

1983

Against Evaluator Relativity: A Response to Sen

Donald H. Regan

University of Michigan Law School, donregan@umich.edu

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles/1421>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles>



Part of the [Law and Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Regan, Donald H. "Against Evaluator Relativity: A Response to Sen." *Phil. & Pub. Aff.* 12, no. 2 (1983): 93-112.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.

DONALD H. REGAN

Against Evaluator Relativity: A Response to Sen

In a recent essay in this journal Amartya Sen introduced the notion of an evaluator-relative consequence-based morality.¹ The basic idea can be described very simply. A consequence-based morality is a morality that instructs each agent to maximize some objective function defined over states of affairs. Such a morality is evaluator neutral if it assigns to every agent the same objective function. If different agents have different objective functions, then the morality is evaluator relative. For example, a morality would be evaluator relative if it assigned to Jones an objective function giving greater weight to the welfare of Jones's children than Smith's children, while it assigned to Smith an objective function giving greater weight to the welfare of Smith's children than Jones's. In more traditional language, a morality is consequence-based if it says that right acts are acts which have good consequences. A consequence-based morality is evaluator neutral if there is a universal good that all agents are required to promote; it is evaluator relative if different agents are assigned different goods. This brief description conceals some complications and possible sources of confusion, but it is not intended as a summary of or a replacement for Sen's very illuminating general discussion of agent relativity. Sen has shown that evaluator relativity must always be accompanied by some other form of relativity, but my focus will be on evaluator relativity except where I advert specifically to another form.

Sen notes that proponents of consequence-based moralities have generally defended evaluator-neutral forms. He does not actually recommend the adoption of an evaluator-relative theory. Still, he discusses the possibilities of evaluator relativity with such interest and apparent favor that it seems worth pursuing the investigation of evaluator relativity a bit

1. Amartya Sen, "Rights and Agency," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 3-39.

further and, in the process, pointing out some reasons why neither people inclined to accept consequence-based theories (on whom I shall concentrate) nor people with deontological inclinations should leap to embrace Sen's new idea.

There is one traditional view that can be construed as recommending a specific evaluator-relative consequence-based morality—ethical egoism. The central Section of this essay, Section III, partially vindicates G. E. Moore's famous refutation of egoism.² Moore claimed that the egoist must contradict himself. Bernard Williams denies this.³ On the issue as stated, Moore is wrong and Williams right. But Moore was a consequentialist, and egoism is often presented as a consequentialist theory. What Moore should have said, and what he may well have had in mind, is that the egoist cannot fit his theory into the consequentialist mold without contradicting himself. That is what I shall show, in a more general form, in Section III. The claim is more perspicuous if turned around: An evaluator-relative consequence-based theory can be formulated without contradiction, but it turns out that in such a theory the evaluations of consequences do not really account for the judgments about the rightness of acts.

I

Let us put aside at the start a specious criticism of evaluator relativity. It might seem that evaluator-relative theories violate the requirement of universalizability. This need not be so.

The appearance of nonuniversalizability arises because, on an evaluator-relative theory, it may be the case that Jones is required to do some act while Smith, who has a different evaluative point of view, would be required in the very same circumstances to do something different. Suppose, as in the example above, that each agent is required to give special weight to the welfare of his own child. Jones, if he must choose between helping his son Tommy and Smith's son John, should help Tommy. Smith, faced with the identical choice, should help John.

2. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 98–99. An argument similar to Moore's may be found in Brian Medlin, "Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 35 (1957), pp. 111–18, reprinted in *Morality and Rational Self-Interest*, ed. David Gauthier (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 56–63.

3. Bernard Williams, "Egoism and Altruism," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 258.

In this case, the solution is obvious. If we describe the alternatives as “help Tommy” and “help John,” then Jones and Smith must do different things. However, if we describe the alternatives as “help your own child” and “help the other,” then each is required to do the same thing, namely to help his own. There is room for argument between the “neutralist” and the “relativist” about which form of description is more appropriate, but universalizability is at best a somewhat impressionistic notion, and the agent-relative descriptions are sufficiently natural so that the neutralist cannot rule them out of court on universalizability grounds.

On the other hand, nothing in Sen’s formalism guarantees that re-description will always be adequate to save universalizability. Imagine, for example, an evaluator-relative theory which requires Jones to place a high value on the preservation of wilderness and requires Smith to ignore wilderness preservation but to place a high value on energy-intensive activities. There will be cases involving conflicts between these values where Jones and Smith will be required to do different things in identical circumstances. Nothing we have said entails that there need be any natural way of redescribing the alternatives so that Jones and Smith must really do the “same” thing. So far as the formalism of evaluator relativity goes, there need be nothing about Jones and Smith that explains why they are assigned different evaluative points of view. The assignments may be completely arbitrary. If they are arbitrary, the theory will not be universalizable.

