EEEP Week 4: Consequentialism, utilitarianism, and the place of economic analysis

"If all biological resources have 'rights' to existence then presumably it is not possible to choose between the extinction of one set of them rather than another. All losses become morally wrong. But biodiversity loss proceeds apace … [It] is essential to choose between different areas of policy intervention—not everything can be saved. … If not everything can be saved then a *ranking* procedure is required. And such a ranking is not consistent with arguing that everything has a right to exist." (David Pearce and Dominic Moran, cited in John O'Neill, Andrew Holland, and Andrew Light, *Environmental Values*, 36)

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the advantages of consequentialist reasoning over environmental values?
2. How relevant are judgements of costs and benefits in circumstances where it is argued that we cannot "put a price" on environmental goods?
3. Are there any moral limits that should be placed on cost-benefit analysis?
4. What implications would follow the inclusion of animals in our consequentialist calculus—and are these implications desirable?

Should we protect the environment, regardless of the cost?

Consequences have a bad rap in moral philosophy. As O'Neill, Holland, and Light argue, to determine the rightness of an act according to its consequences is both too lenient and demanding all at once. It is easy to show that in many cases, consequentialism would require us to do things that many would think are wrong in principle. For instance, it is difficult to deny that we would benefit more by developing wilderness than leaving it untouched; but a core principle in environmentalism is that wilderness is invaluable. On the other hand, consequentialism may seem impossibly demanding. The need to cull elephants (or any number of other species) because their dwindling habitats have put them in conflict with other species may ask too much of the people who have devoted their lives to elephant protection. Why would anyone hold such a simplistic and duplicitous principle when, in theory, virtuous citizens could consult their historical obligations, moral philosophy, and science, to arrive at all-things-considered judgements (as O'Neill et al. hope)?

One potential reason is that, to risk a cliché, we can't start from where we would like to be, but only from where we are. And the world we are in is one of widespread uncertainty and ignorance, with significant political conflict over the burdens of environmental protection. Under these circumstances, the appeal of consequentialism is not that it provides moral certainty, or that it beats the morally rigorous ideals of Kantians and Aristotelians. The appeal instead is that it is practicable. It views ordinary individuals not as people who must (improbably) be convinced—or bludgeoned—to do the right thing; but as people who can, and must, be brought into mutually acceptable compromises. These compromises cannot be premised on the *right*, because the right abjures compromise. Compromises, instead, must rest on the *good*, i.e., consequences that everyone can live with.

While there are many consequentialist ethics, its dominant ethic is utilitarianism, the claim that the best consequences are those that maximise (some form of) welfare. Utilitarianism, indeed, supplies a universal decision-making method, cost-benefit analysis, which alongside the "incentives matter" framework of economics, is the bedrock of all democratic governments. Decisions are right (that is, best) just insofar as the maximise net benefits (benefits-costs). Compromise, then, is "priced in". The environment can*not* be protected regardless of the cost, just as no human life, or liberty, can be held as sacred, regardless of what this demands from others. We see this at work in the current lockdown: no government is (presently) making decisions based on rights, but on the calculus. This *is* brutal: we are losing many things we would otherwise cherish; and asking things of people they have good reason to reject. But, the utilitarian would argue: what's the alternative? And how else could we justify such difficult decisions, other than to say that they make everyone better off, in the long run?