

6. Railton's "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality"

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Railton is addressing one kind of problem that we raised. In class, we discussed the case of a parent who is offered a choice between saving the life of her own child or saving the life of another child. Saving the life of the other child would produce overall more utility than saving the life of her own, so utilitarian consequentialism claims that she should save the life of the other child. To many people, this seems to be the wrong result: surely, they think, whatever duty she has to save the life of the other child is overridden by her duties and obligations to save the life of her own child.

Samuel Scheffler presents us with a less tragic, but related problem for consequentialism. Scheffler observes that consequentialism demands that we don't buy new shoes if we can spend that money in ways that will help other people more, or that we don't watch TV if instead we could be doing more utility maximizing things.

These two cases point to one important problem for consequentialism (here, under the guise of utilitarianism). Consequentialism seems to *alienate* us from the people we love and from things that make our lives richer. By focusing solely on the maximization of utility, it seems to ignore the value that other things bring into our lives: things like friendship, the love for one's family, entertainment, art appreciation, etc. A life lived in line with consequentialist demands seems to be a very impoverished life, enslaved to the maximization of utility. Call this (i.e. the problem that consequentialism alienates us from the people close to us and some valuable life projects) the *alienation problem*.

Railton addresses this problem in "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality". His defense stresses the importance of guiding ourselves by cultivating certain dispositions rather than by making utility calculations all the time.

1 Setting the stage: alienation

Alienation from something is a certain sort of separation or distancing from that thing that results in some loss. As I said above, the charge against consequentialism is that it imposes a set of demands that are too disconnected from our actual concerns, and in doing so, it alienates us from valuable elements in our lives.

Here is an illustration. Imagine you ask your parents why they have been so nice to you by feeding you, taking you to school or taking care of you when you are sick. Doing all those things surely isn't easy, so they must have a very good reason to do it. It wouldn't be unnatural to expect them to answer that they did all those things because they loved you and they wanted you to have a happy life, or something along those lines. However, imagine they offer the following answer:

Well, you know we are act utilitarians. We decided to have you in the first place because, after a series of calculations, we found out that would be the best way for us to maximize the total utility in the world, given our resources. The rest is history: once you were born, the best way to ensure maximization of utility was to take care of you and feed you. Don't get us wrong, we love you very much, but that's not why we did all those things. We did them because they were the morally right thing to do, and if they stopped maximizing utility, we would stop doing them. But we wouldn't love you any less.

Presumably, that would be hurtful and worrisome: in a way, it would show that there was nothing special about you in virtue of which they did all those things. Doing them just happened to be the thing that maximized utility at the time, but things could have changed at any moment, and they can still change. In other words, you were expendable in the eyes of utility maximization.

The problem with the kind of reasoning of these hypothetical parents seems to be that their deliberation is completely separated from their affections. In this sense, their moral reasoning alienates them from their feelings of love towards their child. But our affections and relationships to others are very important elements of a life that is worth living. Since they are so crucial to our lives, we would expect any serious moral theory to at least consider them seriously. This is Railton's take on the alienation problem.

2 The paradox of hedonism

Railton doesn't face the problem of alienation directly. Rather, he starts by offering an illustration of what he calls the paradox of hedonism. Later on, he will explain how the solution to this so-called paradox can help the utilitarian solve the alienation problem. Here is the paradox, in Railton's words:

One version of the so-called "paradox of hedonism" is that adopting as one's exclusive ultimate end in life the pursuit of maximum happiness may well prevent one from having certain experiences or engaging in certain sorts of relationships or commitments that are among the greatest sources of happiness. The hedonist, looking around him, may discover that some of those who are less concerned with their own happiness than he is, and who view people and projects less instrumentally than he does, actually manage to live happier lives than he despite his dogged pursuit of happiness. The "paradox" is pragmatic, not logical, but it looks deep nonetheless: the hedonist, it would appear, ought not to be a hedonist. (p. 141)

Railton is well aware that it's not a matter of necessity that the hedonist way of making decisions will in fact prevent her from achieving maximum happiness. The problem is simply that under certain conditions, the hedonist way of deliberating won't deliver the most happiness. In those cases, the best way to achieve the hedonist goal of maximum happiness requires one not to be a hedonist.

Railton solves the problem on behalf of the hedonist by distinguishing between *objective* and *subjective* forms of hedonism. According to *subjective hedonism*, one should adopt the hedonistic point of view as a guide to action: whenever one deliberates on what to do, one should do whatever seems to contribute most to one's happiness. According to *objective hedonism*, one should follow the course of action that would contribute the most to one's happiness, even if that course of action

would require one *not* to adopt a hedonistic perspective in practical deliberation. A *sophisticated* hedonist, as Railton describes her, will be someone who adopts objective hedonism, but is not committed to subjective hedonism.

Is sophisticated hedonism a tenable position? At first sight, one may think that there is some sort of tension between adopting objective hedonism and rejecting subjective hedonism. However, Railton dispels this impression by offering some compelling examples.

Consider a chess player who is obsessed with winning. He enjoys the game and the like, but what really drives him is his aspiration to win every match, and one day to be the world champion. However, he has noticed as of late that his own ambition to win has led him to make some bad moves recently, which had ultimately made him lose the match. His friends and trainer suggest that he stops focusing on winning and focuses more on the game itself. His trainer may tell him: “Regain your interest in the game, study some theory just for the sake of it. When you play, do it just for the sake of the game itself, because it is interesting and enjoyable. As long as you do that, you will constantly improve, until no one can beat you.”

