



Morality and Alienation: A Criticism of Railton's Account of Consequentialism

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Abstract



In recent decades, one of the challenges facing morality is its alleged conflict with what are among the most important contributors to human well-being. It is claimed that adopting moral theories may alienate one from that which makes one's life worthwhile, such as her affections, her personal commitments, as well as from other people. In his paper, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality", Railton attempts to answer this objection from a consequentialist point of view. For this purpose, he has formulated a new version of consequentialism, which he calls "sophisticated consequentialism". This version, he thinks, avoids the problem of necessitating alienation. This paper first provides an explanation of Railton's formulation of consequentialism and then goes on to criticize the solution he has devised for the problem of alienation by using this formulation and while showing certain incoherencies in the proposed formulation, refuses to accept it as a new version of consequentialism. It is also argued that there are problems in how Railton's account solves the problem of alienation which ultimately render it non-consequentialist.

Keywords

consequentialism, morality, alienation, factors of human happiness, Railton, sophisticated consequentialism.

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Introduction

For almost half a century, some normative theories of ethics have been criticized on the grounds that living up to their demands may alienate one from one's personal commitments, one's affections, or one's intimates. The question is that if our actions are supposed to be ultimately motivated by morality, is there any room left for our other commitments such as love, friendship, and various spontaneous actions, which are among the most basic components of happiness and of what make our life worthwhile. In reality, if a moral theory guides us towards a moral life that results in our alienation from these crucial elements, it means that it has an incompatible conflict with what constitutes our well-being, and this gives us sufficient reason for refusing it. In his paper, "Alienation, consequentialism, and the demands of morality", Peter Railton tries to answer to this objection on behalf of consequentialist theories. In order to do so, he presents a version of consequentialism that he thinks may reduce the problem of alienation in morality. This paper examines and criticizes the way Railton's proposal tries to solve the problem.

Railton's Defence of Consequentialism

Aiming to present a version of consequentialism that does not alienate us from what makes our lives worthwhile, Railton proposes a distinction between subjective consequentialism and objective consequentialism and advocates what he calls sophisticated consequentialism, which he defines as a standing commitment to leading an objectively consequentialist life but not to a particular form of decision making, therefore avoiding any obligation for seeking to lead a subjectively consequentialist life. To bring about the best outcome, a sophisticated consequentialist may take into consideration everything other than the outcome of a certain action; because she realizes that if individuals possess certain enduring motivational patterns, character traits, or *prima facie* commitments to rules, the overall result would be better, even though they would miss some opportunities to maximize the good. For example, she may inculcate in himself certain dispositions to act rapidly in emergencies when there is no opportunity for consequentialist deliberations. This conception of consequentialism, according to Railton, not only permits our enduring commitments and personal relations, but also sees them as necessary, and therefore does not result in alienation. However, Railton believes that alienation is not always undesirable; he mentions cases in which, in a confliction between moral judgements and non-alienation, the former has a greater claim on us.

Criticism of Railton's Project

Three aspects of Railton's project are susceptible to criticism: his axiology; the

distinctions he proposes between subjective, objective, and sophisticated hedonism or consequentialism; and his success in solving the problem through making these distinctions. The first objection concerns the apparently incorrect supposition he has that intention is voluntary and considers it possible to refrain from seeking happiness in order to become happy. This assumption seems problematic since having such an intention demands a contradictory will. But the main problem is the second one which concerns the distinction he proposes between objective consequentialism and sophisticated consequentialism, which does not seem acceptable. Moreover, *with respect to the actions of the agent who is obligated to them*, there is no difference between those views and subjective consequentialisms: According to all three views, one must first define what maximizes one's happiness and, at the same time, has no choice but to choose actions based on this very knowledge that he himself has attained. Given that these distinctions as well as the advantage Railton assumes for sophisticated consequentialism are the basis of his argument in dealing with the problem of alienation, his argument fails if one does not accept these distinctions.

It seems however, that what Railton undertakes through making these distinctions is providing a more comprehensive understanding of the way we promote "maximal good"; i.e., he views "considering the consequences" not as an individual's narrow focus at a specific point in time on the consequences of what she does, but as a consideration of the consequences of one's actions from a wider and deeper perspective.

However, this project needs to meet two conditions in order to be successful: firstly, it should be able to show that non-alienation from what is valuable to us always eventually gives rise to more good and secondly, if it seeks to distinguish between that which leads to more good from that which does not, it requires certain *consequentialist* tools; but Railton can neither show that point, nor has access to these tools. As a result, it seems that he should either withdraw his claim or abandon pure consequentialism.

Conclusion

Railton tries to present a more well-thought-out version of consequentialism. However, firstly, the basis of his argument, i.e. dividing of consequentialism to subjective, objective, and sophisticated forms is disputable, and secondly, even if his proposal is examined independent of this argument, it consists of non-established claims and also requires deviation from pure consequentialism. Railton seeks a deliberated way for moral decision-making which takes into account all reasonable considerations, but, on the one hand, such a theory, if possible, cannot be purely consequentialist, and on the other hand, considerations which play a role in morality are so extensive and complicated that the possibility of successfully incorporating them in a single theory seems very unlikely.

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