

# It doesn't add up: The Organicity Charge against CBA

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## Abstract

This paper defends cost-benefit analysis (CBA) and utilitarianism against the organicity charge. The organicity charge says that, since moral value is organic rather than atomistic, CBA as a utilitarian, atomistic procedure has to be rejected as the proper means to approach moral decisions. However, this rejection, it is argued, rests on a mischaracterisation of CBA and utilitarianism for it imputes naïve atomism about value to the two. This paper argues that more sophisticated versions of utilitarianism and CBA do not assume naïve atomism about moral value and, hence, are the proper means to approach moral decisions.

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## Introduction

In this paper I investigate the ethical significance of cost-benefit analysis (CBA), viz. whether or not CBA can be applied to moral decision-making. More specifically, I discuss and eventually defend CBA against what I call the organicity charge. The exemplary target in this paper is Robert Audi's version of the organicity charge in his paper 'The Ethical Significance of Cost-Benefit Analysis'

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<sup>1</sup> In a nutshell, Audi argues that, since moral value is organic rather than atomistic, CBA as a utilitarian, atomistic procedure cannot be the proper means to approach moral decisions. Let me stress, however, that Audi doesn't reject CBA altogether. Instead he opts for an intuitionist version of CBA that tracks the organicity of moral value. His claim, therefore, is that CBA 'must not be dismissed out of hand as a *mere tool of utilitarianism* [...]'.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I reject Audi's conclusion and argue that exactly *as a tool of utilitarianism*, CBA is a proper means to approach moral decisions. I reject his conclusion because I think that his argument fails to track important properties of its target. I argue that his argument rests on a mischaracterisation of CBA and utilitarianism. More specifically, I argue that Audi ascribes a naïve version of atomism about moral value to proponents of CBA, i.e. mostly utilitarians. As naïve atomism I understand views, which do not allow for organic moral values. To reveal the mischaracterisation, I show that utilitarians or CBA are not necessarily, and indeed not typically, committed to naïve atomism. Therefore, I conclude that believing that moral value is organic does not yield the inference that CBA is an improper analysis of moral decisions. The organicity charge can be paraphrased as follows:

(P1) Cost-benefit analysis is applicable *iff* its object can be decomposed in its single parts (atomism).

(P2) Moral value cannot be decomposed in its single parts (organicity).

(C) Cost-benefit analysis is not applicable to moral value.

The contents of this paper roughly follow the structure of the organicity charge. Thus, in **Section I**, I explicate (P1) and briefly delineate the naïve moral atomism that seems to underlie the argument. I develop the so-called *simple*

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<sup>1</sup> Audi, 'The Ethical Significance of Cost-Benefit Analysis'

<sup>2</sup> Audi, 'The Ethical Significance of Cost-Benefit Analysis' 19, my italics.

*model* of moral assessment, which exemplifies moral atomism and therefore serves as a target of Audi's attack.

In **Section II**, I discuss (P2) regarding the organicity of moral value. First, I outline why Audi thinks that moral value is organic and why organic moral value poses limitations to the use of CBA in its *simple model* version. I then proceed to show that utilitarian reasoning, which is fundamental for CBA, can indeed account for organic moral values. On these grounds I conclude that Audi's argument cannot successfully dismiss the application of CBA to moral decisions.

## **I. CBA, Atomism and the Simple Model**

In this section I explicate (P1) of Audi's organicity argument against CBA. This first premise says that CBA is applicable *if and only if* its object can be decomposed into its single constituting parts. The second part of this bi-conditional is called atomism about value. In its naïve form, atomism entails a conjunction of two further assumptions about moral value: *additivity* and *independence* of moral value<sup>3</sup>. Hence, naïve atomism is the view that objects of evaluation can be decomposed in their individual parts, such that these individual parts can be assessed independently of another to then additively obtain the moral value of the object from these individual assessments.

Given these assumptions, CBA assesses the moral value of an act according to the so-called *simple model*<sup>4</sup>. The simple model requires us, first, to decompose the moral value of an act in its individual right or wrong-making factors (atomism), second, to assess every right/wrong-making factor independently of context (independence) and, finally, to obtain the overall moral value of the act by adding up the individual contributions of these right/wrong-making factors

<sup>3</sup> See Fletcher, *Brown and Moore's Value Invariabilism Vs. Dancy's Variabilism* 162.

