The Alienation Problem for Consequentialism and a Possible Solution

In our ever day lives, we tend to live and act in such a way as to express value in our personal projects and relationships such that separation from these projects and relationships is a considerable loss. We might even think to ourselves that if we are entirely devoid of these personal projects and relationships that our lives may no longer be *ours* in the sense that we would be lacking all meaningful autonomy. How then, do we address moral theories that require us to alienate ourselves from our personal projects and relationships and could we ever find a moral theory that demands complete alienation acceptable? This is what I understand to be the problem of alienation for any moral theory, but in this paper I wish to specifically develop the issue for consequentialists moral theories to which I believe are the most demonstrative.

In both "A critique of utilitarianism" and "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality", Bernard Williams and Peter Railton, respectively, argue that traditional consequentialist moral theories entail two distinct forms of alienation. In this essay I explore these two types of alienation, explain in more detail why alienation might be undesirable, and show that together they form what I call the Alienation Problem for consequentialist theories. Finally, I present a possible solution to the Alienation Problem by shifting the focus of ethical inquiry away from a theory of moral action and instead to a theory of well-being, that is to say a non-consequentialist moral theory.

Bernard Williams and Alienation from Personal Projects

As explored in the introduction, our conception of ourselves as individuals seems to require a set of fundamental projects or commitments not entirely contingent upon the desires of others or state of affairs in the world, which I understand as the idea of autonomy. Intimately connected to the idea of autonomy is William's conception of integrity, which is one sense a

rejection of negative responsibility but also an assertion that what one ought to do is not solely dependent on the input of other's projects, desires, convictions, actions, etc. In other words, if we reject our integrity then we alienate ourselves from our actions and the source of our actions in our convictions. In his Critique, Bernard Williams describes how consequentialist moral theories attack our integrity and require us to abandon our autonomy and therefore alienate us in a real sense from our personal projects.

Consequentialist moral theories are by definition solely concerned with the consequences of actions and the state of affairs in the world. That is, *only* the connections between the consequences of my actions and the state of affairs produced, not the different connections between my actions and their consequences, are taken into account. This is what Williams describes as the equality of all casual connections for which it makes no casual difference through which agent the given state of affairs was produced by. Because what matters is what state of affairs the world contains, which is only affected by the outcome of actions of agents, which in turn are not distinguishable through casual connection, then it follows that *which particular agent* that produces the outcome is not part of the consequentialist moral picture. It naturally follows from the above that consequentialism necessitates negative responsibility, or as William's states "that if I am ever responsible for anything, then I must be just as much responsible for things that I allow or fail to prevent, as I am for things that I myself, in the more everyday restricted sense, bring about."

From negative responsibility it seems that traditional consequentialism must result in alienation from one's own projects. If I am responsible for everything that I fail to prevent, then anything wrong being conducted by anybody is something that I must concern myself with if I am to truly act morally. My own desires, projects, and concerns are just single instantiations

which are easily out-balanced, so to speak, by the desires, projects, and concerns of others. The course of action I ought to take at any moment is now a function determined almost entirely external to me. I am no longer at all autonomous. That is to say, I am alienated from my closest projects and commitments in such a way as to not resemble an individual at all.

What is not so clear is that *every* form of consequentialism must entail such a strong doctrine of negative responsibility. For example, it seems as if some forms of rule-consequentialism could easily avoid the negative responsibility conclusion. Under some rule-consequentialist moral theory, I am only morally responsible for generally following the rules-of-thumb described in the moral theory. For any given moral scenario, then, I am only responsible for following my rules-of-thumb. That is, I am not responsible for anything that is not described by the rules-of-thumb and therefore there appears to be no necessary doctrine of negative responsibility. At the same time, the very same rule-consequentialism might be subject to William's alienation conclusion through a separate route. Because the rules-of-thumb are derived from what is thought to achieve X state of affairs which are once again not casually linked to agents, what I ought to do is still in an indirect way almost entirely dependent on the attitudes and projects of others that are generally thought to produce X state of affairs. In order for a consequentialist theory to escape alienating individuals from their projects, it has to do more than simply eliminate negative responsibility. Rather, it would have to factor in relationships between actions produced by each individual and each individual's personal projects which is not a necessary component of any rule-consequentialist theory. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that alienation from one's ground projects is a serious potential issue for any consequentialist theory and a definite problem for those of the more traditional variety. Additionally, even if a consequentialist theory is capable of avoiding the issue of project

alienation (as Railton believes his sophisticated consequential theory does), inter-relational alienation might still loom.