It might be said that, despite the generality of the formalism, no proponent of evaluator relativity would ever defend a theory in which the evaluative points of view were assigned arbitrarily. There would always be some explanation of why particular evaluations were appropriate for particular individuals. Sen suggests something like this when he observes that, “If evaluator relativity is derived from the ‘positional interpretation’, then it is really *position relativity* that is admitted, which entails evaluator relativity only to the extent that evaluators differ from each other in their respective positions.”⁴ It is reasonable to assume that the relevant differences in respective positions will always be such as to suggest natural agent-relative descriptions of the acts under consideration, in terms of which we can see that the theory is universalizable.

Let me simply state the conclusions which a fuller discussion would

4. Sen, “Rights and Agency,” p. 36.

lead to. Universalizability does not exclude evaluator relativity, or doer relativity, or self-evaluation relativity. These relativities are defined by Sen on the assumption that acts are described in neutral terms (“help Tommy” as opposed to “help your own son”); indeed, they could not be brought out otherwise. All that universalizability requires is that these relativities (and any others we might suggest) disappear when we re-describe acts in certain natural ways. Universalizability *does* eliminate instances of arbitrary relativity, as we have seen. It is not an empty requirement. Still, it allows relativities of all of Sen’s types.

II

Sen is aware that talk of “evaluator relativity” is going to make people uneasy. There is no question about the logical coherence of a theory which instructs different agents to maximize different objective functions; and, as we have seen, it cannot be argued that such a theory must fail to be universalizable. Still, is it appropriate to say such a theory instructs agents to maximize the *goodness* of the consequences of their acts? Since evaluation is relative, each agent must be viewed as maximizing something like “the good from his point of view.” Does that really make sense?

There are, of course, perfectly ordinary senses of “good from his point of view.” If Jones’s hated uncle, on the verge of discovering a cure for Alzheimer’s Disease, dies instead, leaving Jones a fortune, we might say that was good from Jones’s point of view but not from the point of view of the rest of the world. But in saying this occurrence was good from Jones’s point of view, we would simply be saying it promoted Jones’s interests. We would not be saying it was, for lack of a better phrase, *morally* good from Jones’s point of view. When I say “morally good” here, I obviously do not mean “good in virtue of some specifically moral property such as, for example, righteousness.” I mean rather something like “deserving of approval upon dispassionate consideration in a distinctive ‘moral’ frame of mind.” The question is whether it makes sense to think of “morally good” (hereafter just “good”) in this sense as being subject to modification by different points of view.

Sen’s case for the relevance of points of view depends heavily on an aesthetic analogy.⁵ Sen observes that we can say “Mt. Everest is beautiful

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–38.

from five miles to the south” and also “Mt. Everest is *not* beautiful from five miles to the east” without in any way contradicting ourselves. Furthermore, both claims may be completely objective. Aesthetic evaluation depends on one’s point of view. I have no disagreement with what Sen says about Mt. Everest. However, the analogy to moral evaluation is unpersuasive.

When I say, “Mt. Everest is beautiful from five miles to the south,” what I am saying is that Mt. Everest *looks* beautiful from there. I am saying something about the way Mt. Everest looks, or about its appearance. That I am talking about the way it looks, or about its appearance, should not be taken to suggest that I am talking about an illusion or an illusory appearance. What I am talking about is perfectly real. It is the way Everest really looks from that spot. Indeed, it is precisely the reality of “the way Everest looks” that makes it easy to understand and to explain why Everest looks different from different places. The pattern of light, described in terms of color and intensity, that reaches my eye as I look at Everest from the south is entirely different from the pattern of light that reaches my eye as I look at Everest from the east. I do not of course mean to *identify* “the way Everest looks from five miles to the south” with any pattern of light. But *differences* in the relevant patterns of light fully explain why Everest looks different from different vantage points.

Compare now the situation where Jones’s son has just broken his leg. Jones says, “His breaking his leg was a terrible thing.” Smith says, “Well, of course it’s a shame for anyone to break a bone, but it’s not really so bad as Jones makes out.” We can easily imagine Jones and Smith making these disparate observations. The question is, Can they both be right? If we doubt that they can both be right, does the Mt. Everest analogy help us to see how they both can be? I think not. The problem is that here there is nothing at all that corresponds to the perfectly obvious explanation of how the two judgments of Everest can both be right. There are not two obviously different patterns of “moral light.”

