

REPLY TO MCMICHAEL¹

By DAVID LEWIS

DEONTIC conditionals, whether those of ordinary discourse or the simplified versions invented by intensional logicians, are ethically neutral. You can apply them to state any ethical doctrine you please. The results will be only as acceptable as the doctrines that went into them.

Radical utilitarianism, stark and unqualified, is not a commonsensical view. Agreement with our ordinary ethical thought is not its strong point. It is no easy thing to accept the strange doctrine that nothing at all matters to what ought to be the case except the total balance of good and evil²—that any sort or amount of evil can be neutralized, as if it had never been, by enough countervailing good—and that the balancing evil and good may be entirely unrelated, as when the harm I do to you is cancelled out by the kindness of one Martian to another.

Accept this strange doctrine, and what should follow? Exactly the strange consequences that McMichael complains of! Never mind the semantics of deontic conditionals. If you really think that only the total matters, then surely you ought also to think that little is obligatory (there are always alternative ways to reach a high total) and that much is permissible (no evil is so bad that it cannot be neutralized). It is not in the radical utilitarian spirit to believe in outright ethical requirements or prohibitions.

Order the worlds on radically utilitarian principles; then apply the semantics for deontic conditionals that I gave³ in *Counterfactuals*; and the results are as McMichael says they are. Most of us would indeed find these results strange and unacceptable, but the radical utilitarian should find them much to his liking. The semantic analysis tells us what is true (at a world) under an ordering. It modestly declines to choose the

¹ Alan McMichael, 'Too Much of a Good Thing: A Problem in Deontic Logic', *ANALYSIS*, this issue. McMichael there criticizes Section 5.1 of my *Counterfactuals* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1973).

² Since we are discussing my treatment in *Counterfactuals*, our topic is what ought to be, not what someone in particular ought to do. See my footnote on page 100. But parallel questions would arise for the deontic logic of personal obligations.

³ I did give the semantic analysis under discussion—but I did *not* give it as an exact analysis of any 'items of ordinary discourse'. Rather I meant it as a stipulation of truth conditions for deontic conditionals similar to those already studied by some deontic logicians. These have their interest partly because of their resemblance to the deontic conditionals of ordinary discourse. But I fully agree with McMichael (though for different reasons) that the resemblance is far from perfect. Section 5.1 of *Counterfactuals* is not an essay in ordinary language philosophy. As I stated at the outset (page 96), it is a study of the formal analogy between counterfactuals and variably strict conditionals in deontic logic. I did say that those conditionals 'may be read as' certain constructions of ordinary English. (One might likewise say that the standard existential quantifier 'may be read as' some English construction, though aware of differences between the two.) Surely to say that is to claim nothing more than an approximate likeness of meaning. Since the differences I believe in between my deontic conditionals and those of ordinary language are irrelevant to the difference that McMichael believes in and I do not, I have here ignored them.

proper ordering.¹ That is work for a moralist, not a semanticist. If what turns out to be true under a utilitarian ordering is what is true according to radical utilitarianism, not what is true according to our ordinary opinions, that is just as it should be.

Other orderings, other results. For instance, a simplistic non-utilitarian might fancy an ordering on which the better of any two worlds is the one with fewer sins. (It is up to him to tell us how he divides the totality of sin into distinct units.) Under this ordering and my semantics, much is obligatory and little is permissible. Perhaps some of the worlds where Jesse robs the bank have sixteen sins, none have fewer, and some have more. Then what is obligatory, given that Jesse robs the bank, is that there be no seventeenth sin. No course of action with any extra sin is (even conditionally) permissible, no matter how much counterbalancing good there may be. McMichael's argument cannot be made in this case. The only relevant good, sinlessness, is not 'a good which may exist in amounts of any size'.²

What is true under a utilitarian ordering or a sin-counting ordering (according to my semantics) ought not to be expected to agree with our ordinary opinions. Ordinary moralists are neither radical utilitarians nor sin-counters. It would be better to ask: is there *any* ordering (more complicated than those yet considered, no doubt) such that what is true under that ordering agrees with our ordinary moral opinions?

But even that better question is not good. Is there really any definite body of "ordinary moral opinions" to agree with? I think not. We disagree, we waver, we are confused. Few of us singly, still less all of us together, have achieved a stable equilibrium between our utilitarian and our sin-counting inclinations.

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¹ See page 96.

² We might also consider an ordering in which the world with fewer sins is better, but in which ties between worlds with equally many sins are broken on utilitarian considerations. Even though we now have a relevant good which may exist in amounts of any size, it remains true that much is obligatory and little is permissible. Avoidance of extra sin is obligatory, given that Jesse has robbed the bank, because no amount of good can outweigh an extra sin.