The Semantic Equivalence Between the Good and the Right: Its Support for and Challenge to Consequentialism

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Abstract
Viewed from the perspective of meta-ethics, there is some semantic equivalence between the good as desirability and the right as acceptability, so that we can claim that whatever is desirable for a person is also acceptable to and thus right for her or him in terms of its very goodness. In the debate with deontology, then, this equivalence gives consequentialism an advantage, because it could prove that the good on its own is always right, and the evil on its own is always wrong. Meanwhile, it also puts consequentialism at a disadvantage, because consequentialism could hardly answer a tough question: why do we seriously need another criterion of right and wrong besides the one of good and evil in evaluation?

Keywords Good · Right · Semantics · Consequentialism · Deontology

1 Introduction

Quite strangely, while the complicated relationship between the good and the right has been explored in detail for a long time, some simple equivalence between the primary meanings of these two important terms has seldom been taken seriously within the framework of moral philosophy. In some sense, it could even be said that the relationship between the good and the right becomes philosophically complicated and difficult to answer mainly because of the neglect of the similarities and differences of their simple semantics. This article tries to discuss the semantic equivalence from the perspective of meta-ethics and then analyze both its support for and challenge to consequentialist theories.

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2 The Good as Desirability

Although quite a few modern scholars think that the good or the right or both of them cannot be defined, most philosophers still have tried to interpret the meanings of these basic concepts in terms of their relations to human life. The most popular explanation of "good" and "evil (bad)" seems to be the one that links the former with "desirable" and the latter with "averse" (or "detestable"). Aristotle (2009, pp. 3, 45), Thomas Aquinas (1945, p. 42), Hobbes (1991, p. 39), Kant (1956, pp. 62–63), Henry Sidgwick (1962, pp. 110–111), John Rawls (1971, p. 30), and many others, have held a similar view in this regard. Even G. E. Moore, who attributes such a kind of definitions to the "naturalistic fallacy," sometimes admits that what is good is desirable (1993, pp. 142, 147, 264).

This more philosophical explanation can be traced back further in semantics to such common meanings of "good" as "useful" or "beneficial" and of "evil" as "hurtful" or "harmful." Generally speaking, it is very natural for a person to have a desire for what he or she regards as beneficial and to have an aversion to what he or she regards as harmful. Some philosophers have noticed such an interconnection between them, too. Socrates remarks, "what is useful is good for him to whom it is useful." (Xenophon 1959, p. 341) Plato is also convinced that people understand the two words by common consent as follows: "what destroys and corrupts coincides entirely with the bad, while what preserves and benefits coincides entirely with the good." (2004, p. 313) Hume makes it clearer that "the virtues which are immediately *useful* or *agreeable* to the person possessed of them are desirable in a view to self-interest." (1948a, p. 258).

Due to ignorance, misinformation or fraud, to be sure, a person may feel averse to something actually beneficial or feel desirable for something actually harmful to herself or himself. Nevertheless, that does not negate the semantic relation of "desirable" to "beneficial" or of "detestable" to "harmful," for he or she makes an error merely in evaluating whether something is beneficial or harmful to herself or himself, not in desiring something harmful or detesting something beneficial. Though on the ground of misevaluation, in other words, he or she still takes what he or she judges beneficial as desirable or what he or she judges harmful as detestable.

Therefore, we may draw a conclusion in the broadest sense: in both moral and non-moral contexts, the good primarily means the "desirability of the beneficial," and the evil primarily means the "detestability of the harmful." Similar to any other kinds of goods in human life, for instance, such moral goods as virtues, duties, and ethical standards or principles can be seen at bottom as something that people value as beneficial to and thus desirable for them in moral life.

Besides this primary meaning, the word "good" certainly has many other meanings in its common usage, which are usually indicated by various dictionaries. However, it can be argued that some of them, such as "pleasant," "satisfactory," "enjoyable," "favorable," "skillful," "kind," "healthy," and "effective," are straight synonymous with "beneficial" or "desirable," and some others, such as "of a high standard," "agreeable," "sensible," "suitable," and "appropriate," can

be regarded as substantively equivalent to them as shown below. Those meanings that have little to do with them, such as "large in amount or degree," "no less than," and "complete," will not be considered in this article due to its task.