<sup>4</sup> See Robinson *Exploring Alternatives to the Simple Model: Is There an Atomistic Option?*

(additivity). Audi's organicity charge aims at rejecting both, additivity and independence. Thus, the simple model is the proper way to characterise the target of Audi's charge – a naïve atomistic version of CBA.

Before showing, however, how Audi refutes additivity and independence let me exemplify how the simple model applies to moral decision-making. The standard cost-benefit procedure requires us to, first, calculate, i.e. quantify, all costs and benefits of each alternative course of action; second, weigh these costs and benefits against another; and, third, choose the particular action, which yields at least as much benefit as any other alternative. In moral decision-making costs and benefits must be seen as factors that represent a negative, or respectively positive, contribution to the overall moral value of an act. In this sense, costs are factors that make an act less right – they are wrong-making. The same holds *vice versa* for benefits – they are right-making.

Thus, performing CBA in this moral context requires weighing the effects of all the relevant factors and choosing the action, which has at least as great a moral value than any alternative. For example, consider the character Wee-Bey from the HBO series 'The Wire'. Wee-Bey is a kingpin in Baltimore's drug business. Imagine now that Wee-Bey faces the decision whether or not he should snitch on his co-workers to the police. The fact that his snitching will eventually save lives and reduce violence, counts as a right-making factor for him in favour of snitching. However, there are also wrong-making factors. So, Wee-Bey might believe that he has friendship duties towards his co-workers and friends, which forbid snitching on friends. Thus, not complying with his friendship duties counts as a wrong-making factor against snitching. So according to simple-model CBA, Wee-Bey has to determine the overall moral value of snitching by decomposing the act into its individual moral factors: 'saves lives and reduces violence' and 'violates friendship duties'. He then has to evaluate the moral value of each of these factors, i.e. determine their weights, and add these weights, which then yields the overall moral value of snitching. Thus, his object of evaluation is the conjunction: 'saves lives and reduces violence' +

‘violates friendship duties’.

On first sight, simple-model CBA seems to be a very intuitive way of going about moral decisions. This is to say that weighing the costs and benefits of an act seems to be a very common approach to moral decision-making. However, in the following section it will become obvious, as Audi convincingly points out, that the weighing of right- and wrong-making factors, according to the simple model faces serious limitations.

## **II. Audi’s Holistic Charge Against the Simple Model**

Having specified naïve atomistic simple-model CBA as the target of Audi’s organicity charge against CBA, let me now expand on his charge in more detail and discuss its plausibility. To repeat, the bite of the organicity charge is exactly that (P2) moral value cannot atomistically be decomposed in its single parts, because it is organic. Therefore, (C) simple-model CBA cannot be applied to moral decisions.

In this section I, first, go into detail of what it means that moral value is organic rather than atomistic. In fact, I agree with Audi on this point and concede that moral value is organic. Second, however, I evaluate whether the organicity of moral value indeed imposes insurmountable limits to CBA and conclude that it doesn’t. To do so, I show that utilitarian reasoning cannot only account for organic moral value, but does so regularly. On these grounds, I finally conclude that Audi’s attack against CBA rests on a mischaracterisation of CBA and utilitarianism. That is, the naïve atomism characterisation of CBA is improper and his first premise (P1) must be rejected.

### **a. The organicity of moral value**

To begin, let me make more explicit Audi’s claim concerning the organicity of moral value. To show that moral value is organic rather than atomic, Audi

rejects both, *additivity* and *independence* of moral value, although he explicitly argues only against independence. In fact, rejecting independence is sufficient to reject additivity because additivity cannot hold without independence. If wrong/right-making factors are, in general, dependent, then additivity cannot hold. For example, imagine that factors A and B determine the overall value of an act, but are either dependent on another or dependent on some contextual factor C. Now, the function  $V(A,B,C)$  governing the evaluation of the act cannot be additive, but must represent some other kind of relation among these factors, e.g. a multiplicative or exponential relation. Hence, non-independence implies non-additivity.

