Peter Railton: Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality

Peter Railton’s article on alienation and consequentialism seems to me to share something of Doug Portmore’s consequentializing project. I will briefly explain how I see that.

Railton proposes taking two views of consequentialism: subjective consequentialism and objective consequentialism. Subjective consequentialism attempts to understand which available act would promote the most good and act in accord with it. Objective consequentialism’s criterion of rightness for an act is if it would in fact promote the most good. Subjective consequentialism is “a particular mode of deliberation in action,” while objective consequentialism “concerns the outcome actually brought about” (Scheffler, 113.) A sophisticated consequentialist is one who is committed to objective consequentialism as a way of life.

Where objective consequentialism stands apart is that it accepts that non-consequentialist modes of thought and action may in fact lead to the optimal outcome. Railton considered developing dispositions in which one would act in certain ways, such as responding rapidly to give aid in emergencies, that may not in every case bring about the best outcome, but on the whole would promote the good. Thus an objective act-consequentialist “can approve of dispositions, characters, or commitments to rules ... that do not merely supplement a commitment to act for the best, but sometimes override it, so that one knowingly does what is contrary to maximizing the good” (Scheffler, 120.) In another summary statement Railton concluded that “In some cases ... there will exist an objective act-consequentialist argument for developing and sustaining characters of a kind ... an act-consequentialist must condemn” (Scheffler, 121.)

Where I see the similarity to Portmore’s consequentializing project is that with his proposal of objective consequentialism, Railton is trying to find a way to subsume non-consequentialist thought into a consequentialist framework. I understand that it may be difficult to let go of the idea of seeking the greatest good in outcomes, but I remain unconvinced by his argument. As I read his argument, Railton’s objective consequentialist would in essence instrumentalize a non-consequentialist ethic for its consistently optimal outcomes, even if not every outcome is maximized. In his discussion of Juan and Linda’s relationship (Scheffler 120-121) it seems to me that the terms in which Railton discussed Juan’s making an extra trip to be with Linda falls just short of a virtue ethic; surely Juan’s concern for his wife’s well-being was motivated by his direct concern for her, without running through a complex consequentialist calculus to conclude that the cost of an extra visit was the right moral choice because of the outcomes.

In any case, I do not see that the objective consequentialist view holds up well. It seems to me that one cannot instrumentally choose a non-consequentialist way of life: a commitment to a deontological ethic or a virtue ethic of character development must be for its intrinsic value. The only way to avoid the sort of alienation Railton wants to avoid is to commit to a non-consequentialist ethic and to others precisely because they are intrinsically valuable. One may in fact observe that treating others virtuously does lead to high levels of well-being, of a sort that probably could not otherwise be obtained, but to cast such as consequentialist seems suspect. In choosing a non-consequentialist ethic, one’s goals must change such that one is no longer a consequentialist, at least in any direct form; the good that thus emerges is indirect, a byproduct of one’s intrinsic valuation of others. If this is the case, if one chooses to develop a non-consequentialist character or disposition along the lines Railton described, it seems to me that
one is no longer an objective consequentialist, but an incidental consequentialist.


*This is adapted from a series of responses I wrote for an independent study in analytic ethics of partiality and consequentialism.*

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