

Consequentialism, blame, and collective action

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Abstract: Do you have a duty to be a vegan, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, buy fair trade, or vote in an election? Trying to answer such questions, we often encounter collective action problems: if enough people ‘cooperate’ – and become vegan for example – we can bring about a better outcome. Yet what you do as an individual seems to make no difference whatsoever. Collective action problems are thought to pose a serious challenge to consequentialism. In this article, I argue that consequentialism can rise to the challenge. I propose a new consequentialist solution which I call the Reactive Attitude Approach. Rather than only focus on the deontic status of individual acts of cooperation or non-cooperation, I argue that consequentialists should also focus on whether and when to praise or blame individuals. For example, even if your vegetarianism does not change the overall outcome, consequentialists might still recommend praising you for your cooperative behaviour. I develop and defend the Reactive Attitude Approach by drawing on recent instrumentalist theories of blame and responsibility.

Key words: consequentialism; blame; causal inefficacy; collective action; instrumentalism; reactive attitudes; blameless wrongdoing; utilitarianism