Peter Railton and Alienation from Personal Relationships

Fundamental to our practical conception of value is the intimate relationships that we hold with those closest to us. In his essay "Alienation, consequentialism, and the demands of morality," Peter Railton describes a kind of alienation between us and other persons intimate to us produced by strict adherence to a consequentialist moral theory. But what does Railton mean when he says alienation from others, or what I call alienation from personal relationships? We mean to talk about the rough sense of distance or separation from a relationship that we value, whereby diminishing this relationship results in a loss of value. We can make an important distinction here regarding all claims about alienation, namely that they presuppose an established system of value where separation from the thing being valued can be (but is not necessarily) undesirable. This is discussed more fully in the next section regarding the extent of the undesirability of alienation.

What needs to be filled in, then, is how consequentialism leads to this type of inter-personal alienation. The source of the alienation here is how consequentialism requires us to take other persons into account. If the only way in which we can justify our actions and attitudes towards those closest to us is by appealing to ultimate principles outside of the relationship in itself, then we are alienated. That is, we need a sense in which we can justify our behavior in a close relationship from a personal point of view in which the relationship on its own grants moral reason—something not provided in traditional consequentialist theories. It's important to note here that the relationship need not be good in itself, that is to say an absolute

good. The relationship may only be good for those involved, for example, and still be capable of granting non-alienating moral reasons. In order for a moral theory to avoid personal alienation it must, according to Railton, allow for more than just a set of moral obligations in which personal considerations are recognized solely for their function as moral determinants. And this seems rather plausible, for if we want a moral theory that allows for moral reasons for personal relationships outside of being solely impersonal moral determinants—that is to say, a non-alienating moral theory—then we cannot possibly limit all personal relationship as solely considerations to impersonal moral obligations.

Railton attempts to navigate the issue by introducing a pluralist theory of value and a more detailed consequentialist theory that he calls sophisticated consequentialism. Railton defines the term: "a sophisticated consequentialist is someone who has a standing commitment to leading an objectively consequentialist life, but who need not set special stock in any particular form of decision making," where a form of decision making is understood as the methodology from a moral theory for justifying a moral action in a specific instance. For example, if we take it that the methodology of utilitarianism is to maximize utility then the form of decision making of utilitarianism in a given instance would be to justify a moral action on the grounds that it will maximize utility. So what I take Railton to be saying here is that a sophisticated consequentialist can use non-consequentialist justifications or reasons for his actions in given instances. But what also does it mean to be an objective consequentialist? Once again, Railton offers a definition: to be an objective consequentialist is to hold the view that "the criterion of the rightness of an act or course of action is whether it in fact would promote the good of those acts available to the agent." Therefore I take it that when Railton talks of sophisticated consequentialism he means a consequentialist theory that is both justification-independent in relation to the low-level

principles that govern everyday life but also justification-dependent (on objective consequentialism) in relation to the high-level principles responsible for generating the lower-level principles.