If we adopt the differentiation between meta-ethics and normative ethics made by William K. Frankena (1973, pp. 4–5, 96), the above-stated definitions are clearly in the dimension of meta-ethics, for they aim simply at clarifying in what a common sense people primarily understand and use the terms "good" and "evil." Put another way, while different persons often give different and even opposite answers to the question "what is good or evil" in a particular case or as a general principle, so that one and the same war may be taken as good by some persons and yet as evil by others, they are quite similar to each other in their meta-ethical understandings of the terms "good" and "evil," i.e., all of them will take what is beneficial to and desirable for them as good and what is harmful to and detestable for them as evil.[1]

Only by virtue of these meta-ethical definitions can we explain why human action has a fundamental tendency to pursue good and avoid evil: since the good is what is assessed by one as beneficial and desirable, surely one will endeavor to acquire it in one's action; since the evil is what is assessed by one as harmful and detestable, surely one will endeavor to prevent it in one's action. Socrates says, "only the self-controlled have power…by word and deed alike to prefer the good and reject the evil." (Xenophon 1959, p. 333) Viewed from the meta-ethical perspective, however, even if an incontinent person will not pursue what is regarded as evil and avoid what is regarded as good by herself or himself, although her or his evaluations of what is good or evil may be contrary to a self-controlled person's ones. We can understand analytically in this sense the famous formula "*nihil appetimus, nisi sub ratione boni; nihil aversamur, nisi sub ratione mali*": one will not have a desire for something unless it is deemed good by oneself, and one will not have an aversion to something unless it is deemed evil by oneself.

3 The Right as Acceptability

In modern philosophy, the most popular explanation of "right" seems to be the one that links it with "ought" or "obligatory" and thus takes the right and duty as synonyms, no matter whether it is thought to depend upon the good or not. Holding a consequentialist view, for example, Moore declares that "what is 'right' or what is our 'duty' must in any case be defined as what is a means to good." (1993, p. 216) Holding a deontologist view, by contrast, David Ross stresses that "right" does not mean the same as "morally good," but purely and simply as "morally obligatory." (2002, p. 3) Unlike the introduction of "desirable" or "beneficial" in interpreting "good," unfortunately, the introduction of "ought" or "obligatory" in interpreting

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[1] Here I merely stress a meta-ethical fact, bypassing such important and yet knotty problems as whether or not there is any objective, universal, or absolute standard for people's judgments about good and evil as well as about right and wrong.

"right" seems to be a case of *obscurum per obscurius*, since both "ought" and "obligatory" are more complex and therefore difficult to explain than "right" itself.

A simple examination of the common usage of the word "right" can help us clarify its own fundamental meaning, because people usually use it to express their acceptance of something, especially of human action as well as its consequences. For instance, when a person says "this idea is right," it signifies that he or she judges the idea agreeable. By contrast, when a person says "this action is wrong," it signifies that he or she thinks the action rejectable. Therefore, there is a received maxim of justice "*Volenti non fit injuria*," which means that what is permitted by a person will not be assessed by the same person as unjust or wrong. Construing it as "that is not unjust which is done with the consent of the person who is supposed to be hurt by it," John Stuart Mill raises an objection to it: even courts of law "allow voluntary engagements to be set aside on the ground of fraud, and sometimes on that of mere mistake or misinformation." (2003, p. 228) However, this kind of exceptions just imply that what was taken by the person concerned as acceptable and thus right can be taken later by the same person as well as by courts of law as rejectable and thus wrong.

Quite a few modern philosophers also understand the terms "right" and "wrong" in a similar way. On the one hand, Moore regards "moral right," "duty," and "morally permissible" as synonyms (1993, pp. 196–198). On the other hand, Richard B. Brant regards "morally wrong" and "morally forbidden or prohibited" as synonyms (1998, pp. 193–199). Christine M. Korsgaard mentions that our action's rightness has to do with "its acceptability to those with whom we interact." (1996, p. 114) In contractarianist and contractualist views, generally speaking, whether an action is right or wrong depends on whether it accords with or violates principles that are, or would be, agreed upon or accepted by contracting parties (see Darwall 2003, pp. 1–8; also see Gauthier 1987, pp. 10–17; Scanlon 1998, pp. 1–13, 197–206).

