THE NEXT BEST THING

Richard Bronaugh

I

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a justification currently being offered for the introduction of tensed notions of oughtness, rightness, and wrongness into the formal theory of act-utilitarianism. The matter begins with the reasonable idea that utilitarian theory should provide a place for *courses of action,* i.e., some way of representing the structure of the situation when alternative *sequences* of «single» particular actions are evaluated. (*Particular actions* are usually here understood in the manner of Von Wright in [1]*, pp. 35f, as instances of generic actions.) Introducing a tensed 'ought' can be seen specifically as an effort to solve a utilitarian version of the Contrary-to-Duty Imperative puzzle – though R. Chisholm's original discussion in [2] (and many others since, e.g., L. Åqvist's in [3], pp. 245-249) had not been set in a utilitarian frame. The general idea is simple and persuasive: what constituted someone's best course of action may not, at some later time, be the best course to which he can repair. So, if 'oughts' are given tenses, it can be said that though he ought to have followed the sequence $// \sim p, \sim p, p //$, since he has failed do $\sim p$ at the outset, he ought not *now* complete the remainder of that once best course. Though simple and persuasive, there is, as I shall show, reason to doubt the propriety and necessity of introducing tensed 'oughts' into act-utilitarian theory.

The justification for this purported development of the formal theory has been expressed in something like the following terms. Imagine a devilish payoff machine in the presence

* The numerals in brackets indicate references at the end of paper.

of which an agent, call him Hamlet, has only the choice to push or not to push its button. To reach a payoff (i.e., some positive or negative utility) Hamlet must act on three successive occasions, upon the completion of which there will occur an antecedently known result. He may choose to push each time, he may push at no time, or he may produce one of the other six possible combinations. He knows that the Fabian sequence, as it were, is best among the possibilities: // not-push, not-push, push //. However when Hamlet inadvertently pushes the button on the first occasion, thus closing off the best course of action, a review might seem advisable before proceeding. Now Hamlet knows that the sequence // push, not-push, push // is inferior to the aggressive now-available program // push, push, push //. Yet it would appear, given the distribution of obligation over conjunction, that Hamlet ought not push the button again until occasion three. Here one has a version of the Contrary-to-Duty Imperative puzzle, utilitarian-style.

This payoff machine (after one described by L. Åqvist in [4], pp. 318-319; compare the ones in [5] as well) is thought to be a suitable model for courses of action under act-utilitarian assessment and a model upon which can be exhibited a solution to the relevant version of the C-D-I puzzle. By relativizing 'ought' to time it becomes logically possible *both* that at t Hamlet ought next, at $t + 1$, refrain from pushing the button *and* upon the occasion of $t + 1$ that Hamlet ought to push the button. To show how this can be, consider the following sequence, which by stipulation is best (Åqvist's «S_7» in [4]; what I called the Fabian sequence):

t	$t + 1$	$t + 2$
$\sim p$	$\sim p'$	p''

Notice that in Åqvist's method there are «primes» on the p-symbols which give every appearance of individuating by time already. Hence there would seem to be a two-dimensional use of time, the superscripts indicating (a) an *occasion of confor-*

mance (i.e., the dated interval of some appropriate performance) and the subscripts indicating (b) an *occasion of obligation* (i.e., when the ought-expression is true). So, in Åqvist's formalization, assuming constants for agents, one can truthfully affirm $0_t(\sim p')$, which will mean that at t Hamlet ought to not-push the button at $t + 1$. However if p occurs (fumblingly) at t, then it might also be or become (speciously contrary-to-duty) that $0_{t+1}(p')$. So if a misfire occurs *before* the coincidence of the two occasions, before the congruence of time dimensions, it may be that Hamlet will have fresh obligations forthwith. Åqvist writes,

> ... from the point of view of $t + 1$, these things *were* true at t and ought *then* to have been acted upon ((0_t) (S_7), $0_t(\sim p)$, and so forth). But in the situation at $t + 1$, *with* p *having been performed,* John is indeed «dragging his dirty past behind him», and the truth of $0_{t+1}(p)$ means nothing more than this sad but inescapable fact. ([4], p. 320, his italics.)