We can do more to emphasize the disanalogy. When I say, “Mt. Everest is beautiful from five miles to the south,” we have no difficulty distinguishing between “the way Everest looks from five miles to the south” and my aesthetic judgment on the way Everest looks from there. In the case of Tommy’s broken leg, however, we cannot distinguish between “the way it looks from Jones’s moral position” and some further moral judgment on the way it looks. The “way it looks” from Jones’s moral position *is* the moral judgment from that position. (Sen might suggest

that what Jones “sees” *prior* to any moral judgment, is “the evaluator’s son’s broken leg,” whereas what Smith sees, prior to any moral judgment, is “somebody else’s son’s broken leg.” But Jones and Smith are still seeing the same broken leg under different descriptions. “The way Everest looks from five miles to the south” and “the way Everest looks from five miles to the east” are emphatically *not* one thing differently described.) In the Everest case, then, there is a difference in what is seen that precedes and explains the difference in judgments; in the moral case, there is not.

Can it be made to appear that Jones and Smith “see” different things, or that they are talking about different states of affairs that correspond to different patterns of light? The only obvious way to argue that Jones and Smith are evaluating different things (and not the same thing under different descriptions) is to imagine that Jones is evaluating the consequences of Tommy’s broken leg for Jones’s relationship to Tommy and the world, while Smith is evaluating the consequences of the same broken leg for Smith’s relationship to Tommy and the world. But then Sen’s claim that there are different evaluative points of view would be tied to a claim that what we are really required to value is always aspects of our own relationships. I do not say that Sen would be committed to the claim that we are or should be selfish in any narrow sense. Jones might love his son and be to all external appearances an ideal parent. But it would still have to be the case that Jones loved him essentially as “my son,” and not as “Tommy.” That would be unacceptable, as I assume Sen would agree.

I take it Sen would say, “No, no. Jones and Smith are both talking about the same thing, Tommy’s broken leg, but they have different moral relationships to it, just as the person five miles to the south and the person five miles to the east are both talking about Everest but have different physical relationships to it.” The trouble is that I know exactly how the different physical relationships to Everest lead to different aesthetic judgments, and the process suggests no moral analogue, even when I am reminded that Jones is Tommy’s father and Smith is not. The closest I can come to understanding the idea that Tommy’s broken leg is worse from Jones’s point of view than from Smith’s is understanding the idea that Jones ought to care more about Tommy’s broken leg than Smith does. But that seems a rather different idea, and I shall not pursue it here.

I have not shown by positive argument that the notion of “good from

a point of view” is incoherent. Nor shall I. In the next Section I shall show that the notion of “good from a point of view,” even if it is coherent, cannot be satisfactorily combined with the ruling idea of traditional consequentialism, which is that our judgments about the rightness of acts should be explained by our judgments about the goodness of consequences. In the Section after next I shall show that if we nevertheless adopt an evaluator-relative theory, our doing so will have some undesirable results in practice.

III

The central idea of traditional consequentialism is that we should be able to account for our judgments about the rightness of acts in terms of our judgments about the goodness of states of affairs. In this Section I shall consider three ways of interpreting Sen’s suggestion that there are different, equally objective, points of view from which judgments of goodness can be made, and I shall show that on none of the three interpretations can we in fact account for our judgments of rightness in terms of our judgments of goodness. Perhaps it is worth saying at the outset that although I discuss three interpretations of Sen, I think it is tolerably clear which interpretation Sen prefers. It is the last of the three, in the order of my treatment. To some readers it will be obvious from the start that my first two interpretations are not what Sen intends. Of such readers I ask patience. It will not be immediately obvious to everyone that the first two interpretations are wrong; and even for the most perspicacious readers there may be some benefit in explicitly contrasting the third interpretation with the other two possibilities.

A

On the first interpretation, if some state of affairs is good from Jones’s point of view, that fact licenses Jones (though not anyone else) to assert simply, “That state of affairs is good,” and to mean thereby something which does not bear any essential stamp of relativization to a point of view.

On this interpretation, Jones will sometimes have occasion to say, correctly, “Smith acted rightly, but he certainly didn’t produce the best possible consequences.” To be sure, Jones will be justified in saying Smith didn’t produce the best possible consequences by the fact that the con-

sequences were not the best possible from his, *Jones's*, point of view. But that is, for Jones, the *correct* point of view when he is judging, not the rightness of Smith's act, but the value of the consequences Smith produces. In order to be able to assert "Smith acted rightly but failed to produce the best possible consequences," and in particular in order to be able to assert "Smith acted rightly," Jones must be able to assume Smith's point of view hypothetically. He must be able to make the judgment that, "From Smith's point of view, such and such consequences are best." Still, when it comes to judging the consequences themselves, independently of the question of what Smith ought to have done, it is Jones's own evaluative point of view that Jones is called upon to occupy. So when he says, "Smith acted rightly but produced inferior consequences," he is neither being wilfully paradoxical nor falling into some avoidable confusion.