Therefore, we may draw another conclusion in the broadest sense: in both moral and non-moral contexts, the right primarily means the "acceptability," and the wrong primarily means the "rejectability." Put another way, while different persons often give different and even opposite answers to the question "what is right or wrong" in a particular case or as a general principle, so that one and the same war may be taken as right by some persons and yet as wrong by others, they are quite similar to each other in their meta-ethical understandings of the terms "right" and "wrong," i.e., all of them will take what is acceptable to them as right and what is rejectable to them as wrong.

Besides this primary meaning, the word "right" certainly has many other meanings in its common usage, which are usually indicated by various dictionaries. However, it can be argued that some of them, such as "fitting," "suitable," "proper," "appropriate," "normal," and "just," are straight synonymous with "acceptable," and some others, such as "preferable," "satisfactory," "favorable," and "healthy," can be regarded as substantively equivalent to it as shown below. Those meanings that have little to do with it, such as "straight," "total," and "opposite to 'left'," will not be considered in this article due to its task.

In its common usage, the word "right" has another important and noteworthy meaning of "true" or "correct," so that we will also call an idea or statement "right"

if it is thought to conform to facts or truth. On the one hand, if one assesses an idea or statement as acceptable because it is thought to be true or correct, the two meanings of "right" will be compatible and consistent with each other.[2] On the other hand, they can be separable and even incompatible under the circumstances where one assesses a true or correct idea or statement as rejectable (usually for some other reasons), as Hume remarks that "Truths which are *pernicious* to society, if any such there be, will yield to errors which are salutary and *advantageous*." (1948a, p. 258) In both the situations, the two meanings of "right" should be carefully distinguished from each other, otherwise we would confuse an acceptable idea with a true idea or a rejectable idea with a false idea.

It should be stressed here that the right as acceptability is not only opposite to the wrong as rejectability, but is also contrary to unacceptability, which can be seen as the wrong as rejectability in a stronger sense. Similarly, the wrong as rejectability is not only opposite to the right as acceptability, but is also contrary to unrejectability, which can be seen as the right as acceptability in a stronger sense.[3] Significantly, the more complicated and philosophical connection of "right" with "ought" or "obligatory" may be reduced in semantics to its primary meaning thereby: this connection implies not only in a general sense that it will be deemed acceptable if something right is done or something wrong is not done, but also in a stronger sense that it will be deemed unacceptable if something right is not done (therefore it ought to or even must be done) or something wrong is done (therefore it ought not to or even must not be done). Bernard Williams emphasizes the relationship between moral obligation and blame in this stronger sense: "there are no more—except the rage, frustration, sorrow, and fear of someone who sees someone else convincedly or blandly doing what the first person morally thinks they ought not to be done." (1981, pp. 121–122) In consequentialist view, thus, an action will be impermissible if it cannot produce good or better. In deontologist view, by contrast, an action will be impermissible if it violates this or that duty, even though it can produce good or better. We will discuss this connection of "right" with "ought" or "obligatory" in the stronger sense further below.

4 The Advantage of Consequentialism

Given the above-stated definitions, the good and the right as the two fundamental value criteria in human life are clearly different from each other in their primary meanings, for one denotes the desirability and the other denotes the acceptability. Nevertheless, this difference just contains in itself some substantive semantic

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[2] Interestingly, the stance of deontology on moral right is analogous to this case in large measure: an action will be judged right or morally acceptable if it is thought to conform to this or that duty.

[3] By contrast, we can scarcely say the same to the good as desirability and the evil as detestability, since it is hard to regard undesirability as the detestability in a stronger sense or to regard undetestability as the desirability in a stronger sense. Meanwhile, they do have a stronger sense in another dimension, which will be mentioned below.

equivalence between them, so that it can be inferred that whatever is good is also right in terms of its goodness and whatever is evil is also wrong in terms of its evilness.