The motivation here for developing such a moral theory is to allow for the demands of morality to not necessarily be incompatible with acting directly for the sake of another. But does it work? Can a sophisticated consequentialist really act directly for the sake of another in such a way as to eliminate personal alienation? Is sophisticated consequentialism really a consequentialist theory, or, in other words, is consequentialism compatible with Railton's account of sophisticated consequentialism? To answer all of these questions would be beyond the scope of the topic at hand, but it does seem to me that the treatment here given to sophisticated consequentialism by Railton doesn't seem to provide a satisfying solution to the alienation problem. The first issue is that we want to say more than just that the demands of sophisticated consequentialism are not necessarily incompatible with acting directly for the sake of another, an assumed requirement for intimate relationships with other persons, but rather that the demands of sophisticated consequentialism are necessarily and essentially compatible with and facilitators of acting directly for another, along with directly for one's projects. Facilitation here is a key concept; it is not enough for a moral theory to simply allow in a restricted sense for personal relationships and projects, instead they must be fully incorporated into the new theory such that, as Railton puts it, we have changed "the way in which morality asks us to look at things."

It seems as if Railton believes his sophisticated consequentialism differs from traditional consequentialism such that his morality *is* asking us to look at things in a fundamentally different way, but it is not explicit that this reduces alienation in the sense that we want it to. While sophisticated consequentialism allows for an account of moral actions with non-consequentialist

justifications, it is not clear how these justifications stand up on their own without connection to the consequentialism that governs the high-level principles. This leaves Railton with two options: (1) to claim that these non-consequentialists justifications are good in themselves, that is to say absolutely good and objectively so—which is certainly not an obvious truth—or (2) allow for some sort of undesirable alienation to creep back into our moral theory, even if it is reduced relative to the traditional consequentialist theory. While I do not think that sophisticated consequentialism is refuted in conceding either of these two possibilities, it does seem to allow for the prospect that another moral theory is capable of tackling the problem of alienation more effectively.

Why is Alienation So Undesirable?

Even if one accepts that consequentialist theories demand from us alienation from our closest projects and our most intimate relationships, one may reasonably ask why this is undesirable. Those familiar with Nietzsche's works know that he argued in favor of a similar kind of alienation due to its connection with self-actualization. Moreover, the conception of what constitutes a moral theory seems to include that it requires us, at least at some level, to adopt an impersonal and therefore a seemingly alienating point of view. We can even think of cases where alienation has been beneficial, and here Railton gives the example of groups of individuals alienating themselves from their society in order to give rise to social change. And certainly alienation from personal relationships in the most expanded sense, that is to say *any* alienation from *anyone*, is not undesirable. So it must be made clear why alienation is undesirable enough to be a significant problem for consequentialist moral theories in the first place.

Before moving on I would like to quickly address the idea that morality requires an impersonal point of view, an idea brought up by both Williams and Railton. Even if it is the case that morality entails an impersonal point of view, this does not necessarily show that a moral theory cannot allow for morally over-riding personal relationships, or morally comprehensible reasons based on personal relationships. We can easily think of a counter-example: consider a moral theory that has the universal and therefore impersonal axiom to always consider one's spouse above others given otherwise equal moral considerations. This is impersonal because it applies to everyone; 'it's me' is not being used a moral reason. At the same time, we are clearly allowing personal relationships to play an important moral role. Railton points out that this too will lead to personal alienation because we still must ultimately appeal to the axiom in order to justify the use of relationships as moral factors. What's important here, then, is that alienation is not directly the result of whether our moral theory is impersonal or personal, but rather involves something with the moral justifications we are able to give in regards to the value we place on our personal relationships.

I will present two responses to the question regarding the undesirability of alienation as described. The first response takes the form of my previous treatment of alienation and mimics what has been written by Williams and Railton. It is a pragmatic response that is applicable to all moral theories and is based on our self-conceptions as individuals and our evaluation of the lives that we consider worth living, or at the very least livable. My second response relies on a theory of well-being that allows me to make explicit and concise what is being lost with the problem of alienation, from which will naturally follow a possible solution to the problem to be detailed in the final section. Both of these responses rely on the condition that the alienation is between

fundamental projects or commitments and *intimate* relationships. The proximity of the thing that we are separated from is a vital determinate of the value lost in the separation.

