

**Ends Versus Ethics: A Consequentialist Justification for Moral Transgressions**

Maya El Hajj

School of Business Administration

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Dr. Philip McCarthy

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## ENDS VERSUS ETHICS

### **Ends Versus Ethics: A Consequentialist Justification for Moral Transgressions**

In this paper, I argue that consequentialist ethics reasonably rationalizes unethical behavior. Sinnott-Armstrong (2003) defines *consequentialism* as an ethical theory fostered around determining the morality of something according to whether it “makes the world best in the future” (para. 1). First established through the works of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the 18th century, consequentialism weighs the ethicality of something solely through its resulting outcomes. As such, this approach may often conflict with deontological ethics, which measures ethics through the inherent morality of an action, irrespective of its results. However, some criticize consequentialism’s tendency of justifying ethically questionable acts and, perhaps, being counterproductive in doing so. Therefore, I explore various events that have had unethical means but added significance to civilization in demonstrating how consequentialism facilitates advancement.

I support my position on the positive impacts of consequentialism through the following three arguments. First, I argue that unethical methods can produce valuable medical progress and outcomes. For example, Sibanda (2019) explains how the World Health Organization (WHO) deemed it ethical to use unverified treatments in overcoming the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), thus saving many lives. Second, I argue that overemphasizing social rights in the name of ethics may limit shared knowledge. An example is the way in which ‘cancel culture’ punishes people for their actions, minimizing self-expression that could have enriched public knowledge (Mueller, 2021). Finally, I argue that extreme military force can be practical if beneficial consequences follow. This justification of force is explored by Frowe (2023), who examines the role of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings in ending WWII despite the resulting fatalities.

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I also consider alternative views to my position. First, many argue that cultural relativism and personal values cause a degree of subjectivity in understanding consequentialist ethics, meaning that neither the ethicality nor the weight of an outcome's benefit can be truly measured (Liu et al., 2020). For example, while genital removal is a normalized cultural practice that establishes womanhood in some parts of the world, many oppose it because of their cultural beliefs (Holt, n.d.). Second, others believe that the consequential detriments of unethical experiments reduce the value of the benefits such experiments have provided society. One way detriments may outweigh the benefits of an experiment is illustrated in the controversies imposed by historical psychology studies (Thompson, 2023). Although these beliefs have merit, they lack sight of the bigger picture. For instance, while cultural relativism could pose a barrier to measuring the ethics and beneficence of a particular consequence, such differences do not mean that various cultures exist without shared morals (Liu et al., 2020). Thus, we can consider the most collective moral laws when discussing ethical matters.

This paper is important because it addresses a selection of questions that shape our views on consequentialism. These questions include “How does unethical historical research contribute to our awareness today,” “What role does cultural relativism play in determining ethical boundaries,” and “How can ethical principles be reconsidered for their potential benefits.” By tackling such questions, this paper aims to recenter deontological ethics on consequentialist ethics to maximize societal benefit while challenging misperceptions of consequentialism.

### **The Ethicality of Unethical Phenomena**

Justifying unethical means based on the outcomes they have produced is strongly backed by consequentialism. Consequentialist ethics exists in medical contexts, like justifying the use of untested drugs for virus treatment in times of desperation or relying on unethical experiments for

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medical solutions. Further, 'cancel culture' demonstrates how maintaining one person's social rights could instead breach another's, ultimately limiting the public spread of information. Finally, consequentialism also applies to justifying military force depending on intentions, methods, and resulting outcomes.

### **Ends Justify Means in Medicine**

The world of medicine has grown substantially considerate of ethical laws. Indeed, medicine had seen decades of unethical experimentation and medicinal methods before establishing moral boundaries. However, the utility of the contributions made by unethical medical experiments is undeniable and identifiable through various examples. According to Brazier (2008), James Sims was a surgeon in the 17th century who invented a method that prevents the pain of bladder and bowel incontinence for women. The impacts of double incontinence were so detrimental that they sometimes even included death. Therefore, resolving this problem did not come at a cheap price. Brazier describes that, Sims operated on enslaved subjects, without using anesthesia, over 30 times to confirm his results. The author also notes that the presence of informed consent in this experiment remains unverified. Nonetheless, most assume that there is a low chance any woman consented to be experimented on through Sims' process. Despite the uncertainty around informed consent in Sims' experimentation, Brazier demonstrates that we now have therapeutic research because of Sims' results, suggesting that many have benefited, including the test subjects in question.