The novelty of the tensed 'ought' program is that it makes it possible, as in the quotation just given, for the occasion of conformance, as I have labeled it, to *antedate* the occasion of the obligation, i.e., in «$0_{t+1}(p)$», or for the occasion of conformance to *postdate* the occasion of obligation, $0_t(p')$. The following sentence shows the coincidence of the two occasions (a) and (b).

(i) Hamlet ought to do *a* tomorrow.

The reference date of (i) is the future. Compare this with:

(ii) Hamlet ought now to do *a* tomorrow,

in which the obligation date is today and the conformance date is tomorrow; since (a) and (b) do not coincide, the reference date of the expression is either ambiguous ,or, possibly, «dual».

(ii') Hamlet now-ought tomorrow-doing *a*

exhibits perhaps the temporal separation which the tensed 'ought' allows. It is clear how it becomes logically possible for the ought-expression to be true *now,* though false when future time arrives, *its* occasion then having passed. (i) and (ii) are logically independent. (ii) shows the main notion of a

tensed 'ought' and is expressed by Åqvist as $O_t(p')$. Its temporal converse $O_{t+1}(p)$ reports that

(iii) Hamlet ought now to have done *a* yesterday, or

(iii') Hamlet now-ought yesterday-doing *a*.

This is logically compatible with the referentially focused:

(iv) Hamlet ought not to have done *a* yesterday.

In presenting what I regard as a quite fatal objection to Åqvist's proposal I shall give my attention to (iii) and (iv). «$O_{t+1}(p)$» and «$O_t(\sim p)$» are well-formed and can be true together. The result is that p is ought-satisfying at $t + 1$, though it was previously wrong. Far from sadly dragging it along, the past is perpetually rectified, in the present, through the *mere possibility* of a new best course of action, one in which the last erroneous act is the premier component. This I should propose to call a *Principle for the Perpetual Rectification of Antecedents.* By it each of Hamlet's antecedent wrongs is righted in retrospect, except when one or the other of two states obtain (in fact, they probably come to the same thing): Hamlet's life has ended or there are no further courses of action open to him. This development, emerging from an answer to a supposed utilitarian version of the C-D-I puzzle, leads the theory into moral dubiousness and unrepresentativity.

Now it might be replied that the above difficulty must necessarily arise when the logic of the theory is at last revealed, so that the objection is not actually to the introduction of tenses but to the theory in the fullness of itself. There is reason to doubt this, so we must return to the question of the justification for the very development.

II

I wish to argue two theses relevant to the above. (1) There is reason to believe that Hamlet need *never* review his best course of action and cannot, before its termination, ever *rightly* set upon a fresh one, whatever his fumblings. (2) Each of Hamlet's possible courses of action is lifelong; all possible

courses of action under utilitarian assessment terminate only at death. Both these are perhaps startling. The first is a *challenge* to the very possibility of a C-D-I puzzle arising in the formal theory; the second is a *denial* of the notion that courses of morally relevant action comparable on utilitarian grounds must be time-identical. I shall delay my discussion of (2) until section III.

In order to discuss (1) a Principle of Organic Unities must be introduced. POU: *Identical particular actions shared by different possible courses of action need not have the same absolute (i.e., non-comparative) value.* Accepting this is required in order to reach a C-D-I puzzle, hence for the justification of the tensed 'ought' program. When two wholes have the same number of components but share at least one identical member, the total value of one whole may differ from the other even though the absolute values of all their non-identical components are equal. It will be noticed that the value of the «same» final push on a payoff machine varies with the partition.