So, regarding *independence*, Audi argues that the overall assessment of an act does not supervene simply on its individual factors, but rather that it supervenes on the relation between these individual factors<sup>5</sup>. According to Audi this means that individual factors are not only wrong/right-making in themselves, but, if put in relation to another, they are jointly, yet not necessarily additively, wrong/right-making. More specifically, whether or not an additional, contextual factor is present might entirely change the contribution of the other factors. I understand this as the claim that factors do not operate independently (of context) and hence as a rejection of independence.

Given his rejection of atomism, Audi, must be seen as a holist about moral value. Roughly speaking, holism is the view to say that moral value is organic, viz. that it is a complex whole (e.g. Moore's *principle of organic unities*<sup>6</sup>). This view entails that the moral value of an act is *not* necessarily equal to the sum of the individual values of its constituting factors, as atomism assumes. In other words, the moral value of an act is *not* an additive function of its constituting and independently operating right/wrong-making factors.

Note the crucial difference between holistic and atomistic assessments of acts. Under holism the overall moral assessment of an act might as well differ

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<sup>5</sup> Audi 'The Ethical Significance of Cost-Benefit Analysis' 16

<sup>6</sup> Moore *Principia Ethica* 184.

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from an atomistic assessment of the same act. That is, depending on the specific relation between the right/wrong-making factors, an act might be more or less right than its atomistic evaluation would assume. In fact, it might even be the case that our holistic assessment of an act says that it is wrong, although we would have to concede that all the atomistic factors of the act are right-making.

To illustrate this latter case, consider Audi's example of the unrepentant convict. The decision in question is whether or not we should grant cable TV to an unrepentant convict. Imagine that there are two duties, which compel us to grant him cable TV. First, our duty of beneficence would give reason to do so. Or in other words, doing good to the convict, would be a right-making factor of the act. On the other hand, our duty of justice also gives good reason to give cable TV to the convict, since want to treat him equally to other people. In other words, treating him fair is a right-making factor of the act. Yet, according to Audi, this situation would create a problem to CBA and utilitarianism, since all the relevant factors are – according to the simple model –right-making and cannot account for that obviously it doesn't seem right to give cable TV to the unrepentant convict. Instead, he claims, we have to assess this situation holistically by emphasising the unfitting relation between the convict's good treatment and his unrepentant disposition, which utilitarians allegedly fail to see. We should treat the overall value of the act as a *non*-additive function of *not* independently operating factors.

However, I do not find this example very convincing. It doesn't show that CBA or utilitarians would get the evaluation of the act wrong. Audi's point with this example seems to be that utilitarianism wouldn't properly track all the relevant factors to assess the situation correctly. Against this allegation, however, I want to defend utilitarianism and CBA. In what follows I show that utilitarians or CBA are not necessarily, and indeed not typically, committed to naïve atomism. In fact, imputing naïve atomism amounts to the allegation that utilitarians commit a simple category mistake by misperceiving the proper object of evaluation – which they don't. Moreover, assuming this category mistake for

utilitarianism, Audi's charge seems to imply that utilitarian assessment is insensitive to contextual/agent-relative factors – which it isn't. In the unrepentant convict example, the proper object, which atomistic utilitarian reasoning fails to see according to Audi, is that someone with an evil disposition (unrepentance) and who has failed to meet his moral duties in the past (convict) enjoys our duties of benevolence and justice, where unrepentance and being a convict are contextual/agent-relative factors.

### **b. The proper object of analysis**

Let me clarify why Audi's claims are mischaracterisations of utilitarianism by way of two simple examples. These examples aim at showing that the organicity of moral value doesn't impose insurmountable limits to utilitarianism, if we don't mischaracterise utilitarianism as committed to naïve atomism and, thus, as misperceiving the proper object of analysis.

First, consider a pair of shoes. We can assess the value of this pair in two different ways. First, we could assign atomistically a value to the left shoe, in the sense that we measure its utility for a person, and then add the utility value of the right shoe to obtain their joint value. However, it seems obvious that the resulting utility value is smaller than the utility value of the pair of shoes taken as a whole. Thus, second, we could assess the utility value of the pair of shoes for a person holistically. In fact, I think that the second, holistic way of measuring the value of a pair of shoes is the correct way. That is, we should opt for the holistic version not because the atomistic version yields the intuitively wrong result, but rather because the correct way of assessing the value of an object is to consider the *proper object* of evaluation.

