

INTRODUCTION



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HOW SHOULD we live? What do we owe to other people? How, if at all, do ethical demands and prudential ones differ? Is there any moral difference between our actions (such as killing) and inactions (such as letting die) when each has the same consequences (the loss of a life)? Judith Jarvis Thomson is a contemporary moral philosopher who has not avoided such big questions. At one time or another in her distinguished career, she has addressed each of these questions, and she continues to do so in her 1999–2000 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University.

This book consists of Thomson’s revised Tanner Lectures, with commentaries by Philip Fisher, Martha Nussbaum, Jerome Schneewind, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, along with a reply by Thomson to her commentators. Thomson’s arguments show the value—as well as the limits, which all modes of intellectual inquiry have—of trying to answer big moral questions by a scrupulous mode of philosophical inquiry. The commentaries give prominent voice to recurrent claims about the limits of such philosophical inquiry, which Thomson then addresses in her reply to commentators.

Some kinds of philosophical reasoning about questions such as “What ought I to do?” seem peculiar, even wrongheaded, to

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many people. Fisher and Herrnstein Smith give voice to such criticism. Instead of using real-world examples in all their empirical complexity and ambiguity, Thomson tends to offer seemingly simple, hypothetical examples, taken out of context. Why? By using hypothetical examples, she tries to determine whether some widely held philosophical generalizations are—as they claim—generally defensible.

In Part I, on “goodness,” she tests the popular and intuitively appealing moral claim: “Act always to bring about the most good in the world.” To test this moral generalization, she employs some simple examples that are presented (at first) totally out of context. “Alfred presses the doorbell.” Should he do so? In light of such examples, she asks, can we coherently and credibly stand by the claim “Act always to bring about the most good in the world”? Ironically, Thomson uses such simple examples, taken out of context, to arrive at a conclusion with which she is in heated agreement with those who challenge her use of such examples. All agree—although for different reasons and by employing very different methods and styles of argument—that it is a mistake to generalize about what actions are good apart from a context that raises the questions “Good in what way?” “For whom?” “Under what circumstances?”

Some contemporary moral philosophers not only address big questions about the nature of ethical action, but also try to come to conclusions about controversial ethical issues in their writings. They move beyond hypothetical problems to actual ones. They do not shy away from some of the most controversial ethical problems of our time, such as abortion, affirmative action, and physician-assisted suicide. Thomson is also one of these philosophers. She has dared to defend the morality of abortion, affirmative action, and physician-assisted suicide, with important qualifications that come out of her careful analysis of examples, both hypothetical and actual. While some philosophers have opened

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themselves to criticism for using seemingly trivial or bizarre hypotheticals, and other philosophers have opened themselves to criticism for stepping beyond the bounds of “value-free” inquiry for taking morally controversial positions on actual issues, Thomson has repeatedly done both. She has demonstrated the courage of her philosophical and moral convictions. In this volume, she defends the idea that the two kinds of convictions—philosophical and moral—go hand in hand. In the realm of moral philosophy, she argues, philosophical claims are not one thing and moral claims another, and never the twain shall meet.

The aim of Thomson’s inquiry—an aim that she shares even with many who disagree with the conclusions that she reaches—is to examine what it takes to answer the question: “What should I do in this situation?” Thomson asks, “Should I act always to bring about the best consequences?” The attraction of answering “yes” is a single simple principle that tells us what we should do in any given situation: Always act in a way to bring about the best consequences! People who subscribe to this principle are called Consequentialists. Thomson then reminds us: To know how one should act as a good Consequentialist, one needs to be able to answer the question “What are the best consequences?”

Some Consequentialists are called Classical Utilitarians because they follow Jeremy Bentham, who argued that good consequences are those that produce pleasure, and bad consequences are correspondingly those that produce pain. According to Benthamite Utilitarianism, we should always act in a way to maximize the net amount of pleasure (over pain) in the world. The idea that morality requires people to bring about the greatest amount of good—meaning pleasure—in the world has been a very appealing and at times extremely progressive doctrine. Few philosophers have been more effective than Bentham in directly helping to bring about progressive political reforms on the basis of his philosophy. He championed penal reform in nineteenth-century

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England, for example, by invoking his Utilitarian philosophy to oppose the infliction of unnecessary pain on prisoners.

The Utilitarian source of progressive penal reform is also the source of some less appealing or apparently progressive points of view. What does Utilitarianism have to say, for example, about people who enjoy the suffering of others? Some people who enjoy the suffering of others may try to bring about more suffering in the world, and that would be bad from a Utilitarian perspective. But what about those people who do not try to bring about more suffering in the world, but simply take pleasure in the suffering of other beings? Thomson thinks that taking pleasure in someone else's suffering is adding something bad to the world, not something good. One can think this without denying that a person's enjoyment adds to the net amount of pleasure in the world. It is bad, Thomson suggests, for a person to enjoy the suffering of others even when he cannot do anything to relieve that suffering. She faults Utilitarianism for being incapable of appreciating—let alone accepting—this judgment. Utilitarianism's response is to remind us that pleasure is good and pain is bad. But is pleasure always good? Not, Thomson thinks, when the pleasure consists in being pleased at someone else's suffering.

