Cluelessness

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Objective Cluelessness

For each action, there is a fact of the matter about which complete world-history would result were you to perform it.*

*This is strictly speaking probably not true. The universe might be nondeterministic. And, even if it isn't, actions can be underspecified. But let's just assume this is true to simplify the discussion.

(OB) *Criterion of Objective Betterness:* ϕ is *objectively better* than ψ iff the consequences of ϕ are better than those of ψ.

Lenman argues that most of our actions (because they are identity-affecting) have inscrutable causal ramifications. Their foreseeable consequences are massively swamped by their unforeseeable consequences.

(CW_O) *Cluelessness Worry for Objective Betterness:* We can never have the faintest idea whether ϕ is objectively better than ψ.

Because *Consequentialism* holds that the right action is the one with the best actual consequences, if (CW_O), we'll never know whether someone acts rightly or wrongly. But, Lenman argues, there are actions—e.g., Hitler's crimes—that we *know* are wrong. So, Consequentialism is not true.

What do you think of Lenman's argument?

One response is to argue that Lenman overstates the effects the unforeseeable consequences have on an action. Greaves considers two (bad) arguments along these lines:

1. *The 'ripples on a pond' postulate.* The influence your choice has on how the future unfolds decays over time.
2. *The cancellation postulate.* For any action, the good unforeseeable effects are very likely to be cancelled out by the bad unforeseeable effects—so whether the action is good or bad overall is mostly determined by its foreseeable effects.

Why does Greaves think these are bad responses?

Subjective Cluelessness

Maybe it's true that we rarely know whether an action is *objectively* right or wrong. But we can still guide our decisions and evaluate actions in regard to whether they are *subjectively* wrong or right.

(OB) *Criterion of Subjective Betterness:* ϕ is *subjectively better* than ψ iff the expected value of the consequences of ϕ is higher than the expected value of the consequences of ψ.

Is there a *Cluelessness Worry* for Subjective Betterness, too?

> **Against Cluelessness.** For any possible unforeseeable effects, E_1 and E_2, it might be the case that (i) E_1 would result from ϕing and E_2 would result from ψing. But it also might be the case that (ii) E_1 would result from ψing and E_2 would result from ϕing. You have no reason to think (i) is more likely to be true than (ii), and no reason to think (ii) is more likely to be true than (i). So, you should assign (i) and (ii) the same probability.
>
> But if this is true for all possible unforeseeable effects, then the contribution that those unforeseeable effects make to the difference in the *expected values* of ϕ and ψ is zero.

And, so, the expected value of an action is determined entirely by its *foreseeable* effects.

The Principle of Indifference

The previous argument relied on *The Principle of Indifference.*

POI If you have no more reason to think P than Q, and you have no more reason to think Q than P, then $Cr(P) = Cr(Q)$.

The Partition Problem. The Principle of Indifference is problematic because what advice it offers depends on how the possibilities are partitioned.

EXAMPLE: THE MYSTERY CUBE FACTORY. You know that the factory produces cubes of some particular size. You know the length of the cubes produced is somewhere between 0 and 2 feet long.

	Length $= \ell$
L_1	$0 \leq \ell \leq 1$
L_2	$1 \leq \ell \leq 2$

	Area $= a$
A_1	$0 \leq a \leq 1$
A_2	$1 \leq a \leq 2$
A_3	$2 \leq a \leq 3$
A_4	$3 \leq a \leq 4$

L_1 is logically equivalent to A_1.
L_2 is logically equivalent to $(A_2 \vee A_3 \vee A_4)$.

Greaves' Response: All this shows is that a *fully unrestricted* POI is false. It does not show that there are no true restrictions of POI.

And the cases to which the POI in the argument above are—we have grounds to think—"good cases".

Complex Cluelessness

We can sometimes be in a situation where, for some pair of actions ϕ and ψ:

(CC_1) We have some reason to think the unforeseeable consequences of ϕ would be better than those of ψ.

(CC_2) We have some reason to think the unforeseeable consequences of ψ would be better than those of ϕ.

(CC_3) It is unclear how to weigh up these reasons against one another.

Are such cases possible? Can you think of any examples?

In the face of such questions, perhaps we should adopt *imprecise credences*: to be in a credal state that is represented by a many-membered *set* (called a 'representor') of probability functions.

Mogensen argues that, in such cases, it's not unreasonable to evaluate your actions using the ***Maximality rule***: roughly, an action is permissible just so long as there isn't some other available action that is ranked ahead of it by *every* probability function in your representor.

Because this rule is so permissive, if it's true that we are often in cases of complex cluelessness, much of what we can decide to do will be morally permissible.

Is that an implausible conclusion?