

DISCUSSION

A LOGICAL CONDITION FOR THE REDESCRIPTION
OF ACTIONS IN TERMS OF THEIR CONSEQUENCES?

HAROLD J. ALLEN

In her interesting and suggestive article "Actions, Consequences and Ethical Theory" ¹ Ruth Macklin admits the possibility of redescribing actions by including their consequences in more complete descriptions of them. Yet she claims "that there are clear cases of a break in the chain of action and consequence such that we cannot recast certain consequences as redescriptions of the action" – for a logical and not just for a practical reason. ² Though I do not wish to attack the view that there may be at least contextually related *practical* reasons for making a distinction between an action and its consequences, I do wish to question the significance of Mrs. Macklin's contention that there are instances in which the *logical* relation between action and consequence is such that the consequence cannot be used to redescribe the action.

Mrs. Macklin admits the following as "true descriptions of what might be called the same action:" ³

- (1) "Jones tenses his forefinger
- (2) Jones pulls the trigger
- (3) Jones shoots the gun
- (4) Jones kills Smith
- (5) Jones murders Smith
- (6) Jones avenges his brother's death
- (7) Jones widows Smith's wife."

Yet she argues in the same place that the following two examples of possible consequences of the action variously so described are themselves logically incapable of serving to redescribe it:

- "(8) Smith's wife commits suicide
- (9) Smith's six children are orphaned."

With respect to (8), Mrs. Macklin contends that "the fact that Smith's wife committed *suicide* logically precludes it from being Jones' action." ⁴ The dependency of (9) upon (8) is evidently sufficient ground to place it in the same category. But no further justification of either conclusion is offered.

On the basis of examples (8) and (9), the following general criterion is proposed as a necessary condition for any action of an actor A to be redescribed in terms of any of its consequences:

A description of the consequence of A's action must not logically preclude its being a description of the action. ⁵

If what is intended is that the description of the action and that of its consequent must be consistent with one another, the demand is certainly a reasonable one. Yet, as I will try to show, it is not at all obvious that this cri-

terion excludes cases (8) and (9) from serving as redescriptions of the action described by, say, case (4) in any but in a trivial way. What is there about Smith's wife's suicide which might make it inconsistent for it to serve in a redescription of Jones' action? The general thought appears to be that if Smith's wife's suicide is her own act, it cannot without contradiction be used to describe Jones' act. But surely there is ambiguity here. While it is true that Jones cannot without contradiction be said to have himself committed the act of suicide attributed to Smith's wife, such an interpretation would hardly seem to be the appropriate one in regarding Smith's wife's suicide as a consequence of Jones killing Smith.

In speaking of Jones' killing of Smith as a consequence of Jones shooting the gun, there is a sense in which it would be absurd to assume that Jones himself pierced Smith's heart. "How", one might ask; "with his pointed head?" The usual interpretation would be that Jones' part in the process was limited to aiming and shooting the gun. The resultant passage of the bullet would then be thought of as having by its own action pierced Smith's heart and caused his death. The first interpretation leads to contradiction. Either it was Jones' pointed head that pierced Smith's heart and killed him, or it was the bullet from Jones' gun; it cannot have been both. Note however that there is no contradiction in speaking of Jones' action in killing Smith and the bullet's action in the same process, according to the usual interpretation. Both Jones and the bullet have their role to play, and the action of the bullet is an integral part of Jones' "larger" act.

Now it might be argued that the relation between Jones killing Smith and Smith's wife killing herself only parallels that between Jones shooting the gun and the bullet piercing Smith's heart. In answer to the claim that there would be a contradiction in saying both that Smith's wife killed herself and that Jones killed her, it could be answered that, in the present case, Jones is as surely using Smith's wife as an instrument of her own death as he used the bullet as an instrument of Smith's death. In order for Smith's wife's suicide to be regarded as logically incompatible with Jones killing her, it would have to be assumed, for example, that stab wounds inflicted on her by Jones himself were the cause of her death rather than (as I will assume) that it was self-inflicted stab wounds that killed her. But given the assumption of suicide in the first place, this would be as absurd as claiming that Smith's death was caused by a wound from Jones' pointed head when we know that it was the bullet from Jones' gun that did it. Yet no logical difficulty has yet been shown to exist in saying that Jones brought about Smith's wife's suicide in the same way that he brought about the action of the bullet in piercing Smith's heart.

It may be objected that there is an important difference between the two cases in that a free choice involving personal responsibility may have intervened between Jones' killing of Smith and Smith's wife's suicide (*i.e.*, – Smith's wife's decision to kill herself, provided that she was then of sound mind) while no such choice is part of the chain of events linking Jones' shooting of the gun and Smith's death. Though this objection opens up a host of unexplored questions, and its relevance is unestablished, I will let it

stand because I regard it as perhaps the most telling point implicit in Mrs. Macklin's position. Such a defense does not appear to be open to Mrs. Macklin herself, however, because she specifically divorces considerations of responsibility from her argument.⁶ In sum, the unobjectionable claim that the description of a consequence must not logically preclude the possibility of its serving as a redescription of the action, if it is so to serve, has not been shown in any but a trivial way to rule out either of the following two possible redescriptions of Jones' act of killing Smith:

(a) Jones brings about Smith's wife's suicide

(b) Jones brings about the orphaning of Smith's six children.

Whether or not it can be shown to do so I do not know. At the very least however, the significance of the criterion has been called into question.

Adelphi University

REFERENCES

¹*Journal of Value Inquiry*, I, No. 1 (Spring 1967), 72-80.

²*Ibid.*, 77.

³*Ibid.*, 76.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, 78.

⁶*Ibid.*, 77.