Medical consequentialism also exists contemporarily, where unethical means have led to favorable ends. This modern consequentialism is supported by the authentication of using untested medical treatments to overcome EVD. In his article, Sibanda (2019) emphasizes relying on uncertified means of treating EVD as the virus was vastly spreading and harming large

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populations. The author confirms that even the WHO announced the ethical acceptability of using such drugs irrespective of the lack of testing because of the treatment's potential to cure EVD patients. Therefore, Sibanda concludes that since the prospective positives of using untested drugs outweigh the possible harms, using unverified drugs is ultimately acceptable in a time of such necessity. Similarly, the authentication of untested medicine also occurred when the Food and Drug Administration permitted treatments through peramivir, an untested drug, to counter influenza H1N1, which is also a disease that endangered many individuals (Hayden & Reardon, 2014). On this premise, consequentialism can bear an extent of ethical transgression if the gain exceeds the compromise, demonstrating that the ends justify the means in medicine.

### **Detriments of Overemphasizing Social Rights**

Like in medicine, consequentialist ethics are also strongly linked to social rights. More specifically, when people attempt to uphold one person's rights, they often sacrifice another's. This counterproductivity exists because there are two sides to all stories, meaning that a villain may easily become a victim, as we see in 'cancel culture.' According to Mueller (2021), cancel culture is the shared rejection of a typically known figure who engages in ethically problematic activities. Mueller recognizes matters related to gender and sexuality as the most common reasons for 'canceling' an individual. Such reasons also largely demonstrate the public rejection of J.K Rowling. Helm's (2021) article discusses the collective confrontation of Rowling while criticizing her views on transsexuality, which, according to the article, contain sexist undertones. Living in an era dominated by cancel culture, Rowling was inevitably 'canceled' in various ways as a result of her controversial tweets about transsexuality.

Helm (2021) demonstrates that the 'cancellation' of Rowling extended beyond her social reputation. The author explains that the effects came in simpler forms, like boycotting her Harry

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Potter books, to more extreme measures like sending her death threats. Rowling still suffers from consequences like being excluded from the Museum of Pop Culture, particularly after being part of this museum before (Russel, 2023). This removal indicates that, apart from her social life, the consequences are also reflected in Rowling's professional life. Therefore, the social rights that cancel culture aims to promote seem to overshadow Rowling's freedom of speech and her right to earn a living, meaning that overall rights are still not entirely realized.

Additionally to impacting people's professional lives, cancel culture negatively affects personal relationships. Smith (2020) describes how several Harry Potter actors publicly condemned Rowling and her claims despite the lifelong impact that Rowling has had on those actors' careers. Smith shows how this example especially demonstrates the wedge that cancel culture builds between people, irrespective of the value of their relationships. In this sense, Smith infers that it is unclear whether Rowling is still considered a villain or if her rejection by much of the world makes her a victim.

### **Military Force Explained**

Protecting a nation through military force can easily cause irreversible harm to the wrong people. As such, counterproductivity is a frequent theme in deontological ethics that also exists in military defense. The justification for using force in a conflict is referred to as *jus in bello*. This law involves identifying targets in war and acting proportionally with legitimate targets and collateral damage (Steinhoff, 2021). According to Frowe (2023), consequentialism and *jus in bello* are largely related to one another in that, because of the detriments of wars, achieving conflict resolution within the shortest possible time is a primary objective. However, conflict resolution is highly restricted when militaries must consider several rules in even establishing wars, let alone ending the wars. As a result, Frowe posits that if militaries immediately

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intimidated their opponents with intense force, wars would end sooner, leaving less collateral damage because of the reduced conflict time. An example the author refers to is how the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings were explainable by the fact that they were the only ways of ending WWII despite the extreme collateral damage that resulted. Upon evaluating the justification for these bombings, Frowe also acknowledges that conflict rules are never entirely followed, even if they are legitimately established. Additionally, Gordin (2007) explains how the sudden end of WWII was a direct result of the intensity of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Gordin acknowledges that the intent behind the bombings was to shorten the duration of the war, though the literal impact was greater. The author elaborates on how the bombings resulted in the unexpected surrender of the Japanese, directly demonstrating how inflicting force does not always correlate with deteriorating wars. Instead, the WWII example displays how military force can contribute to ending conflicts.