Thomson therefore objects to what she calls "Hedonism About Goodness," an idea at the heart of Classical Utilitarianism. Hedonism About Goodness is the idea that an event is good to the extent that it is pleasurable to sentient beings. Stated this abstractly, hedonism about pleasure is intuitively appealing to many people. But its appeal diminishes when we consider a person who takes pleasure in the pain of other sentient beings. The person does not cause other people pain—which Utilitarianism would also count as bad—but rather he simply takes pleasure in pain that he cannot ameliorate. The Utilitarian reasoning is that it is good to add pleasure to the world, and therefore to the extent that we cannot ameliorate the pain of others, we might as well take plea-

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sure in it. Thomson suggests why criticism of people who take pleasure in the pain of others makes moral sense. “There is a world of difference,” she writes, “between pleasures according as their objects differ from each other.” If the object of our pleasure is the singing of Jessye Norman, then our pleasure is good; but if the object of our pleasure is the torturing of prisoners of war, then our pleasure is bad. This is so even if we have no power to effect any change in either the singing or the torturing.

This basic criticism of Utilitarianism is the beginning of a far-ranging critique by Thomson that extends beyond Utilitarianism to the more general moral perspective called Consequentialism. Consequentialism is not committed to Hedonism About Goodness, but it is committed to the principle that people should act always to bring about the best consequences. Consequentialism can reject Hedonism About Goodness. It therefore need not approve of people getting pleasure out of the pain of other sentient beings. So why then criticize Consequentialism? The idea that we ought to act so as to bring about the best consequences is very appealing on its face.

Consequentialism, according to Thomson, has another, closely related problem, which arises precisely because it rejects Hedonism About Goodness. Consequentialism needs to offer an account of what events are good and what events are bad. It must offer such an account because it must be able to say what it means to bring about the best consequences. After all, the core of Consequentialism—its very defining doctrine—is the requirement that people should act in such a way as to bring about the best consequences. So if we are to defend Consequentialism, we must know what it means to bring about the best consequences.

Thomson’s most striking claim in Part I, on “goodness,” is that the seemingly simple and appealing advice that people should act “to bring about the best consequences”—or, what is the same, to bring about the most good—is meaningless. Thomson argues

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that Consequentialism must ultimately fail because its basic requirement—that people bring about the “most good”—has no meaning. Good is always good in some way, in some context, for some beings.

To make this claim about the meaninglessness of the “good” less abstract, Thomson asks us to consider a question like the following: Is drinking (whole) milk good? We can’t answer this or any other question about what is “good” when it is posed so abstractly. Why? Because to make the question meaningful we need to consider *the ways* in which something may be good. Drinking milk may be good or bad, but only in different ways. Drinking milk is good for women who need calcium (and have low cholesterol), and bad for men who have high cholesterol (and don’t need calcium). It is not simply good or bad (full stop).

What this and many other examples tell us, according to Thomson, is that the moral command “Act in a way so as to bring about the most good” is meaningless. Since there is no such thing as good, simply and strictly speaking, there can be no such thing as being morally required to bring about the most good in the world. It is therefore not so much wrong as it is meaningless to say that people should act so as to maximize goodness in the world. There are too many different ways in which actions can be good or bad to make the idea of maximizing goodness meaningful.

Thomson rejects what she calls Moorean Consequentialism for this reason. In her commentary, Nussbaum suggests that more recent conceptions of Consequentialism are immune from Thomson’s critique. The conception proposed by the political philosopher Philip Pettit or the economist Amartya Sen, for example, does not ask people to act so as to maximize goodness in the world. “Sensible” Consequentialism does not presuppose a unitary conception of the good. What does it then advise us to do? Pettit’s conception asks us to choose our actions on the basis

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of relevant consequences. Sen asks us to choose our actions on the basis of the probable states of affairs brought about by our actions. Sensible Consequentialism seems to stand up to Thomson's critique because it explicitly admits that there are many different ways in which the consequences of our actions can be good and bad.