Let me explain what I mean by this. In the present case one might think of four different objects of evaluation. The first two are simply the individual shoes, the object 'left shoe' and the object 'right shoe'. The third object of evaluation is the conjunction of the two individual shoes, namely 'left shoe' +

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‘right shoe’. The problem I see here with this conjunction of the objects ‘left shoe’ + ‘right shoe’ is that it is an inadequate unit of analysis. What then is the proper object of evaluation in the shoe case? It is the fourth object of evaluation, namely the object ‘pair of shoes’, which is simply a different object; different from the conjunction ‘left shoe’ + ‘right shoe’. So far, this seems to concur the holist’s point that organicity is important in assessing the utility of a pair of shoes *simpliciter*. Indeed, I agree on this point. However, what I wish to point out is that this does nothing in the way of undermining a utilitarian assessment of the utility of a pair of shoes. There is simply no reason why the utilitarian would believe that the utility of the object ‘pair of shoes’ is simply the aggregate of the individual utilities of two quite different objects, viz. ‘right shoe’ and ‘left shoe’. It seems sensible to hold that the object ‘pair of shoes’ is an object of its own kind whose value is not atomistically reducible to the individual values of its constituents.

Having spotted this basic misunderstanding, which follows from the assumption that utilitarians are committed to naïve atomism, let me now apply a similar line of reasoning to a case in the moral domain. With the following example I do not only want to discuss the issue regarding the proper object of analysis; I also want to discuss the implication that CBA and utilitarianism cannot address contextual or agent relative factors, e.g. an unrepentant disposition.

Imagine we have to morally assess my act of throwing a snowball at a street sign. Taken as such, this act has no moral value at all, i.e. it is neither right nor wrong. I might throw the snowball, or not – it doesn’t matter morally. However, consider that unforeseeable consequences occur and a car drives by exactly in the second I throw the snowball. Some snow hits the windscreen, the driver loses control of the car and crashes into a group of bystanders, which are seriously harmed. Now apply an atomistic evaluation as suggested by the simple model to the case. The proper simple model assessment would be an additive function of the moral value of each individual consequence and their respective foreseeability. Hence, the object of analysis is the conjunction ‘bad

consequences' + '(un)foreseeability'.

Now, there are two cases. First, if these consequences were foreseeable, then the proper atomistic evaluation would trade on the conjunction of the objects, or factors for that matter, 'bad consequences' + 'foreseeability'. In this case, throwing the snowball would be wrong. Second, if the consequences were unforeseeable, then the object of evaluation would be the conjunction of the factors 'bad consequences' + 'unforeseeability'. In this latter case, throwing the snowball would be (at least) not as wrong as in the first case where consequences were foreseeable.

So, it seems as if whether the consequences are foreseeable or unforeseeable changes our overall assessment of the act. However, if the simple model applies, then the foreseeability of consequences as a wrong-making factor would have a direct effect on the moral assessment of throwing a snowball. In the other case, where the consequences are unforeseeable, their mere unforeseeability would count as a right-making factor, since the overall assessment of throwing a snowball changes such that the act is less wrong.

However, it would amount to a mischaracterisation to claim that utilitarians must assess the overall moral value in the snowball case according to the simple model. The simple additive conjunction 'bad consequences' + 'foreseeability' does not seem to be the proper object of evaluation. Rather the proper object is 'bad consequences given foreseeability'. More specifically, the evaluation of the act throwing a snowball is *consequential* upon whether or not the bad consequences are foreseeable. However, this consequential relationship cannot be properly represented by an additive function. Although I want to remain uncommitted in this respect, a multiplicative conjunction is possibly a better representation of the relationship between the factors 'bad consequences' and '(un)foreseeability'. It seems implausible to believe that utilitarians would account for the foreseeability of consequences additively, rather than in any other form that represents the consequential relationship among the factors. In fact, discounting consequences for subjective beliefs about their possibility or prob-

ability is a central feature of consequentialist theories, and *a fortiori* utilitarianism and CBA. Hence, utilitarianism does not commit the category mistake of misperceiving the proper object of evaluation, when possibilities and probabilities of events matter for the moral assessments of acts.

