

Comment on Professor Hurley's "What Lurks Beneath the Integrity Objection"

Patricia Marino, Northwestern, April 23, 2009

Professor Hurley argues here for a particular interpretation of the point and significance of Williams's famous objections to consequentialist moral theories. While it has been traditional, he says, to understand the difficulty as one about the internal psychological and ethical costs of adopting a consequentialist view, Professor Hurley says that the real issue concerns the relationship between consequentialism as a moral theory and the accounts of practical reason and deliberation embedded in consequentialist moral thinking itself. These just don't fit together, because there is no way the adoption of an impersonal, 3rd person point of view can give rise to reasons that must *outweigh* those we reasons that arise, for each of us, from our own particular projects and life commitments. And yet, as a moral theory, consequentialism demands this very thing, in its requirement that the 3rd person point of view be authoritative. It is in its insistence that we treat impersonal reasons as always overriding personal reasons that consequentialism is truly alienating.

I am much in sympathy with the general point of view of this paper, and I find Professor Hurley's way of framing the issue particularly interesting and strong. Let me use this comment, though, to suggest a few directions for further thought, both in defense of consequentialism and concerning the claim that the reasons problem "lurks behind" the other.

Notice first that even on a reasons internalism view, we need not take an agent to have perfect information about what he has reason to do and how strong those reasons

are. Agents may frequently be mistaken about the contents of their own subjective motivational sets, if, for example, they don't know the best means to an end they have. Agents may also have rankings among their preferences that are non-ideal, because they violate basic requirements like transitivity. This raises the possibility that the typical moral agent is in error when he judges his personal projects to give rise to reasons that override those grounded in 3rd personal reflection.

On this line of thought, we might account for the power and decisiveness of 3rd person generated reasons by saying not that they are outside our motivational set, but rather that they are inside it, and high ranking, even when the agent doesn't know that they are. Most of us want to live happily in a world full of others. If adopting 3rd person reasons as overriding were the best means to that goal, perhaps we would do best to emulate the "utilitarian saint," who does take his project of promoting the interests of others as the most important project in his life.

Indeed, in his discussion of why we ought to act morally, Peter Singer says something along these lines, arguing that those who take up the moral point of view may simply be happier than those who do not.¹ If this is right, any agent who cares most about her own happiness and well-being will generate internal overriding reasons for taking up a 3rd person point of view. It might seem implausible to say that in every case, the 3rd person point of view will tend to a person's happiness. But given the range of ways a person may be confused about how best to understand his own internal reasons, there

¹ Singer, Practical Ethics, 2nd ed. 327-328. To support this claim, Singer suggests that humans are generally happier when moral, and that even those cases that seem like exceptions aren't really. Psychopaths would seem to be such exceptions, since they get along fine and enjoy life while generally failing to take the projects of others into account at all. But Singer suggests that perhaps psychopaths aren't really happy at all -- they're actually bored out of their minds and acting up like bad schoolchildren.

may be more subtle psychological links to explore between well-being and the project of taking the 3rd person point of view as ultimately authoritative.

A second possibility involves letting go of reasons internalism. Professor Hurley says his argument applies equally well on a reasons externalist view, but let me suggest here that a move to reasons externalism at least changes the nature and difficulty of the problem. With reasons externalism, we may say that the reasons generated by the 3rd person point of view are decisive over personal reasons not because of the agent's subjective motivational set, but on some other basis. The problem, as Professor Hurley says, is that the burden would fall squarely on the reasons externalist to explain how such reasons could come to be so decisive.

It seems to me, though, that a burden similar to this one falls on anyone who believes that we can have reason to act morally in cases in which doing so seems contrary to the satisfaction of our more personal wants and commitments. And many people must believe this. A person's personal projects and life commitments may be good or bad from a moral point of view -- that is, they may be more like childrearing or more like joining a race-based hate group. Any moral theory will have to enable us to distinguish the two, and to explain why projects that are morally bad are projects a person has decisive reason to shun. That is, any moral theory will have to explain why sometimes an agent may have decisive reason to act so as to violate one of his basic 1st person commitments. This is a hard explanation for anyone to give, from the point of view of any moral theory. So why should it count particularly against the consequentialist that he lacks it?

I take it Professor Hurley's answer to this question is, in part, that the explanation in question may be particularly difficult for a consequentialist to find. That is, the burden

of explanation weighs particularly heavily on him because in his general point of view of what is good, the consequentialist admits that what is good is what people take to be good -- there is no other standpoint. So he cannot then turn around and say that this one thing, the 3rd person point of view, is supremely good whether or not anyone thinks it is.

This may well be. But in other ways, the burden for the consequentialist is comparatively light, because he at least may give the start of an answer: in engaging in morally bad projects, you are failing to take into account the interests of others along with the interests of yourself. That this answer does not "go all the way down" as an explanation need not count against the consequentialist any more than it counts against any other moral view that lacks a convincing answer to the question of "why be moral."

Finally, and perhaps most promisingly, a consequentialist may adopt neither a reasons internalism nor a reasons externalism point of view. He may, instead, challenge the very conception of selfhood and reasons necessary to get the objection off the ground. In his paper on alienation and consequentialism, Peter Railton says that when examining cases of deep commitment, "it becomes artificial to impose a dichotomy between what is done for the self and what is done for the other."² The essential self is not a private self, but a social one, one already constituted in a society, with a history, and so on. From this point of view, the problem about reasons from a 3rd person point of view becoming decisive over reasons from a 1st person point of view dissolves, since we cannot draw the necessary distinctions to start with.

In elaborating what he takes to be the proper psychological outlook, Railton suggests that many of our 1st person projects will survive inspection from the 3rd person point of view. For instance, when we think about why we act lovingly toward our

² Railton, Alienation, Consequentialism, and Morality, in Scheffler, *Consequentialism and Its Critics* p. 128

spouses, it is most appropriate to say both that we act out of love -- "It's almost a part of me to do it," -- and that we justify our action from a broader point of view -- "it's a better world when people can have a relationship like ours . . ."³ If this is right, the typical moral agent may only rarely experience true conflicts between his 1st person commitments and his 3rd person project of enabling the projects of others. In those rare cases, taking the self as a socially constituted one we cannot even ask the necessary question, of why an agent has decisive reason to pursue the 3rd person project over his own.

I take it Williams, and perhaps Professor Hurley along with him, may want to insist at this point that this social self cannot be an agent's true self, that to insist that it is is to demand an agent give up his own integrity. If this is right, though, it suggests a sense in which the integrity objection lurks beneath the reasons problem, rather than the other way around.

³ Railton, ACM p. 111