Denying the POU will allow one to argue as follows: Hamlet, at his instrument, confronts the following situation, the solid line representing the best course of action.

t	$t+1$	$t+2$
p	p	p
$\sim p$	$\sim p$	$\sim p$

For simplicity assume that Hamlet set out correctly, not fumbling until $t + 1$, when p occurs (broken line). The question is whether $\sim p$ at $t + 2$ could ever be best next. That it cannot may be seen when one realizes that the value relationship between p and $\sim p$ at $t + 2$ is fixed by the correct course of action. That relationship is unchanged by Hamlet's errors. By fumbling at $t + 1$ he does some inferior act, but his next *best* act cannot be one which is once again inferior to its alternative; the *next* best thing is always the next *best* action, just as it was in the beginning and ever shall be. *The best course*

of action is simply the series of those actions which are best on each occasion. This is why one ought not depart from it and ought always to repair to it. Of course, everytime we stray, whatever the reason, we are losers, but it is logically impossible to lose enough to warrant changing the route, hence there can be no contrary-to-duty imperatives in the act-utilitarian theory. QED.

The above argument depends upon denying the POU. Compare now the way the situation is constructed if one *assumes* it. Isolating the two relevant vectors in the diagram above, one has the following. ('O' for the solid line, the optimal policy, and 'B' for the broken. The numbers in parentheses are suggested absolute values.)

	t	$t+1$	$t+2$
0	$\sim p$ (10)	$\sim p$ (10)	p (10)
B	$\sim p$ (12)	p (8)	$\sim p$ (9)

Given a correct performance $\sim p$ at t and a mistaken performance p at $t+1$, should the agent at $t+2$ perform p or $\sim p$? In the former argument, p (10) would seem clearly the choice over $\sim p$ (9). But the heart of the question is whether 0 and B can contain an *identical* action $\sim p$ at t, the absolute value of which is 10 in 0 and 12 in B. If the answer to that is Yes, then the performance $\sim p$ at $t+2$ will produce 29 (the sum of the values of B), whereas a return to virtue, p at $t+2$, will produce a total of only 28. Hence appears the Contrary-to-Duty Imperative puzzle within the formal act-utilitarian theory. It may seem very reasonable to permit the variation of absolute value in this way simply because there is intermingling in the effects of different actions in a sequence. (I assume here that not all the causal influence of an action initiated at t need terminate before $t+2$.) However this may be, the POU runs afoul the most commonly held theory of utilitarian action description.

How are particular actions described for the purposes of the act-utilitarian theory? If no explicit rule for descriptive

detail (no level of «relevant specification») is established, the following situation arises. Assume the principle that when some particular action *a* ought to be performed, no alternative to *a* ought to be performed instead. If cooking a breakfast is alternative to cooking an egg for breakfast, then it follows that if one ought to cook an egg for breakfast, one ought not cook a breakfast. (Cf. [6], pp. 38-39.) Avoiding such a result requires a theory of relevant specification. The one which I believe is most widely held I shall call «utilitarian description»: *viz., the relevant description of an action will be a statement expressing only those (causal) properties it has which produce consequences pertinent to the standard of utility.*

Now if one assumes that the question of types or genera among actions is a question of utilitarian description (e.g., cf. [7], pp. 52-61) and also assumes that whenever the type-description is altered, the «identity» of the particular action changes (this would follow from the view of Von Wright in [1]), then it is impossible for the *same* particular action to be transferred from one sequence to another when its relevant description will be altered by the move. (Identity will not often exist between particular actions in different sequences; consequences *do* intermingle.) But the hypothesis required for any application of the POU (i.e., that some action *does* remain itself even though it has changed consequences or value) is rendered empty by the purging effect of the theory of utilitarian description upon it.

