

Effect Selection and Causal Cluelessness

'Selection (...) applies to just one side of the causal relation: the *c*-side. Though perhaps there is also selection on the *e*-side, between *the effect* and *its byproducts* (or *side effects*). Still, it seems that the effect/byproduct distinction is not quite parallel to the cause/condition distinction since the effect/byproduct distinction seems to have more to do with agential intentions and less to do with the contrastive structure of causal inquiry. I do not have an explanation for this asymmetry'. (Schaffer 2005: 352).

Abstract

As formulated by Mill (1843/1947: 213-214), the problem of causal selection is that of explaining the priority given to a determinant or set of determinants as *the cause* of a target event in contrast to the complex sum of all determinants in its past light cone (*the background conditions*). Assuming that reality is represented as a directed, uniform network of causal interactions, is there a metaphysical basis for the distinction drawn between causes and conditions, or is it just a discretionary and indiscriminate matter? Causal selection received considerable critical attention (Hesslow 1988, Waters 2007, Schaffer 2012, Franklin-Hall 2015, *inter alia*), however, there has been little discussion about an apparently similar mechanism operating on the effect side of causal relations. From an analogous Millian angle, the real Effect is the whole set of consequents and no clear explanation is offered for the priority typically given to a consequent or set of consequents (*the effect*) over other results (*by-products, side-effects, after-effects, etc.*).¹ The main goal of the paper is to explore effect selection and assess its relevance to determining the appropriate extent of moral responsibility for consequences. I argue that the difficulties in the way of a clear answer to the puzzle of effect selection motivate an epistemic argument against consequentialism.

Overview: First, I introduce effect selection, review several attempts to formulate selection criteria, and indicate their deficiencies. Second, I examine if two prominent ways of explaining causal selection apply to the effect side. I show that a prospective approach needs to strike a balance between: (a) the claim that effects and by-products are metaphysically distinct (given the Millian network model), and (b) the claim that effects and by-products are in no sense objectively different and selection is consistently governed by context-dependent pragmatics (given the scientists' concrete efforts to determine effects and isolate them from by-products – e.g., in the case of most prescription drugs). I argue that despite the strong sense that effects and by-products are essentially different, the criteria governing their differentiation are neither clear, nor predictable. Third, I consider the relevance of effect selection to determining the appropriate scope of moral responsibility for consequences and develop a novel epistemic objection to consequentialism:

- (1) Because consequentialism determines the moral status of an action φ by its (causal and logical) consequences, one has access to the moral status of an action φ if one has access to its consequences.
- (2) In terms of access to consequences, consequentialists need to distinguish between the 'primary' effects which are determinative of an act's rightness and those 'secondary' effects which are not.
- (3) But because one does not know what the relevant or primary consequences of a particular action φ are (in contrast to its irrelevant or secondary consequences), one does not know that action's moral status.
- (4) But if one cannot know the moral status of our actions (the comparative quality of their consequences), then one does not know which actions consequentialism requires one to perform.
- (5) But if one wants consequentialism to offer significant moral guidance to agents, agents must know which actions consequentialism asks them to perform.
- (6) Therefore, consequentialism cannot offer us significant moral guidance.

¹ For instance, G. E. Moore notes: 'One natural way, and perhaps the most natural way, of understanding the expression "the total consequences of the action, A," is one in which among the consequences of A nothing is included but what is the case *subsequently* to the occurrence of A, so that the "total consequences of A" means everything which is the case *subsequently* to A's occurrence, which is also such that it would not have been the case if A had not occurred.' (Moore 1942: 559, emphasis in original).

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