

Good critical thinking about democracy and consequentialism

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



In politics, one of the main problems found by most leaders or public servants is to weigh ends and means. Sometimes, even in the most homogeneous societies, where most people would tend to share a common view on what ends their government should pursue, people will often disagree on what policy should the government adopt to meet their demands.

For example, many people would agree that poverty should not exist on this day and age. Some might say that the solution is to take part of the wealth of the richest portion of society, which would be discriminative and would constitute a violation of their rights, and then distribute it among the less fortunate. Others would suggest that reducing taxes encourages private initiative, which would then encourage employment and generation of wealth without having to go into the pockets of the wealthy, but would generate sharp inequalities among citizens. Both alternatives pursue the same goal, but reflect opposite lines of thought that depend on how important the end itself is. The second line of thought gives more tries harder to respect objective moral values, while the first one considers that the goal is more important than anything else.

This last perspective is called consequentialism. The view that a normative policy's morality depends only on the consequences of its implementation is based on classic utilitarianism, which holds that an action is morally correct only if it maximizes the good . Now, it would be licit to question what does good mean, or for whom it is good.

Some might say that values are relative and they depend on the society that defines them. However, American development analyst Lawrence Harrison,

states that there are values that the vast majority of people in the world would share, no matter what culture they belong to . This poses a problem to policy makers at the time of making decisions that directly or indirectly affect large amounts of people, as they have to generate policies that solve specific problems without affecting the rights of the people and respecting their values.

Consequentialism eliminates the idea that moral values, such as property or freedom, are objective, and gives foot to moral relativism. Following this line of thought, someone might suggest that the best way to end poverty is to kill all poor people. This is clearly an absurd proposal, but it would indeed be an effective solution, yet it would mean that someone might be willing to violate human rights en masse just because the goal is worth more than the lives of many. Hence the expression “ the end justifies the means”.

The aforementioned expression is mostly attributed to Machiavellianism as it implies that one is guided by pragmatic morality. In politics, it means that any action that benefits the State as a whole is morally acceptable, even if it means violation of rights, genocide or worse. Internationalist Hans Morgenthau argued that States could not be held back by moral values or universals . For him, prudence, one of the supreme virtues of politics, means that states should ponder the consequences of all political courses of actions, and must not act in defense of moral principles if they get in the way of political action .

Political realism, or the application of consequentialism to politics, is what most states have applied since the appearance of the idea of nation-state . But it is not clear if it has maximized benefits for the vast majority of people.

For example, the decision taken by the United States to fight communism in Vietnam was based on the idea that it would be the only way to stop communism and maintain open markets in Asia. Those goals were pursued at great cost of lives and economic resources. However, Political scientist Bruce Russett, pointed out that the American participation actually worsened the quality of lives of Vietnamese and the cruelty of communists, and that if the United States had taken a different stance towards Asia they would have been more open to cooperation . This of course is known now, and politicians have now come up with the concept of unforeseen consequences to excuse themselves, when in fact their failures are caused by poor evaluation of costs and benefits, and the idea that there are goals that must be pursued by all means necessary .

Since social activity is infinitely complex, as millions of people with different sets of values participate and interact constantly, letting anyone take political decisions based on consequentialism would inevitably mean that at least one group of people will be affected negatively. That is why there should be limits to the government and a set of generally accepted values, so everyone knows when the state is about to threaten them in the name of the public good.

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