In addition to justifying force in conflicts, the principles of *jus in bello* heavily prioritize proportionality. According to Strawser and McMahan (2013), the proportionality of military killing methods between countries in conflict can further justify force. Unlike the Hiroshima example, a time we could establish the unjustifiability of force exertion is the Iraq war and Abu Ghraib torture methods. *Jus in bello* laws oppose the United States' military force because of the disproportionality in fatalities and excessive killing methods since Iraq was not actively at war with the United States (Porpora et al., 2013). Linking this example to Strawser and McMahan, they question whether it is vital to take a person's life violently if that person is going to die regardless. This question especially applies if the opposing side attempts to impose relatively more moral killing methods and seek discrimination between targets. In that context, if there is

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no justified need for self-defense, discrimination between targets, and proportionality, consequentialism cannot justify the use of extreme military force.

### **Unethical Behavior Cannot Be Justified**

Consequentialist ethics is a topic of much debate, meaning that its arguments come in various forms. Some claim, for example, that we can never fully measure the morality of an act, to let alone justify that act. This belief stems from personal standards and cultural relativism. Others also debate that experimental outcomes are not considered beneficial if their processes pose ethical concerns. While these views are not entirely incorrect, recognizing their gaps is crucial to having a comprehensive view of ethical theories.

### **Ethics Are Subjective**

Critics often claim that ethics are subjective. That is, many believe that personal values and cultural relativism cloud our judgments of ethical boundaries. This view stems from how cultural relativism introduces variability and undermines the universality of ethical standards across cultures (Cherry, 2023). From this standpoint, what is ethical to one person is unethical to another, so some suppose that attempting to justify unethical behavior is somewhat impossible. For instance, Holt (n.d.) illustrates the impacts of cultural relativism on ethics in African and Asian cultures. According to Holt, such cultures believe that womanhood is only established after females undergo a dangerous process for genital organ removal. In other words, the author portrays that female genital mutilation makes women eligible for marriage in various cultures. In response, the WHO refers to this act as a “traditional harmful practice,” aiming to eliminate it by 2030 (“Female Genital Mutilation,” n.d.) (para. 1). Consequently, if this tradition is a marital prerequisite in some parts of the world, eliminating it may also eliminate the chances of many women experiencing marriage, a central part of life. While it is plausible to feel



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disturbed by specific customs like genital removal, we cannot guarantee that the members of such cultures share this disturbance because, to them, the benefits may outweigh the harm.

Although ethical lines can be blurred by cultural relativism and personal values, the differences shaped by these standards do not necessarily imply ethical subjectivity. According to Liu et al. (2020), while various cultures have diverse ethical views, there are always specific, collectively recognized morals. Likewise, the authors apply this inference to personal values, in that not sharing comparable ethical ideals with the rest of the world is almost impossible. Ross and Parks (2018) identify that an example of such value is the concept of respect. The authors demonstrate that nobody does not want to be respected regardless of their upbringing and philosophies, making mutual respect an ethical value everybody wishes to fulfill.

In addition to collective values, ethical theories can demonstrate the universality of ethics. Kranak (2019) suggests that Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative theory proposes a firm argument against the belief that ethics are subjective. The author describes how, under the categorical imperative, moral codes must be universal, irrespective of individual or collective desires. As Kranak describes, there is a specific method for universalizing ethical laws. This method involves envisioning how life would be if everyone followed the same actions under the same circumstances, whether good or bad. One of the most debated examples of the categorical imperative, as Kranak further emphasizes, is lying, which, according to Kant, must never occur under any circumstance. Nonetheless, Kant's categorical imperative is one of the various ethical theories advocating for the collective nature of ethics, making it difficult to sustain the view that they are entirely subjective.

### **Harms of Unethical Research Outweigh the Benefits**

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Because of the objectivity of various ethical principles, many reckon that when experimenters act unethically toward test subjects, the consequential benefits of such investigations lose value. One of the most classical examples of a study with experimental harm yet long-term consequential benefit is the Milgram Experiment. This investigation, according to Cherry (2024), involved instructing a group of men to deliver shocks that went from 15 volts to 450 volts whenever their ‘test subjects’ answered specific questions incorrectly. Cherry reveals that the participants did not know the test subjects they delivered shocks to were merely acting as though they were experiencing severe pain or having heart problems. In reality, the electric shocks were not reaching the test subjects. Additionally, the author provided meaningful statistics about this experiment, like how 26/40 of the men followed the experimenter’s orders until the end by delivering the 450-volt shock.

Critics of the Milgram Experiment maintain that the study is ethically unacceptable in contemporary research for a number of reasons. The most common criticisms of the study include the pressure applied to the participants and the lack of transparency regarding the experiment’s truth (McArthur, 2009). In addition, apart from the experimenter’s lacked transparency, some directly accuse Milgram of deceiving his participants. If we apply the categorical imperative theory to Milgram’s deception of all his participants, we can deem his dishonesty universally unethical (Hollander, 2016). On this premise, it can be understandable why many oppose the Milgram Experiment’s methods.

