

# Consequentialism and the practice-dependence debate in political theory

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**Abstract:** Political philosophers/theorists have recently debated what role real-life social practices should play in normative theorising. Should our theories be practice-independent or practice-dependent? That is, can we formulate normative institutional principles independently of real-world practices or are such principles only ever relative to the practices they are meant to govern? In this article, I argue that consequentialism has a plausible account of how social practices should factor in normative political philosophy. I first outline a version of consequentialist political philosophy I call Practice Consequentialism. I argue that Practice Consequentialism provides a plausible blueprint for integrating social practices in normative institutional theorising. Second, I argue that Practice Consequentialism accounts well for the central arguments on both sides of the practice-independence vs dependence debate. Capturing arguments for practice-dependence, consequentialism brings out why real-world practices are central in formulating normative principles. Conversely, capturing arguments for practice-independence, consequentialism offers a clear external normative perspective from which to evaluate practices. While I focus on consequentialism, the arguments also extend to non-consequentialists who believe that instrumental reasons should play a central, if defeasible, role for justification in political theory.

**Key words:** practice-dependence; practice-independence; methods of political theory; practices; utilitarianism; consequentialism; instrumentalism