Our chess player may decide to follow his trainer’s advice. He decides to focus again on the game. When he makes a move, he won’t make it merely because he wants to win, but because it is the best move, even if it leads to a stalemate. However, he only adopts this new way of deliberating because he thinks that winning is the best outcome for him, and he still wants to win. It’s just that in order to win, he must stop focusing so much on winning. As Railton would put it, the chess player need not always act for the sake of winning, since he may make some moves simply because they are the best move, but he would not make those moves if it were not compatible with his winning the game—for instance, unless there is no better move available, he wouldn’t play a move that he knows would lead to his defeat.

The sophisticated hedonist is a bit like the chess player. She still wants to be happy, but she realizes that in order for her to be happy, she will sometimes have to deliberate in ways that don’t take into account what will maximize her happiness. If it turned out that even sophisticated hedonism makes it harder to live a happy life, our sophisticated hedonist may reject her hedonism at all.¹

3 Back to consequentialism

Railton thinks that alienation is not always a bad thing. Sometimes, we need to examine our interests and emotions from the outside to do what is right: our love for someone may preclude us from seeing that we are doing something that could harm them, or that better courses of action are available to us. However, it’s desirable to limit the alienating effects of moral considerations.

Railton’s strategy has two components. First, he notices the sources of alienation in standard utilitarian doctrines, and sketches a perspective that gets rid of those sources. Second, he uses the distinction between objective and subjective forms of consequentialism to solve the problem of alienation for the moral view he sketched.

According to Railton, act utilitarianism produces alienation because, in focusing solely on experiences, it separates us from reality—in this sense, he agrees with Nozick. Furthermore, it alienates us from many valuable interests because it takes goals other than happiness or utility to be merely instrumental—that is, it takes those further goals not to be valuable in themselves, but only because

¹Think about certain examples in science fiction where a character erases her memory in order to achieve a goal that she couldn’t have otherwise achieve.

they will allow us to get some other thing that is valuable in itself. He thinks that these sources of alienation can be eliminated by adopting a *pluralist* view about value.

On this pluralist view, many things are of value: happiness, personal relationships, knowledge, beauty, etc. The value of each of these things is to be weighted against the value of others in each particular case, and in general, no particular value overrides the others. Which action will deliver the maximum amount of value will depend on its consequences in a wide range of dimensions: consequences regarding utility, knowledge, etc.

The second part of Railton's defense consists in making a distinction between two kinds of consequentialism: *objective* and subjective. Just like he distinguished between objective and subjective hedonism in order to solve the paradox of hedonism, now Railton will use it to show that a pluralist consequentialist moral doctrine need not alienate us from our emotions and other elements that make our lives worth living.

According to *objective* consequentialism, "the criterion of rightness of an act or course of action is whether it in fact would most promote the good of those acts available to the agent" (p. 152). According to *subjective* consequentialism, "whenever one faces a choice of actions, one should attempt to determine which act of those available would most promote the good, and should then try to act accordingly." (p. 152) Railton thinks that we can escape the alienation problem by becoming *sophisticated consequentialists*: endorsing objective consequentialism but recognizing that sometimes this will require us to reject a characteristically consequentialist mode of deliberation.

He thinks that we won't be any less consequentialist if we adopt sophisticated consequentialism. Just like the chess player can still have winning as her main aim, but recognizes that not all of her moves have to be made having in mind what maximizes her chances of winning, so the sophisticated consequentialist wants to achieve the maximum possible good, but recognizes that she doesn't need to perform every action guided by what will bring about the most good.

Indeed, a consequentialist way of deliberation may prevent us from doing the most good in several cases: if you face an emergency, you probably won't have the time to engage in all the computations of utility that subjective consequentialism would require you to do. Suppose for instance that you just saw a car crash, and you spot a dangerous gas leak. It's very likely that there will be an explosion soon, but you don't know how soon exactly. You can either examine all the available data until you determine how long there is left until the explosion, you can run for it and try to rescue the person who is still inside the car, or you can just stay away and call 911. If you go with the first option, by the time you finish your calculation it may be too late for you to either rescue the trapped person or to run for safety.

A consequentialist style of deliberation can run into similar problems. Railton ridicules such style of reasoning as follows:

before I deliberate about an act, it seems I must decide how much time would be optimal to allocate for this deliberation; but then I must first decide how much time would be optimal to allocate for this time-allocation decision; but before that I must decide how much time would be optimal to allocate for *that* decision; and so on. The sophisticated consequentialist can block this paralyzing regress by noting that often the best thing to do is not to ask questions about time allocation at all (pp. 153-4)

If subjective consequentialism won't lead to maximizing the good, then what will? Railton takes this to be mostly an empirical question. However, he thinks that it's likely that we can maximize the good by developing certain kinds of dispositions that result in maximization of the good. **Question:**

How is this different from rule-consequentialism? In p. 159, Railton addresses almost explicitly some of the problems that we raised in previous sessions. What is his answer to those problems?

Railton ends his piece by making some observations on the demands of morality, from a consequentialist perspective:

- He thinks that, just like it's better for each of us to develop a certain kind of character or a certain set of dispositions, what morality will most likely require from us will be to support certain social and political arrangements that make it easier for the good to be maximized.
- In most realistic cases, the greater good is equivalent to the best possible lives for the highest number of people. Realistically speaking, we rarely encounter cases in which a person must be sacrificed for the greater good or the like.