To return to the last diagram, the outcome is to question whether the *same* action can appear there in both 0 and B at *t*. If identity *is* given up between the «$\sim p$» twins at *t*, then the new answer to the question of optimal policy would seem to be $// \ldots, \sim p, p //$, with values 12, 10, and 10. This move is blocked, however, by the correct claim that the value 12 is dependent upon the 9-valued performance of $\sim p$ at $t + 2$. Consider this new arrangement of vectors.

	t	$t + 1$	$t + 2$
0'	... (12)	$\sim p$ (10)	$\sim p$ (9)
B'	$\sim p$ (10)	p (8)	p (10)

Now this gives no support to the POU. Nevertheless, the 0' choice of $\sim p$ at $t + 2$ may seem to cut against thesis (1). Can't Hamlet, having gone wrong at $t + 1$, recover somewhat, contrary-to-duty, by remaining upon vector B', choosing a value 10 over a 9 at $t + 2$? To understand why he should not do this and should return to virtue is to see that, in fact, it remains unsettled until $t + 2$ which action was actually performed at t. One is here committed, without embarrassment, to the possibility that a complete utilitarian description of some action a cannot be stated until, at some later time, another action b is performed. Thus if $\sim p$ is performed at $t + 2$, then ... was performed at t; if p is performed at $t + 2$, then $\sim p$ was performed at t. Of course such retroactive utilitarian description will confirm the values stated above. There is a perfectly clear sense therefore in which Hamlet does do the best thing by returning to the original virtue of $\sim p$ at $t + 2$: its value to Hamlet is 9 ($\sim p$'s «own value») plus 2 (that being the added value, in the example, in having done ... at t). The case for thesis (1) is the plausibility of the theory of utilitarian description, which gives reason to believe that one can never confront a C-D-I puzzle in the theory. With reference to section I, it gives us reason to think the tensed 'ought' unnecessary, as well as impropitious.

III

I should like now to discuss my thesis (2), that all possible course of action under utilitarian assessment terminate only at death. In L. Bergström's book, [6], the only consideration given to *time* is that particular actions within a set of alternatives for an agent must all be time-identical; *sequences* of action, which could extend to some length, are treated as «compound particular actions» and can be compared with any other performable course of action which takes the same time. This sti-

pulation *seems* reasonable, see pp. 31-32 in [6], but it fails to provide any restriction indicating a proper length of time for such action. In fact, it would appear that when one presses upon this issue time-identity ceases to be important in a non-probabilistic, «actual consequences» utilitarianism. In the course of a complete life there is a very, very large number of distinguishable non-time-identical sequences of agent-identical acts. What the theory allows, and probably should explicitly require in its full understanding, is that *all* a person's possible lives be compared. If there is, for each person, a best possible life (or a set of equally superior lives), i.e., a maximally valuable course of action (or set of courses) in relation to all his other available courses of action in a complete life, then that it (or one of them) ought to be lived entails, by a familiar principle of deontic logic, that *each* step in a best procession ought to be taken when its time is right. So time and season matter, but time-identity does not; lifetime courses of action can, in theory, be compared even though they are of different lengths. There are those, surely, who have *rightly* valued their brief flame above one which would have smoldered overlog. (This is so because there is no unreckoned utility between the terminus of one complete life and the terminus of some, say, lengthier complete life.) The concern with time-identity over short or longish periods among «compound particular actions» is a result of a failure to appreciate fully the quite utter impracticability of the theory I have discussed.*

Richard BRONAUGH

(University of Western Ontario)

* This paper was written with the support of a grant from The Canada Council.

REFERENCES

[1] Georg Henrik VON WRIGHT, *Norm and Action* (London: 1963).

[2] Roderick M. CHISHOLM, «Contrary-to-duty imperatives and deontic logic,» *Analysis*, XXIV (1963): 33-36.

[3] Lennart ÅQVIST, «'Next' and 'Ought' Alternative Foundations for Von Wright's Tense-Logic, with an Application to Deontic Logic,» *Logique et Analyse*, 34 (1966): 231-251.

[4] Lennart ÅQVIST, «Improved Formulations of Act-Utilitarianism,» *Noûs*, III, 3 (1969): 299-323.

[5] Lawrence POWERS, «Some Deontic Logicians,» *Noûs*, I, 4 (1967): 381-400.

[6] Lars BERGSTÖM, *The Alternatives and Consequences of Actions* (Stockholm: 1966).

[7] David LYONS, *The Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism* (Oxford: 1965).