If it is the case that we are alienated from our closest projects and our most intimate relationships in virtue of adopting such and such morality, then what must we give up? It seems as if we must give up anything resembling our previous conceptions of an autonomous, mature human life. By giving up our closest projects and becoming a function between the inputs of external desires, we lose the ability to exercise our own projects and attitudes to the extent that they might as well not exist. The same applies to our personal relationships; we lose any serious sense of friendship, love, group loyalties, etc. There are also seems to be metaphysical issues from this sort of alienation, namely the creation of a dichotomy between the deliberative-self and the affectionate-self, such that the affectionate-self must be perceived by the individual as having no moral significance. Indeed, part of the issue here seems to be exactly that of the Kantian moral saint discussed by Rae Langton. We can even go so far as to imagine as great as a human being as possible and then apply to their lives the alienation constraints. Without any sense of intimate relationships and without any sense of personal projects, even the life of the greatest human being imaginable seems to be lacking something important. More could be said, but I think it is clear: the demands of this morality would necessarily involve a limited human life, perhaps one not even worth living at all.

Now, I want to consider the same question again, but instead utilizing a basic understanding that part of what is valuable for a human being is his or her well-being. Then we can concisely characterize the issue of alienation by stating that it prevents us from living a full, flourishing human life—it limits our well-being in a critical way. We see genuine, close human relationships and projects as necessary components of the best type of life for a human being.

Not only do I believe that this response more fully encapsulates what we really want to say with the first response, but I also believe that it does so because a moral theory focusing on human well-being is better equipped to deal with the Problem of Alienation, of which I now want to make as explicit as possible.

Full Statement of the Alienation Problem for Consequentialist Theories

How does one reconcile the alienation required by the demands of morality under consequentialist moral theories when the objects we are alienating ourselves from are essential components for what we consider to be lives worth living? If the consequentialist theory in question is said not to be alienating, then its author must show explicitly how it allows for the elimination of alienation concerns such that the moral theory allows for us to take into account other persons closest to us and our own projects in a fundamentally different way than traditional consequentialism.

A Possible Solution

Here I would like to offer a possible solution to the alienation problem by briefly considering the issue from a perspective of well-being rather than a perspective of right or wrong action. As I have already shown, this perspective frames the problem by classifying alienation as undesirable due to the constraints that it casts upon our capacity for well-being. To be clear, the theory of well-being that I have in mind is the Aristotelian one as interpreted and described by Richard Kraut, which follows very closely to the one traditionally attributed to Aristotle with few notable exceptions such as the rejection of absolute goods, i.e. the possibility of something being good (period) in itself and without relation, and the inclusion of some Platonic ideas. In my use of it here, the specific details of Kraut's theory of well-being are not important as the arguments

presented will generalize to any theory of well-being at all similar to that of the Aristotelian tradition.

I think there are two reasonable responses to be made here. The first is to question if this sense of integrity is really a necessary part of our human well-being. What this really pushes at, at least as I see it, is that the justification for such a conception of human well-being is naturalistic and dependent upon a conception of human nature, where such a conception could of course be wrong, or, at the very least, conceivably different. While this is an important distinction for the overall acceptability of such a moral theory, it does not apply much in this circumstance because I am presently concerned only with how such a moral theory could solve the Problem of Alienation. The counter-response is then to say that if our conception of human well-being is wrong then similarly our conception of the Problem of Alienation is wrong as well, which is in some sense a solution to the problem in itself.

I think the much better response to be made by the consequentialist here is: so what? Even if one concedes that a theory of well-being better frames the Problem of Alienation and provides a more elegant solution does not necessarily imply that one must abandon consequentialist ways of thinking. Surely we can at least eliminate some of the alienation found in traditional consequentialist moral theories by introducing alternative theories as Railton does in his essay? I think this is right, and that the Problem of Alienation as presented here is not at all fatal to the consequentialist way of thinking. What I believe this response avoids, though, is the fact that the Alienation Problem *does* increase the relative attractiveness of well-being focused moral theories. The philosophical study of ethics has not yet decisively chosen any winners among moral theories, and so it is very much of useful importance to weigh the options among

multiple ethical issues we deem relevant, a category in which alienation seems to manifestly belong.