We have no need to provide prolix arguments for this equivalence, as the reason is quite simple: one will certainly accept—even always with approval—whatever one judges beneficial, because one not only has a desire for it but also has no reason to reject it with reproach for its own sake. Similarly, one will certainly reject—even always with disapproval—whatever one judges harmful, because one not only has an aversion to it but also has no reason to accept it with commendation for its own sake. Therefore, we can claim that the good as desirability analytically implies in itself the right as the acceptability with approval, and the evil as detestability analytically implies in itself the wrong as the rejectability with disapproval. Virtually, it seems a contradiction in terms to say that one takes something desirable itself as rejectable or something detestable itself as acceptable.

This equivalence is also represented in some overlapping meanings of the two words. As stated above, "good" has such meanings as "of a high standard," "suitable," "agreeable," and "appropriate," and "right" has such meanings as "satisfactory," "preferable," and "favorable," all of which perform a similar function to express the acceptance of something in approval. This overlapping is especially obvious when the two terms are used as a positive answer to a proposal, request, or question in daily speech. Focusing chiefly upon their emotive implications and without analyzing their primary meanings, Charles L. Stevenson asserts in this sense that he can find little ground for a sharp distinction between "good" and "right" in their common usage (1979, pp. 97–99). In dictionaries, besides, "good" is often defined as "morally right" and "right" is often defined as "morally good," as if they were synonyms in the moral sense.

Then, we can understand in virtue of this equivalence why many philosophers have emphasized the inseparable relationship between the good and the right (justice). Plato holds that justice is a soul's virtue by which just people are wiser and better and more capable of acting, whereas injustice is a soul's vice by which unjust people are not even able to act together (2004, pp. 32–34). Hume declares, "Justice is certainly approved of, for no other reason than because it has a tendency to the public good." (1948b, p. 167) That is why he thinks that truths which might be pernicious to society would be rejectable: in his view, they could not "be approved of" due to their very perniciousness. Even Rawls has to admit, "All ethical doctrines worth our attention take consequences into account in judging rightness." (1971, p. 30) Without resorting to the desirable or detestable consequences of an action, indeed, one is unlikely to judge it acceptable or rejectable.

Insisting that the right lies in producing good or better, in the final analysis, consequentialist theories have a great meta-ethical advantage over deontologist theories in their debate precisely owing to this undeniable equivalence. As is well known, Jeremy Bentham declares, "By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question." (1907, p. 2) In both semantics and logic, this principle itself is hard to be refuted, for it is absurd for one to take an action to promote one's

happiness as rejectable or even blameworthy for its own sake or an action to oppose one's happiness as acceptable or even praiseworthy for its own sake.

Surprisingly, consequentialists seem scarcely well aware of this equivalence. Although presenting abundant and strong arguments for their stance from many other angles, they have neither regarded this equivalence consciously as a foothold of their theories nor responded to critics definitely by resorting to it. As Judith Jarvis Thomson remarks, for instance, what most makes Moore's consequentialist story attractive is: "it is hard to see how it could be perfectly all right to fail to do what would make the world go better than it otherwise would." (1997, p. 274) Nonetheless, Moore is satisfied by merely mentioning that "the word 'duty' is commonly applied only to the class of actions which excite moral approval, or of which the omission excites moral disapproval" and that "to praise a thing is to assert either that it is good in itself or else that it is a means to good" (1993, pp. 217, 220), without further noticing such a clear semantic overlapping between the good and the right (duty), which could demonstrate his view in an indisputable way.

Ironically, a few consequentialists even obscure this equivalence in large measure. Defining in the stronger sense the right as "being compelled to fulfill the duty" and the wrong as "ought to be punished or at least reproached," Mill stresses that the right is essentially different from what is desirable or laudable and the wrong is essentially different from what is disliked or disparaged (2003, p. 222). Plainly enough, however, a right action compelled to fulfill the duty of the so-called "greatest happiness" may still be desirable and laudable for utilitarians in terms of its promotion of the "greatest happiness," and expressing dislike or disparagement against an action can also be construed to some extent as a reproach against it. Another example is Richard M. Hare. While focusing in detail upon the commending function of "good" as a value-term in *The Language of Morals*, he pays little attention to the semantic overlapping between "good" and "right" in this very regard, by which he might have provided more consistent and persuasive arguments for his utilitarian belief that the right lies in maximizing human happiness. As a matter of fact, he not only queries those theories holding that "A is right" means "I approve of A" or "A is conducive to Y," but is also convinced, though pretty reasonably as argued below, that it is important to draw a rigid distinction between "good" and other words such as "right," "ought," and "duty" (1964, pp. 5–12, 79–151).