But Thomson says that Sensible Consequentialism cannot succeed simply by admitting that there are many different ways in which consequences can be good and bad. It needs to do more than reject a unitary conception of the good. Pettit's Sensible Consequentialism needs to tell us how first to choose which consequences are relevant, and then to decide which of the relevant consequences to pursue. Sen's Sensible Consequentialism needs to tell us how to evaluate and compare the various states of affairs that our actions (or inactions) can bring about. All kinds of Sensible Consequentialism need to give us a way to answer the question "What should we do in this situation?" Furthermore, they need to answer the question exclusively on the basis of the consequences of the alternative actions that are open to us. (If they admit a consideration other than consequences, then they cease to be distinctively Consequentialist theories.) Sensible Consequentialism therefore needs to give us guidance in how comparatively to evaluate the relevant alternative consequences, or states of affairs, that our actions can produce.

In reply to Nussbaum, Thomson makes yet another striking claim: Sensible Consequentialism has no future. Why? Without a unitary conception of the good, Consequentialism has no credible and consistent way of ranking alternative outcomes. Should you give money to a needy friend, to Oxfam, buy yourself a luxurious dinner, or flush the money down the toilet? All of these alternatives—even flushing it down the toilet—can be good in some way. (Thomson discusses a few of the ways.) If Sensible Consequentialism diverges from Moorean Consequentialism by

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its rejection of ranking the different ways in which these alternatives can be good, then it cannot tell us what to do based on consequences only. Sensible Consequentialism admits other considerations besides consequences—such as our right to live our own life and our obligations to others. We then can rely in part (although not entirely) on these other considerations to aid us in deciding what to do.

But if Sensible Consequentialism welcomes non-Consequentialist considerations, it ceases to be a distinctive type of ethical theory. It is not, strictly speaking, Consequentialist. (Consequentialism strictly speaking counts only consequences.) How can Sensible Consequentialism—which considers more than consequences—be distinguished from sensible deontology—which considers rights and obligations but not only rights and obligations? Both take into account consequences, rights, and obligations, depending on what is at stake in an action. What, then, if anything, is the difference between Sensible Consequentialism and deontology? Do they simply—or, more accurately, *complexly*—converge?

Here and in her many other writings, Thomson is a critic of Consequentialism, strictly speaking. She offers an alternative way of thinking about morality. The consequences of our actions matter, but consequences are not all that matter. We also have our own lives to lead, and what we ought to do is therefore at least partly independent of whether our actions will produce good consequences in the world. Thomson's moral perspective takes seriously our distinctiveness as individuals. She therefore defends individual rights and their correlative obligations. According to Thomson, we have strict obligations to refrain from harming others even if such obligations sometimes mean that we should let harm be done rather than act so as to harm others. This claim—precisely because it can advise individuals not to harm others even

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when more harms will therefore be done—is controversial in a way that Consequentialism is not. Thomson never claims otherwise. She therefore continues to develop and defend her perspective against an impressive range of critics, some of them quite sympathetic yet unconvinced that she has answered all the important questions raised by one of the more promising moral perspectives of our time.

Schneewind raises one such question that any moral perspective should answer. Does knowledge of the moral “ought”—what we should do, morally speaking—bring with it the kind of necessity to act whether or not a divine lawgiver commands morality? Seventeenth-century natural law theorists presupposed a divine lawgiver and thought that the moral ought therefore was absolutely binding on everyone. Natural law theorists did not take the moral ought as “advice” but rather as “command.” And not just any command, but the highest and most obligatory command, that of an omniscient and omnipotent God.

When morality is detached from a divine lawgiver, what changes? Does the way that people are bound by morality change, and if so, in what way and with what consequences? Thomson can only begin to answer this question in her reply to Schneewind. Even if the way people are (objectively) bound by morality does not change, as Thomson suggests, is the way that they (subjectively) think they are bound by morality likely to change when they no longer believe in God? “I greatly doubt,” Thomson says, “that your moral views would be affected *just* by your shifting from the thought that God makes morality to the thought that morality makes itself.” Her emphasis on the “just” is critical. Our metaphysics of morality, as she writes, “*can* leave everything the same.” Yes, but is it *likely* that taking away God leaves people thinking that they are as bound by morality as they would otherwise think they are (or would actually be)? And if there are other

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things that tend to change with taking away God, how morally significant are those changes on people's desire to discern morality? On their motivation to act morally?

Is it the case that absent belief in God, more people tend to think—mistakenly, on Thomson's view—that they are not so bound by morality as they would otherwise be? This change—contingent as it is on human psychology—would in itself constitute a significant change in our moral world from that of the seventeenth century. Or is it the case that people who do not believe in God still think that they are every bit as bound by morality as people who believe in God? Or if not every bit as bound, still bound enough that the difference is one of degree, not of kind. And why do believers and nonbelievers (in God) think one way or the other, or vary even among themselves? Since believers and nonbelievers of many different kinds coexist, side by side, interdependently in our world, we should be able to find out how much of a difference belief makes. These would be fascinating findings, relevant to—but not determinative of—philosophical thinking about morality in our time. These are several of the many questions about morality that Thomson and her commentators urge us to pursue from different perspectives.