't need us.
 - 1. Good can be produced regardless of our existence. God can produce fruit and bring good from whomever and whatever and wherever He desires.
 - 2. Thus, God does not ultimately call us to be producers; that is not what He requires of us. He calls us to be faithful and obedient.
 - 3. Consequentialism causes us to think of our value in terms of our ability to produce.

Scripture, however, reminds us that our ability to produce is largely inconsequential. God will bring the good He desires regardless of our efforts.

4. Consequentialism implies that our highest purpose is to produce. Scripture tells us our highest purpose is to worship God, from Whom come all good things.
5. Luke 19:40 – ⁴⁰ He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”
6. Esther 4:14 – ¹⁴ For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

VI. Discussion: Consequentialism Applied

- A. Where do we see consequentialism in the church? Do we generally have pragmatic leanings? If so, is this good or bad?
- B. Whenever we do what is wrong in order to pursue success, we practice an unhealthy consequentialism/pragmatism. Where are we tempted to do what is wrong because we desire “results?”
- C. Whenever we do not do what is right because we are afraid of the results, we are practicing an unhealthy consequentialism/pragmatism. Where are we tempted to not do what we know is right, because we are concerned about the “results?”
- D. Is it righteous to “weigh” sin and good in determining our actions, such that we are willing to put up with a little bit of evil and sin if the final outcome of our actions is “worth it?”
- E. Consider our actions in social realms such as politics. Do the ends justify the means? In other words, should we try to advance our causes “at all costs?” Should we do “whatever it takes” to eliminate an evil such as abortion? What is the cost of unrighteous means to good ends?

“A ministry’s faithfulness to the mission of God *is itself* success, regardless of the results. Yet at the same time, a faithful ministry *will be* a fruitful ministry. We need to take care that we define fruitfulness according to the biblical portraits of fruitfulness.” Jared Wilson, *Gospel-Driven Ministry*, p. 43