Nonetheless, although the Milgram Experiment is collectively criticized for violating ethical codes, it has made contributions to social psychology that society actively benefits from today. Being the first experiment to consider authority bias – that Shatz (n.d.) defines as submitting to people we consider authority figures – the study produced valuable lessons. Shatz

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highlights that this investigation was the first ever example of how far humans can go while obeying a higher figure, meaning that this information may have never publicly existed without the Milgram Experiment. Furthermore, Benjamin and Simpson (2009) elaborate on how differently the world began to view personalities and individual characteristics as drawing links between obedience and other human features became easier. Thus, according to Benjamin and Simpson, professionals have agreed that no study can replicate the depth and complexity of Milgram's results under today's ethical laws.

Aside from increasing knowledge, the Milgram experiment caused psychologists to become more conscious of ethical implications. More specifically, psychological experiments shifted toward stricter moral compasses, which Benjamin and Simpson demonstrate by comparing how experiments occurred prior to versus post-Milgram. In doing so, the authors elaborate on how experiments were carried out in laboratories using fear-inducing controls, like electric shocks. By contrast, the authors explain that psychological investigations began appearing in other settings apart from laboratories through less harmful measures. As a result, we now see many psychological experiments peacefully conducted in the real world without manipulating any variables, which, according to Benjamin and Simpson, is one of the most crucial developments in modern psychology.

### **Conclusion**

Many of today's developments have resulted from ethically questionable, often criticized methods, yet the long-term benefits have lasted longer than the consequential harms. We see such developments in medical and psychological experiments, military behavior, or even individuals who have contributed knowledge to the world through public expression. While

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having a moral compass is crucial, that should not mean undermining the weight of valuable contributions to the world because of what it took to achieve such outcomes.

In this paper, I argued that consequentialism rationally justifies unethical behavior. One of the ways through which this notion comes into play is how consequentialist ethics, more effectively than deontological ethics, drives efficient medical progression. This notion is evident in how consequentialism validates Sims' objectively unethical experimentation that resolved the harms of double incontinence, as well as justifying the reliance on untested drugs to treat EVD. Furthermore, consequentialism also influences social rights through promoting self-expression. In clearer terms, consequentialist ethics can justify vocalizing ethically controversial opinions as free speech is a right that increases publicly shared knowledge. On this premise, the world's distribution of wisdom expands once individuals share their thoughts, irrespective of whether that individual's surroundings agree. In addition, a consequentialist effectively identifies when military force is necessary and acceptable. From this angle, consequentialism exists in more extreme times during which the greater good was placed higher than ethics, like the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Overall, consequentialism facilitates additional consideration of how, most of the time, the destination matters more than the journey.

Nonetheless, some criticism is unavoidable in understanding consequentialist ethics. First, one of the primary arguments against consequentialism is the subjectivity of ethics and an experimental outcome's value. Many often believe this subjectivity is the product of individual standards and cultural relativism. Notwithstanding this claim, evidence suggests that various ideals are almost entirely objective, making it easier to understand basic ethics and, thus, consequentialism. Second, critics also argue that the harms of problematic experiments dominate the experimental benefits. However, only applying deontological ethics in experimentation

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would not have generated the same long-term benefits as many controversial experiments. These are the same experiments society criticizes despite simultaneously relying on them in daily life.

This paper is important as it further explored ethical theories, along with the implications such theories manifest. Overlooking the grey areas of deontological ethics is easy since many believe the line between right and wrong is clear. Nonetheless, this paper demonstrates how clear the line can be. In fact, consequentialism arguably fosters more explicit boundaries to measuring ethicality than deontological ethics, where people express whether something is ethical without a confirmed means of determining their verdict. At the same time, this notion can become more practical upon considering specific recommendations. In a medical context, conducting cost-benefit analyses can confirm or deny the acceptability of an act with ethical concerns before crucial decision-making. As for cancel culture, perhaps peacefully educating the artist on their wrongdoings would produce a more genuine change than creating an argument everybody aims to win. Finally, an appropriate way of considering ethics in war would be to ensure a justified need for self-defense with fair discrimination between targets. Ultimately, some level of ethical transgression is inevitable in life's processes, and consequentialism provides a rational perspective that ethically problematic conduct is not always ill-intentioned. As such, this paper poses a reminder to society to never judge a book by its cover.

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