### **c. Audi's mischaracterisation of CBA and utilitarianism**

With this in mind, let me now show Audi's mischaracterisation of CBA and utilitarianism in a more general framework. More specifically, I want to advance, in opposition to Audi, the claim that utilitarian reasoning is not insensitive to contextual/agent-relative factors – one of which is foreseeability. For this purpose, let me introduce the distinction between *direct* and *indirect* factors. Direct factors have a *direct* effect on the overall assessment of the moral value of an act. On the other hand, indirect factors have an *indirect* effect on the value of an act. For example, the factor foreseeability does not directly affect the rightness or wrongness of an act. It does so via the bad consequences and, hence, is an indirect factor. Therefore, I claim, utilitarianism and CBA are sensitive to indirect contextual factors. I understand *sensitivity to indirect contextual factors* broad enough to comprise both agent-relative factors, such as unrepentance or past moral failure, and agent-independent factors, such as foreseeability or probabilities. However, Audi seems to oversee this *sensitivity to indirect contextual factors* rather uncharitably in his charge against CBA. In my view, claiming that utilitarianism and CBA are insensitive to indirect contextual factors is a mischaracterisation of utilitarian thought. In other words, it is not the case that CBA applies *iff* we can apply the simple model and, thus, (P1) in Audi's organicity charge must be rejected.

Indeed, many utilitarian philosophers either dismiss atomism and especially additivity<sup>7</sup> or take the charges against their purported atomism serious and develop, e.g., desert-sensitive utilitarian theories<sup>8</sup>. In particular desert-sensitive

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<sup>7</sup> e.g. Kagan *The Additive Fallacy*.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Arrhenius textitDesert as Fit: An Axiomatic Analysis, Feldman Adjusting Utility for

theories seem to me promising strategies to come to grips with problems like the unrepentant convict. Thus, Audi's unrepentant convict does not pose a problem for utilitarianism and CBA. It seems all the way possible to account for our intuition that it is wrong to provide cable TV to the unrepentant convict by means of discounting our duties of beneficence and justice by his desert. Here desert is an indirect factor, which operates through the direct factors benevolence and justice. Both, as direct factors, contribute additively to the moral value of the act. However, there is a game-changer: the indirect factor of desert. To resolve the holistic puzzle in the unrepentant convict case, conceive of desert as to take two different realisations, which come in degrees. First, what one deserves trades on the degree to which an agent has met his moral requirements in the past. So for example, malicious criminal acts reduce one's desert. Second, what one deserves also depends on the agent's dispositions. For example, people's bad intentions reduce their desert. It is obvious, that a malicious and unrepentant convict did not meet his moral requirements to some degree, which has a considerable impact on our sense of fairness towards the convict. In this sense desert is an indirect factor, which affects the strength of the factor fairness. In the same vein, the convict's unrepentance, viz. his disposition has an indirect effect on our overall willingness to grant him cable TV via the factor beneficence.

To wrap this section up, not only does Audi mischaracterise utilitarianism by alleging that it – in principle – wouldn't track all the relevant factors in moral decisions. Also, his treatment of the unrepentant convict case doesn't track exactly what is at stake in the decision. His only contribution is to say that there is more to the situation than merely the two factors benevolence and justice. What utilitarianism – in its more sophisticated versions – can offer is an exact treatment of why benevolence and justice are no unconditionally right-making

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Justice: A Consequentialist Reply to the Objection from Justice, Kagan textitThe Geometry of Desert.

factors.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this paper on Audi's organicity charge against CBA and utilitarianism, let me briefly summarise my main findings. Recall Audi's organicity argument: First, Audi claims that CBA, and hence utilitarianism, is applicable *if and only if* its object can be evaluated by the atomistic *simple model*, which presupposes *additivity* and *independence* of the wrong/right-making factors of the object. Second, he argues quite convincingly that moral value is not atomistic but rather *organic*. Third, he concludes that *simple-model* CBA is not applicable to moral value and moral decisions.

To rebut his organicity charge I have argued that the *simple model*, which Audi assumes to underlie utilitarianism and CBA, is a mischaracterisation of actual and more sophisticated versions of utilitarianism and CBA. I have shown that utilitarianism and CBA do not fail to assess moral acts as complex wholes. In fact, both can account for organic moral values, that is, utilitarianism and CBA need not commit to *additivity* and *independence* of moral value.

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