5 The Disadvantage of Consequentialism

While giving consequentialism a great advantage, the semantic equivalence between the good and the right also constitutes a critical challenge to it at the same time: why do we need to take their complicated relationship seriously if the right is analyzable in terms of the good? The former would be even unnecessary: since an action of producing good is always acceptable in itself and an action of causing evil is always rejectable in itself, it would be totally enough for us to evaluate whether or not an action is acceptable merely by the criterion of good and evil. Then, why do we need another criterion of right and wrong to do so specifically? Obviously, the only reasonable explanation for it seems that the right as acceptability has some

specific meaning that is not equivalent to the good both as desirability and as commendability.

A further analysis of "right" in the connection with "ought" or "obligatory" can prove that it does have such a specific meaning. To be sure, we may also claim in a sense that one "ought" to accept something desirable for oneself, especially when it can satisfy one's indispensable or urgent need.[4] However, it seems meaningless to apply the term "ought" in the stronger sense of "obligatory" or even of "being compelled" to the good itself: why "ought" one to accept something under obligation or even compulsion if it is already desirable for oneself? It is in this sense that Hare reasonably stresses: "'ought' behaves more like 'right' than it does like 'good'." (1964, p. 152) Therefore, it suggests that, in the connection with "ought" or "obligatory," the right as acceptability may be aimed at something other than what is regarded as good.

An extreme and yet not rare case mentioned by Sidgwick clearly shows that it can be aimed at something evil: "The call of duty has often impelled a soldier or other public servant, or the adherent of a persecuted religion, to face certain and painful death, under circumstances where it might be avoided with little or no loss even of reputation" (1962, p. 170). It is plain enough that what is accepted here by the agent out of a sense of duty is exactly something evil almost for everyone (including the agent): certain and painful death. Sidgwick makes it clear: "The great majority of men…certainly act as if death were one of the worst of evils" (1962, p. 415). Under the circumstances, paradoxically, the agent just thinks it unacceptable not to accept such a worst evil that is unacceptable in terms of its evilness, even though he or she is able to avoid it easily.

While being at a disadvantage in the debate with consequentialist theories by separating the right from the good and thus deviating from their semantic equivalence, in the final analysis, deontologist theories have a great meta-ethical advantage precisely owing to stressing such a kind of actions valued as right by the agent as well as by others, in which, impelled by the call of duty and going sharply against her or his natural tendency to pursue good and to avoid evil, the agent rejects or gives up something good like life and accepts or endures something evil like death. As H. A. Prichard puts it, "the doing of our duty often vitally interferes with the satisfaction of our inclinations." (1912, p. 22) In other words, the doing of our duty often makes something desirable for us into rejectable and something detestable for us into acceptable.[5]

Moreover, only by virtue of such paradoxical and yet right actions can we explain why the right has the above-stated specific meaning connected with "ought" in the stronger sense, which is also recognized by most consequentialists. Different from a right action of accepting good and rejecting evil, which can be taken

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[4] It is this indispensableness or urgency that endows "desirable" with a stronger sense, by which the good can be classified qualitatively into two categories: the "primary good" and the "secondary good" (see Liu Q. 2010).

[5] It should be stressed that, under the circumstances, what is rejectable to us is still desirable for us in itself, not becoming detestable, and what is acceptable to us is still detestable for us in itself, not becoming desirable (see Liu Q. 2012).

naturally without obligation, a right action of accepting evil and rejecting good, which appears to be a contradiction in terms, must be taken under obligation or even compulsion. The reason is quite simple: even if the agent takes such an action voluntarily and thinks it laudable, he or she will still feel reluctance to some extent, as he or she has to accept something evil like death to which he or she has an aversion and reject something good like life for which he or she has a desire. Even out of a sense of duty, then, the agent will still feel compelled to reject good with regret and accept evil with tolerance in such a right action (see Zhuang, 2020; Migdal, 2021). Contrary to G. E. M. Anscombe's belief (1958, pp. 5–6), therefore, the emphatic semantic connection between "right," "ought," and "obligatory" is such a universal and comprehensive phenomenon that it is not only far beyond the Judaic-Christian "divine law" conception of ethics, but also spreads throughout those non-moral fields of human life. Indeed, it is deeply rooted in the paradoxical feature of even such an ordinary action: one has to take some bitter medicine in order to treat one's disease.