It is tempting to try to eliminate Jones's paradoxical assertion by saying that Jones should appeal to his own evaluative point of view only when evaluating the consequences of his own acts. When he is evaluating the consequences of Smith's acts, he should take Smith's point of view; and so on. This will not do. The same state of affairs may be *both* a consequence of an act by Jones *and* a consequence of an act by Smith. (This may be true if Jones influences Smith, or if Jones and Smith act independently but their acts produce some joint effect.) In such a case, if Jones is required to take one point of view on the consequences of his own acts and another point of view on the consequences of Smith's acts, he may well find himself required to make incompatible evaluations of the same state of affairs.

If we cannot eliminate the paradox involved in Jones's assertion that Smith has acted rightly but produced inferior consequences, is this one of those paradoxes we must just learn to live with? No, I don't think we can live with it. Suppose Jones asks himself *why* Smith's act was right despite having inferior consequences. He can repeat to himself what he has already explicitly or implicitly noted, that the act had best consequences from Smith's point of view. But, from Jones's point of view, Smith's point of view is mistaken. Smith's evaluation of the consequences, considered not as a step in Smith's deciding what to do but *as an evaluation of the consequences*, is just wrong (Jones must believe). Smith's mistaken evaluation may explain why Smith thinks the act is right; and it might lead Jones to regard Smith as *excused* for acting wrongly. But Jones cannot explain his own view that Smith's act was *right* by relying

substantively on an evaluation he rejects. (Jones might try to sidestep this difficulty by saying that Smith's act was right because it produced "good consequences" *in the sense of* "the consequences Smith was supposed to produce." But that would be to admit openly that the notion of goodness was playing no genuine role in the justification of the claim that Smith acted rightly.) In sum, on the present interpretation of evaluator relativity, Jones's judgments of goodness cannot explain his judgments of rightness.

B

At more than one point in the preceding subsection, it would have been natural to suggest a new interpretation of evaluator relativity. Perhaps Jones's point of view should be limited, not to the evaluation of the consequences of Jones's acts (we have considered and rejected that possibility), but rather to the evaluation of states of affairs *considered as* consequences of Jones's acts. Some state of affairs may be both a consequence of an act of Jones and a consequence of an act of Smith; but even so, we can distinguish between considering it as a consequence of an act of Jones (in the course of deciding what Jones should do or should have done) and considering it as a consequence of an act of Smith (in the course of deciding what Smith should do or should have done).

Now, if Jones's point of view is relevant only to evaluating states of affairs *considered as* consequences of Jones's acts—if *even Jones* must not regard evaluations "from his point of view" as having any broader significance—then the notion of goodness functions only inside the context of choosing and judging acts. To say that the consequences of some act are "good from Jones's point of view" is to say *only* that they are the consequences Jones is required to produce. (In effect, we have reduplicated the suggestion at the end of the preceding subsection that Jones might say of Smith's act that it produced "good consequences" *in the sense of* "the consequences Smith is supposed to produce.") To say "these are the consequences Jones is required to produce" is not to give even the semblance of a reason, from Jones's point of view or any other, for such a requirement. In sum, on the present interpretation of evaluator relativity, the judgment that an act has good consequences from Jones's point of view, while it may still *entail* that the act is right for Jones, has no tendency at all to *explain* its rightness.

The point here, while essentially simple, is easy to lose hold of. Let me

try to forestall two possible confusions. First, I would admit that the claim “the act has good consequences from Jones’s point of view” might be thought to explain the rightness of the act *to the extent that* it calls attention to the fact that the consequences of the act are rated higher by the objective function assigned to Jones than are the consequences of any other available act. The important point, however, is that the reference to “goodness,” as it is presently being construed, cannot possibly function as a reason why Jones should have that objective function. Second, the point is not just that the present claim about “goodness” gives no reason why *Jones* should have that objective function, as opposed to someone else. The point is that it gives no reason for assigning that objective function to anyone at all, Jones included. It gives no reason why the assigned “objective” should *be* an objective, for anyone.

C

We need a new interpretation of evaluator relativity, and we need judgments of goodness-from-a-point-of-view to have two properties if they are to explain the judgments of rightness we want them to explain: On the one hand, they must be free-standing, in the sense that they must have significance beyond the immediate context of choosing and judging acts. That is what we learned from subsection *B*. On the other hand, what we learned from subsection *A* is that judgments of goodness-from-a-point-of-view must be essentially and ineradicably relative. It must not follow from the statement, “That state of affairs is good from Jones’s point of view,” that even Jones can assert simply, “That state of affairs is good.” He may utter the sentence, “That state of affairs is good,” but we must always understand an implicit reference to his point of view, not merely as part of his justification for what he says, but as part of what he *means* by what he says.

