

A NOTE ON MOTIVES, CONSEQUENCES AND VALUE

DOUGLAS WALTON

In a recent article in this journal,<sup>1</sup> Professor Lawrence Becker has convincingly argued for the need of increased attempts to coordinate theoretical results in axiology, deontology and agent morality if an integrated ethical theory is to overcome the difficulties of its current divisive state. I would like to endorse his recommendation, and act on it to the extent of making one specific suggestion for the integration of certain aspects of deontological and agent morality concepts with the axiological approach. Axiology is often associated with utilitarianism, and recently also, to a certain extent, with the theory of games. I wish to make a proposal whereby the mental element in action (motive, intent, deliberation, and other concepts of *mens rea*), usually emphasized in deontological and agent morality approaches, and coped with (at best) in axiological theories, becomes an integral part of the axiological framework.

The intuitive notion is that a motive can be identified with an estimated consequence of an action that an agent places an especially high value on. For example, in writing an essay, a student may recognize that there are a number of likely consequences of his action, but of this set the consequence that he values most highly (e.g., getting a high mark) may be said to constitute his "motive." Let us say that the agent's estimate of the likely consequences is the set  $C$ , composed of consequences  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_j$ . If there is a certain consequence,  $C_m$ , that the agent values above all other estimated consequences, then  $C_m$  is identical to his motive, or his primary motive. Actually, to allow for compound motives, it is better to let the motive be a subset of  $C$  rather than a member of  $C$ . Thus we can say "His motive was to get a high mark and win his professor's esteem." Now we can define motive as follows. Intuitively, let  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_j$  be the set of consequences estimated by the agent,  $x$ . Let  $Mv_x$  be the value of  $M$  for  $x$ .

- $x$  does  $A$  with motive  $M$  IFF
1.  $x$  believes that  $A$  will probabilify  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_j$  ( $j \geq 0$ ),
  2.  $M \subseteq C$  where  $C = \{C_1, C_2, \dots, C_j\}$  and
  3.  $\neg (\exists M') (M' \subseteq C \wedge M'v_x > Mv_x)$

1. stipulates that the agent have a set of consequences in mind as probable outcomes. 2. stipulates that the motive be a subset of the set of consequences, and 3. stipulates that of all the estimated consequences, the motive be the

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence C. Becker, "Axiology, Deontology, and Agent Morality: The Need for Coordination," *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. VI, No. 3, 1972, 213-220.

one (or ones) that the agent places a greater value on than any of the others. We legislate, in addition, that to probabilify the null set of consequences is to preserve the *status quo*. Further, we require that the set (AUC) is a possible world.

The philosophical import of this proposal is that it effectively bridges a crucial aspect of the axiological, agent morality and deontological approaches in ethics. Acceptance of the proposal allows the ethical theorist to bypass a dilemma that has bifurcated the history of ethics: the locus of valuation must be either the consequences of the action or the motive of the action. The tension is removed between these apparently contrary proposals.

In addition, utilitarianism is freed from the objection that it places value falsely on the consequences because the real locus of valuation in allocation of responsibility is the motive. It may be assumed as a *desideratum* here that the utilitarian ought not to argue that value is to be identified with the actual outcome of an action, which is never entirely known. He must use as a basis for calculation some estimate thereof, and in the case of a single agent, the agent's estimate constitutes the morally relevant datum. The advantages of the above definition for the moral philosopher are further seen by observing that the definiens contains only games-theoretic or set-theoretic concepts. The games-theoretic concepts of subjective probability and valuation are the only concepts utilized other than the usual logical and set-theoretical terms. Thus while the concept of motive retains a degree of subjectivity characteristic of mentalistic primitives, as defined above, it is free of the unclear jargon that too often characterizes ethical theory.

A difficulty is posed by the purported identity of motives and consequences. It might be easy to accept that motives might be associated with consequences; but how could they be consequences (since for one thing they occur at different times)? Similarly, we might accept that beliefs are associated with their objects (e.g., propositions), but it is difficult to see how they could be *identified* with them.<sup>2</sup>

One way out would be to relax the purported identity in favor of a one-to-one correspondence between motives and consequences - by no means a trivialization of the thrust of the proposal. Yet the heroic course of maintaining the identity, with its apparently untoward consequences is not to be completely disparaged. A similar situation is found in the set-theoretic identification of a binary relation with a set of ordered pairs. Despite its unintuitiveness, the arrangement is mathematically advantageous. Similarly, the unintuitiveness of the identification of motives and consequences may be counterbalanced by its value as a coordinating device in ethical theory.

University of Winnipeg

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Donald Davidson for pointing out this problem in correspondence, December 21 1972.