

### Alienation and consequentialism: Railton

**THE IDEA OF ALIENATION.** Railton concedes that a general definition of alienation may be out of reach. Instead, we should settle for examples that develop the familiar Williamsian theme. John and Helen, in their respective situations, display distant, ‘chilling’ attitudes. There is ‘estrangement’ between their affections and their rationality. Their commitments are wholly rational and impartial, so that personal relations are legitimate for them only to the extent they may be justified within those commitments. 153

**AN UNSATISFACTORY RESPONSE.** A moral theorist might retort that these problems, meaningful as they are, do not threaten moral theory. They arise from a distinctly non-moral perspective (perhaps characterised by impartiality). Moral theory need not reject other perspectives out of hand. But this response is ‘complacent’. First, we can’t simply multiply perspectives: we need to try to unify them in one theory of practical reasoning. Second, personal relations are an integral part of well-being. A moral theory that has nothing to say about them is necessarily defective. 154 155

**ALIENATION AND HOT FEELINGS.** A better response is to try to quash the appeal of non-alienation. Spontaneous action, of the kind that Williams seems to favour, is not always desirable. We need to maintain emotional ‘distance’ from the object of our affections, lest they overflow and distort practical reasoning. Further, it is necessary to be able to subject Williamsian ‘ground projects’ to rational inspection. 161

**SUBJECTIVE, OBJECTIVE, SOPHISTICATED.** The idea that the most important thing in life is your happiness is appealing. But you may find that, if you become a ‘subjective hedonist’ and single-mindedly pursue ‘happiness’, you are not getting any happier. You might despair and become an ‘objective hedonist’ and simply hold that certain activities objectively tend to contribute to one’s happiness. You will also hold a normative component of this view and claim that one should follow the actions best contributing to one’s happiness. One, finally, might reconcile these two views and become a ‘sophisticated hedonist’. One might adopt happiness as a goal only if it passes the tests of objective hedonism. 158

*Example 1.* Having children, let us suppose, increases one’s happiness. But in your dealings with them—indeed, in conceiving them in the first place—you better not be driven by your own happiness. A sophisticated hedonist recognises this and sets out to surrender himself to altruistic motivation.

**EUTHYPHRO AND PAVLIK.** Euthyphro was ready to prosecute his own father for a perceived wrong. He protested the critics who accused him of disrespecting his father and insisted that the only proper motive must be impartial justice. See Plato’s *Euthyphro* for details.

A Soviet saint Pavlik Morozov told the authorities on his father who engaged in some, by Soviet lights, illegal activities (whether the story has factual basis doesn’t matter to us). Young people were encouraged to follow his example.

Are these attitudes and behaviours precisely the ones applauded by the moral theory? What if, in Euthyphro’s and Pavlik Morozov’s fashion, the moral agent discovers that his close relative (his father, say) has committed a capital offence? Should the agent ‘do what is right’ and treat the offender like any other person, thus ignoring the close relation that exists between them?

On the face of it, that is precisely so. Moral theory demands to do what is right regardless of the (morally) contingent relations this or another individual may have to you: see Figure 1.

**IMPARTIALITY AND CONCENTRIC CIRCLES.** Railton subtly misrepresents Williams’ worries. It is not as if a Williamsian man is not prepared to give up or re-examine his identities. It is rather that there is a range of elements that, in fact, *do* constitute his identity. Impartial moral theories demand, so Williams, that he abandon his identity at the moment when impartiality requires him to. 176

Secondly, Railton’s misrepresentation is also at a deeper level (I think). Our identities are ‘relational’, they are not fixed at all. Williams may be construed (though himself, he is not sympathetic to this line of thought) that some *non-impartial* identities are non-negotiable. It is contingent what career

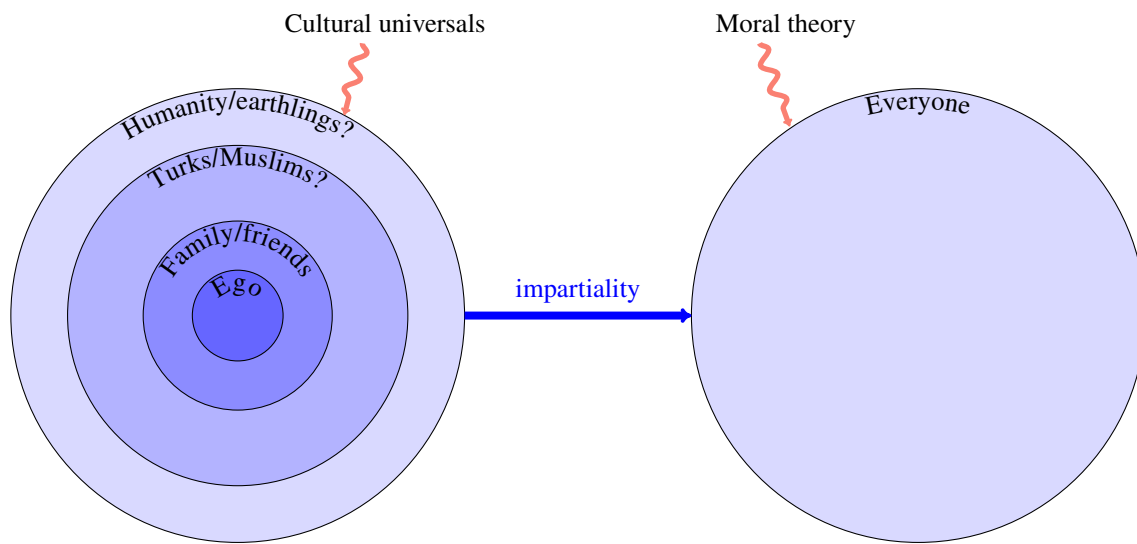


Figure 1: The pull of impartiality

you have, whose husband you are, whose brother, whose son or friend. It is contingent whether you are any of that (except being a son!), or whether being naturally a brother, say, means that this fact is part of your identity. Yet there must be *an* element of your identity that is at odds with impartiality. Or, on the other hand, if there is no such element, then there is something missing in your ethical makeup, that you are not a fully functioning human. Likely that's not the case anyway, and you are not honest with yourself and/or others when you declare that your ground projects are all wholly impartial.

Thus Railton's reflections in 176–178 seem to me to miss the point. Williams' critique does not entail a rejection of the impartial point of view in its entirety, or its logical impossibility, or incoherence. It only shows its necessary limitation, a limitation that impartial moral theories cannot themselves allow.

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