We have, of course, a model for just the sort of judgments we want—it is the judgments from different physical points of view in Sen’s Everest example. The judgments of beauty-from-a-point-of-view are free-standing. But they are also essentially relative to a point of view. The Everest analogy is excellent for showing what judgments of goodness-from-a-point-of-view must be like if they are to serve Sen’s purposes, even though it does little, if I am right, to show that judgments of goodness-from-a-point-of-view *can* be like this.

Suppose I now concede the possibility of judgments of goodness-from-

a-point-of-view on the Everest model. There is still a difficulty. Assume Jones has just done an act whose consequences were good from his own point of view but bad from Smith's. I ask Jones, "Why did you do that act?" He responds, "Because it had good consequences."

"Good consequences from your point of view, you mean?"

"Of course."

"You are aware the act had bad consequences from Smith's point of view?"

"Yes."

"Well then, why did you act to produce good consequences from your point of view instead of good consequences from Smith's point of view? That is, in choosing a point of view for evaluating the consequences of your act, why did you choose Jones's instead of Smith's?"

"Because the point of view you mincingly refer to as 'Jones's' is *mine!*"

"I don't think that's an answer. In a different context, of course, it would be. If by 'a judgment from your point of view' we meant something like 'a judgment embodying the belief it was most reasonable for you to have about the truth of some matter', then it would obviously be true in an important sense that you should act on *your* point of view. But on the present interpretation that is *not* what we mean by 'a judgment from your point of view'. Given what we do mean, I don't think it's at all obvious you should act on judgments of good from your point of view as opposed to Smith's or anyone else's. So I ask again, why did you act on your point of view?"

At this point Jones might say, "Because that's what I am *supposed* to do. The theory says each agent should maximize the good-from-his-point-of-view." If Jones says this, then he in effect concedes the point I am trying to make, which is that even on the present interpretation of evaluator relativity, our judgments of goodness do not account for our judgments of rightness. To be sure, they *figure in* an account of our judgments of rightness. But they do not account for them without leaving a very important gap. They give no explanation of why each agent should maximize the good from one point of view as opposed to another.

It might seem that there is an obvious answer to my criticism—it might seem that *of course* each agent should maximize the good as it appears from the position he occupies. To see why this answer is inadequate, we must expand on an exchange in my dialogue with Jones, and we must distinguish between "evaluatively occupying" a position and "empirically

occupying" it. I shall say that Jones "evaluatively occupies" a position if *in his role as an evaluator* he must give that position special prominence. Now, as we normally use the phrase "Jones's point of view," it is clear that Jones does evaluatively occupy his own point of view. We can talk of Jones's point of view even on a neutral good, and we mean something like Jones's best judgment of what that good is. It is clear that when Jones is called upon to make specific evaluations, he has no alternative but to give his own point of view in this sense special prominence. On the other hand, if we are dealing with an evaluator-relative theory and different points of view on the good in Sen's sense, it turns out that Jones does *not* evaluatively occupy his "own" point of view. Recall that all evaluations, even those made by Jones from his "own" point of view, are essentially relative. When Jones says, "Tommy's broken leg is a terrible thing," what he *means* is "From the point of view of someone who happens to be Tommy's father, Tommy's broken leg is a terrible thing." So far as the evaluative content of the judgment is concerned there is no more to it than that. But of course Jones can also say, with perfect truth, "From the point of view of someone who happens not to be Tommy's father, the broken leg is not so bad after all." Since every evaluative judgment Jones makes is essentially relativized to some point of view or other, there is nothing in Jones's *evaluations* to connect him to one point of view rather than another. In sum, Jones does not evaluatively occupy "Jones's" point of view. To be sure, Jones *empirically* occupies Jones's point of view. What we have been calling "Jones's point of view" is the point of view of Tommy's father, and Jones *is* Tommy's father. (Indeed, in whatever sense it is a necessary truth that I was born in my birthplace it is a necessary truth that Jones empirically occupies Jones's point of view.) Still, I see no reason why, in selecting an evaluative viewpoint as a basis for action, Jones should select the viewpoint from the position he occupies empirically even though he does *not* occupy it evaluatively. Perhaps he should. But to say that he should because that is the position he occupies is to say very much less than one might have supposed.

If we look again at the Everest example, with this difficulty in mind, we will discover a new disanalogy between the aesthetic case and the moral. If Jones and Smith are viewing Everest from different locations, and if we ask Jones, "Is it better that Everest should be beautiful from where you are than from where Smith is?", he would presumably say no.