Corresponding to the fact that the agent may accept something good or something evil in a right action, then, the notion of the right as acceptability eventually has the two levels of meanings: one refers to the acceptability with approval aiming at the good, and the other refers to the acceptability with tolerance aiming at the evil. While both can fall into the category of the right as acceptability in terms of their primary meanings, they are quite distinct from each other in terms of their subgrade meanings: the former is equivalent to the good as desirability, whereas the latter is not. Put another way, the semantic equivalence of the right to the good lies only in the former, not in the latter. Also for this reason, while we can claim that what is deemed desirable is also acceptable for the sake of its goodness, we cannot claim that what is deemed acceptable is also desirable for the sake of its rightness, because what is deemed tolerantly acceptable must be something detestable. At bottom, why does one need to accept in tolerance something good and desirable for oneself?

Now we can answer the above-asked questions as follows: the main reason why we need to have a notion of the right specifically referring to acceptability besides the notion of good referring both to desirability and to approving acceptability is: the latter cannot analytically entails the meaning of the right as tolerant acceptability aiming at the evil. Therefore, if we call "approving acceptability" equivalent to the good the "elementary right," we may call "tolerant acceptability" aiming at the evil the "proper right," for it must be strictly distinguished from the good. Correspondingly, the main reason why we need the criterion of right and wrong as well as of justice and injustice besides the one of good and evil is: the latter can be used only to evaluate analytically on the level of the elementary right whether or not something good produced by an action is approvingly acceptable, not to evaluate paradoxically on the level of the proper right whether or not something evil caused by an action is tolerantly acceptable (see Liu 2020; Gu et al. 2020; Liu 2022).

Viewed from this perspective, the fatal weakness of consequentialism in the meta-ethical dimension seems to be that it overlooks the subgrade meaning of the right as tolerant acceptability aiming at the evil, which cannot be reduced merely to the good as desirability and approving acceptability. As a result, it fails to explain persuasively those paradoxical and yet right actions in which, out of a sense of duty,

the agent has to reject something good (sometimes even one of the most important goods like life) and accept something evil (sometimes even one of the worst of evils like death).

6 Summary

To sum up, once the semantic equivalence of the good and the right is clarified, we would find the important meta-ethical reason why consequentialism enjoys a huge theoretical advantage in the debate with deontology as follows: its basic position of reducing the right to the good is based precisely on this equivalence that could be easily determined through analysis. As long as this equivalence cannot be denied, therefore, it is difficult to completely refute the basic arguments of consequentialism. At the same time, however, the main deficiency of consequentialism seems to be that it does not see that the right also contains the subgrade meaning as "tolerant acceptability" pointing to evil, which cannot be covered by the good as desirability and approving acceptability. As a result, it is difficult to explain those right actions in real life by which people reject something good and yet accept something evil according to this or that duty. Indeed, some questions brought about by these right actions in paradox are one of the most serious theoretical challenges not only to consequentialism but also to deontology: how can something good become rejectable if it is always acceptable in terms of its goodness? How can something evil become acceptable if it is always rejectable in terms of its evilness? Why ought one to reject good and accept evil in accordance with duty, even at the cost of causing a self-contradiction in terms like "circular square"? From where does a duty get such a binding power that it can compel people to voluntarily take such right actions partially and yet directly against their natural tendency to pursue good and to avoid evil? Do these actions eventually negate the semantic equivalence between the good and the right on the level of approving acceptability, and thus make consequentialism untenable and deontology tenable? Obviously, addressing these questions seriously is very significant for us to find a satisfactory—namely, both good and right—solution to such a highly controversial issue as the complicated relationship between the good and the right and to overcome the long and yet absurd dichotomy between Western consequentialism and deontology.

Declarations

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