He might add that he *likes* it better when Everest is beautiful from where he is, but that is another matter. On the other hand, suppose we ask Jones whether it is better that the state of the world should be good from his own point of view than from Smith's. What should he say? If he is cautious, he will say no; or perhaps, "That's a meaningless question; there is no nonrelative 'better' "; or even, "Yes—from my point of view, of course." But when Jones acts, he attempts to bring it about that the state of the world is the best possible from *his* point of view. It seems that by his action he is saying implicitly that it *is* better for the world to be good from his point of view than for it to be good from Smith's point of view. (Maybe not. Maybe he is only saying implicitly that he ought to try to maximize the goodness of the world from his point of view. But then we repeat, "Why, given that there are other points of view with precisely equal credentials?") The point is that *action* necessarily involves preferring one point of view to others in a way that aesthetic judgment does not.

To summarize the results of this Section, we have seen that however we interpret evaluator relativity, the proponent of an evaluator-relative theory is unable to account for his judgments of rightness in terms of his judgments of goodness. On the first interpretation, judgments of rightness and judgments of goodness are in open conflict. On the second interpretation, judgments of goodness are too insubstantial to account for anything. On the third interpretation, which is the most nearly adequate, there is a crucial unanswered question—why should each agent act on his own point of view instead of some other?

I am confident that Sen intends the third interpretation, and I admit that my argument against the third interpretation is weaker than my arguments against the other two. It might even seem that I am begging the question in favor of evaluator neutrality and against evaluator relativity (under the third interpretation) by assuming an unreasonably strong sense in which judgments of goodness must "account for" judgments of rightness. It is not always easy to tell when a philosophical argument is question-begging, but I think this one is not. Plainly, on an evaluator-neutral theory our judgments of goodness account for our judgments of rightness more completely than on an evaluator-relative theory. The question of which point of view an agent should act on does not arise. Perhaps we should not insist on that extra degree of completeness. But that there

is a difference here, on a matter which has been central to the historical intentions of consequentialists, cannot be denied.⁶

IV

Suppose that, undeterred by the argument of the previous Section, we embraced an evaluator-relative theory. There would be some unfortunate results which flow from the fact that the evaluator-relative theory, while it abandons neutrality, retains another feature of traditional consequentialism, what we might call its “compulsoriness.”

To both oversimplify and speak metaphorically, moral theories tend to come in two kinds. One kind of theory, based on rights and duties, is primarily concerned to carve out for each agent a bit of room for action, a private space, within which he can do as he likes so long as he does not overstep the bounds and invade the space of others. The other kind of theory, based on some conception of the good, is primarily concerned to tell each agent what all his actions should aim at. Good-based theories leave much less room for unconstrained choice. They are much more “compulsory.”

A theory of the first kind, concerned with giving agents room for action, can admit that within their private spheres agents may have different, even conflicting projects. Different “points of view” are perfectly acceptable. On the other hand, it remains open to the proponent of such a theory to regard as *ideal* a situation in which conflict disappears and all projects are in common. (What disappears is not conflict among values, but conflict among agents in their pursuit of values.)

Absence of conflict is a powerful and appealing ideal. It is accorded the status of a requirement, and not just an ideal, by an evaluator-neutral consequentialism. But it cannot be taken *even as an ideal* by an evaluator-relative theory like Sen’s. Sen combines the compulsoriness of consequentialism with divergent assigned points of view, and the result is that harmony among agents’ projects is positively excluded. Harmony would

6. Sen’s notion of evaluator relativity has something in common with Jesse Kalin’s suggestion that “A moral theory may be teleological in terms of merely formal values” (“In Defense of Egoism,” in *Morality and Rational Self-Interest*, ed. David Gauthier [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970], p. 78). Kalin’s idea is not exactly the same as Sen’s, but the argument I give in the text could be used to show that a theory recognizing only what Kalin calls “formal values” cannot be teleological in the traditional sense.

remain empirically possible if the assigned points of view were sufficiently empty—if, say, they assigned to each agent the task of satisfying his own desires. But what purports to be a point of view on the good ought to have some substance, and then divergent points of view require conflict. What that suggests is that if we embrace a theory with the compulsoriness of consequentialism, we have strong reason to embrace evaluator neutrality as well. In this Section we shall look in more detail at two ways in which the conflict required by evaluator relativity is manifested, and we shall make some comparisons with evaluator-neutral theories.

A

Evaluator-relative theories do not allow agents to give sincere moral advice.⁷ Suppose Jones is in a position to confer a benefit either on his own child or on Smith's. Jones asks Smith what he should do. On the theory that tells each agent to favor his own child, Jones should confer the benefit on his child. But on the same theory Smith ought to advise Jones to confer the benefit on *Smith's* child since giving that advice is the act of Smith's that will produce best consequences as *Smith* is required to evaluate them. The theory requires Smith to advise Jones to do something other than what (Smith knows) the theory requires Jones to do.

Two lines of defense of evaluator relativity suggest themselves. On the one hand, the defender might say that even an evaluator-neutral consequence-based theory sometimes requires insincere advice and that the problem, if there is one, is connected to the emphasis on consequences, rather than to evaluator relativity. For example, even on an evaluator-neutral theory, if you ask me for advice and I know you are going to do the opposite of what I advise, I may be required to advise you to do the act I believe to be wrong in order to bring it about that you do the act I believe to be right. Now, whether it is a bad thing that an evaluator-neutral theory should require insincere advice in the case just described, and if so just how bad a thing it is, are questions that would take us far afield. Fortunately, we can see without any divagation that there is an enormous difference between the implications of the evaluator-neutral theory and the evaluator-relative one. Under the evaluator-neutral theory, even "insincere" advice will always be aimed at leading the recipient of

7. This point has often been made as a criticism of ethical egoism. E.g., William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 19; Kalin, "In Defense of Egoism," pp. 80–84.

the advice to do the right act. The right act is the one that maximizes the value of the consequences. Since both giver and receiver of advice are required to evaluate consequences in the same way, the right act for the person advised is also the act with best consequences as evaluated by the adviser. Under the evaluator-relative theory, in contrast, the insincere (but required) advice will be aimed at leading the recipient of the advice to do what he should not.

The other line of defense of the evaluator-relative theory points out that the theory need not be *entirely* consequence-based. There may be special deontological constraints that require sincerity in giving advice (perhaps as part of a general deontological requirement of truth telling). About this line of defense I have two comments. First, it implicitly concedes that there is a significant disadvantage in evaluator relativity from the point of view of anyone who wants his theory to be entirely consequence-based. Second, it is unclear just how much consequence-based evaluation, even of an evaluator-relative sort, will be left after the imposition of enough deontological constraints to solve the present difficulty entirely. The difficulty affects much more than the giving of advice. My acts may influence yours in innumerable ways. On an evaluator-relative theory, *whenever* I am required to take into account the consequences of your acts as indirect consequences of mine, I am likely to have perverse incentives. I will want to influence you to produce the consequences which are best as I evaluate them. I will therefore often want to influence you to an act which will not produce the best consequences as you ought to evaluate them—which will, in other words, be the wrong act.⁸

B

A further problem with evaluator-relative theories is that they generate situations analogous to the prisoners' dilemma.⁹ Evaluator-neutral theories do not. Consider again the theory which instructs Jones and Smith each to give special weight to the welfare of his own child. Suppose Jones and Smith find themselves in the following position: Jones can either confer a benefit on his own child or confer a greater benefit on Smith's

8. One way of dealing with the problem of this subsection might be to stipulate that Smith should value directly Jones's acting rightly. This suggestion seems too gimmicky, and if taken seriously would lead to too great complexities, to be worth considering here.

9. Again, this point is a standard criticism of ethical egoism, since it is egoism that generates the classical prisoners' dilemma. See Frankena, *Ethics*, p. 19.

child; Smith can either confer a benefit on his own child or confer a greater benefit on Jones's child; Jones and Smith cannot make an effective agreement to "trade" benefits for each other's children, and neither of them can affect the way the other acts. In this situation, given appropriate further assumptions about the size of the benefits and the degree to which each father must favor his own child, the evaluator-relative theory will require Jones to benefit Jones's child and Smith to benefit Smith's child. The end result will be that *each child* is worse off than he would have been if both parents had followed an evaluator-neutral morality and each had conferred the greatest benefit he could on any child, regardless of its paternity. When both parents follow the evaluator-relative morality, neither achieves his goals *as defined by the evaluator-relative morality itself* as well as he would have if both had followed an evaluator-neutral morality.¹⁰

I have just described a case in which an evaluator-relative morality generates a prisoners' dilemma analogue; and I have noted that in this case, at least, an evaluator-neutral morality would have saved the day. There are other sorts of cases where it is often suggested that evaluator-neutral theories generate prisoners' dilemma analogues. It is a common argument against act-utilitarianism that it would require that everyone refuse to vote, or that everyone cheat on his taxes if he could get away with it, even though such behavior, if universal, would have disastrous consequences. Now, even if these arguments against act-utilitarianism were correct, they would not indicate a problem to which evaluator relativity would seem the natural solution. (We could impose a solution, in an evaluator-relative form, by altering the objective functions so that each agent regards as a significant good his own voting, or whatever. But that seems too *ad hoc* to be relevant.) In any event, the arguments against act-utilitarianism are not correct. It is possible that everyone should behave in such a way that each agent satisfies act-utilitarianism, *given the way the others behave*, and disastrous consequences result. But this is not yet an analogue of the prisoners' dilemma. In the prisoners' dilemma, each agent is required (by self-interest) to behave in a particular way *regardless of how the others behave*, and the results are unsatisfactory for all concerned. With regard to act-utilitarianism, I have shown else-

10. For a full and illuminating discussion, see Derek Parfit, "Prudence, Morality, and the Prisoner's Dilemma," *Proceedings of the British Academy for 1979* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981).

where that it is not possible to describe a situation where every agent is required by act-utilitarianism to behave in a certain way regardless of how others behave and where disastrous consequences result from all agents' behaving as they are required to. Indeed, whatever general pattern of behavior produces the *best* possible consequences, it is always true that in that pattern every agent satisfies act-utilitarianism, given the way the others are behaving. Evaluator-neutral theories, for which act-utilitarianism is in the present context an adequate representative, cannot give rise to prisoners' dilemmas.¹¹

V

The preceding Section makes it natural to propose the following argument: The good (or the good from a point of view) is something one is morally required to promote. If it is implausible to suppose that different agents are morally required to promote conflicting goods, then it is implausible to suppose that there *are* conflicting goods (in the relevant sense). It *is* implausible to suppose that different agents are morally required to promote conflicting goods. (That is not to deny, of course, that it may be morally appropriate for different agents to focus their attention and energies on different persons and projects; but that is a much weaker claim.) Therefore, it is implausible to suppose that there are conflicting goods of the sort Sen posits.

This argument actually highlights one of the unsatisfying features of the present discussion. Sen suggests that perhaps our notion of the good should be evaluator relative. I respond by pointing out the difficulty of understanding Sen's suggestion and also by pointing out various respects in which an evaluator-relative good would be unable to play the role in moral theory that an evaluator-neutral good has traditionally played. A third party might well break in: "Enough of this indirection. Instead of arguing about what the good might look like, tell us what it does look like, and give us some arguments. Then we will know whether it is neutral or relative." The point is that any consequentialist, whether neutralist or

11. Donald H. Regan, *Utilitarianism and Co-operation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 54–65. Elsewhere in the same book I describe a theory, called cooperative utilitarianism, which is superior to act-utilitarianism in respects relevant to the present discussion; but even to describe precisely the advantages of cooperative utilitarianism would require a digression of unjustifiable length.

relativist, ought ideally to produce some account of why the things he says are good are so. Notoriously, no one has yet done an entirely satisfactory job at this. But if someone could produce an adequate substantive account of the good, then it seems the issues dealt with in this essay would resolve themselves.

That observation leads to another. If we ask what is appealing in the idea of evaluator relativity, aside from the logical interest of a new structural possibility, the answer may be this: one may be inclined to a relativist view by the suspicion that any argument that could explain why there is any objective value would *at the same time* explain why there are different, equally objective, evaluative points of view. I do not share this suspicion, and I shall not argue against it here; but it provides yet another reason for admitting that the arguments for neutralism in this essay are not ultimately satisfying by themselves. On behalf of either neutralism or relativism, some more direct demonstration would be in order.

VI

I lean toward consequentialism in ethics, and I have discussed evaluator relativity primarily from the consequentialist's point of view. However, Sen's evaluator-relative theories are designed to capture in a consequence-based format essentially deontological intuitions. Would a possessor of basically deontological intuitions find Sen's new idea more attractive than I do? Probably not, for two reasons.

First, even where an evaluator-relative theory generates the right prescriptions for action, it could be thought to misdescribe the reasons.¹² The idea that parents should promote the interests of their own children is very common. But not many people who promote the interests of their own children would say they did so because a benefit for their child was a *greater good* than the same benefit for someone else's child. They would not even say it was a greater good from some point of view peculiar to (but appropriate to) themselves. They would admit that a benefit for their neighbor's child was every bit as good as a benefit for their own, and they would then benefit their own if they could, feeling perfectly entitled morally to this behavior. (It is perhaps worth mentioning that a *doer*-relative but evaluator-neutral theory would not capture the common in-

12. I believe I owe this point to Derek Parfit.

tuition either. Ordinary people who favor their own children are not indifferent between conferring a benefit on their own child and bringing it about that a neighbor confers a comparable benefit on his child.)

Second, nothing one could reasonably call a consequence-based theory is going to capture all the distinctions that matter to the deontological mind. Deontologists are too concerned about the way consequences are produced. In terms of the consequences, there is no difference between Jones's rescuing his son instead of Smith's son from a burning building and Jones's persuading the fire brigade (if they alone can effect a rescue) to do the same. But many people would see a difference here. Similarly, many people would believe that even if I need not forgo a large benefit in order to stop you from twisting a child's arm, still I may not permit you to twist the child's arm *in order to* produce an identical benefit.¹³ The difference, whatever it is, is not in the consequences.

13. See Thomas Nagel, "The Limits of Objectivity," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* I, ed. Sterling McMurrin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 130.

I have learned much about the topic of this essay from conversations with Amartya Sen and from the other members of a discussion group in Oxford to whom he and I read earlier versions of our papers.