An Individual Reality, Separate from Oneself: Alienation and Sociality in Moral Theory

Jack Samuel

Introduction

Though we do not always use the term 'alienation,' a common complaint against moral theory alleges that it is disconnected from everyday life, or perhaps that it leaves us standing outside of the world, reflecting abstractly on facts about duties or rights or aggregate utility. The underlying impulse is to challenge moral theory's relevance to lived ethical experience. If this or that moral theory were correct, we worry, some feature of ordinary ethical life would be rendered mysterious, or in Iris Murdoch's phrase, "theorized away." Critics of alienation object that moral theory has traded in its groundedness in or relevance to the ethical phenomenology of everyday life for the appearance of rigor, universalism, systematicity, simplicity, or some other virtue typically attributed to scientific enterprises. The hallmark of alienation is that it sunders us from something of value: a part of ourselves, a part of our lives, or a part of our world. The goal of alienation critique is to reunite ourselves with whatever it is, to restore a sense of ourselves as unified ethical subjects for whom the things that matter can be intelligible.

The concept of alienation receives its canonical expression within 20th-century Anglophone moral philosophy in Williams's *Critique of Utilitarianism*. There and in (Williams 1976*b*) he insists that the reader attend to the lifeworld of the agent, to the commitments, projects, and relationships that are especially *hers*. They belong to her in a way that contributes to the realization of her agency as more than a mere chooser, more than what Murdoch called "the quick flash of the choosing will".[1] They are part of what it is to be an agent.[2] In his response to Williams, Railton (1984) glosses alienation as a split between the rational and the affective parts of the self. A moral theory is inadequate, they agree, insofar as it requires us to adopt a deliberative standpoint abstracted from the contingencies of our messy, human lives.

---

[1] (Murdoch 1971, 52)

[2] Or at any rate they are part of what it is to be a *human* agent, to be the kind of embodied, embedded agents that we in fact are. I am not attributing to Williams a claim about agency as such (as theorized by, for example, metaethical contructivists), nor do I intend to make any such claims myself. In what follows, "agency" should be understood to have this narrower meaning.

The predominant lesson from reading Williams and Railton is that there is a threat to the internal integrity of the agent; the feature of human life from which moral theory threatens to alienate us is theorized as a part of ourselves. Moral theory paints a picture of us as disconnected from feelings, desires, passions; from our 'affective selves'. Call this the threat of *psychological alienation.*

There is another dimension of this debate that risks getting lost. Both Williams and Railton lean on examples of morally significant social relationships in drawing out the intuitive worry that moral theory is alienating. Railton seems to suggest that a complete response to the problem of alienation will involve making room not only for the integrity of the agent but for a kind of *social* integrity as well: it is not enough to reassure us that a harmony of the rational and affective parts of soul is possible without at the same time accounting for the way that we are essentially among others.

Perhaps avoiding psychological alienation is an important criterion. If the kinds of persons, agents, or moral subjects that a given moral theory implicitly envisions are inadequate as a philosophical account of what we are like—if we can't be like that because we would be essentially fractured, restless, at war with ourselves—then we ought to reject it. But in theorizing alienation as a psychological defect the other persons to whom we stand in the social relationships that partly constitute the realization of our agency drop out of the story.

It is this, the problem of *social alienation*, that I want to get a better grip on, and the corresponding demand for an account of social integrity. As a placeholder, what I want to suggest is sundered or at least obscured by moral theory is not (or at least not only) the psychic unity of an individual but what I will call the ethical *contact* that we make with one another. The metaphor of 'ethical contact' is helpful in illuminating the parallel between the worry I want to uncover and a long-standing worry in the epistemology of perception: that a theory leaves us trapped behind a 'veil of ideas', never really making *perceptual contact* with the world.[3] I'll argue that moral philosophy's focus on the individual and her mental states can obscure or alienate us from our

---

[3]See e.g. (Sturgeon 2008, 112): "Visual experience is remarkable for two reasons. It seems to involve conscious portrayal of the world; and it seems to involve perceptual contact with the world;" the term is also used by other contributors throughout the same volume (Haddock & MacPherson 2008) and throughout the literature on perception. As Sturgeon notes there is little agreement about what perceptual contact amounts to, but near consensus that whatever it is, a theory of perception must make good sense of it. (Sturgeon's suggestion that experience 'portrays' the world is probably not quite right, at least in the context of the discussion of perceptual contact in §2—better, perhaps, to say that experience *reveals* the world.)

Another advantage to the term 'ethical contact' is that, having no existing technical use, it has accreted none of the associations or competing precisifications that might incline a skeptical reader to reject the letter of my proposal without first at least considering the spirit. This is also a disadvantage, however, insofar as it may be entirely unclear just what it is (aside from psychic harmony) that I think moral theory risks theorizing away. I'll try to say more to characterize it positively later, once I've put in place the analogical basis in perceptual epistemology—I hope that at this stage there is some appeal to the vague idea that there is some sense in which moral theory risks alienating us from others.

fundamental sociality and its irreducible place in moral life.

When we route the normative significance of others and our relationships with them through normative and psychological statuses that attach solely to individual agents, we lose our grip on the lived social reality that gave rise to anxieties about alienation in the first place. Thus, moral theory leaves us alienated from the being-among-others that constitutes the substance of ethical life and leaves any agent who understands herself in these terms alienated from the concrete others with whom she shares a world.

1   Alienation in General

Williams (1973) objects that consequentialism misconceives agency, providing a picture of the agent as a mere "locus of causal intervention." The agent weighs the possible outcomes of different actions, taking no account of whether they will have been brought about as a result of her choice, by mere happenstance, or by the agency of another. Insofar as she can permissibly take on projects and commitments that serve the greater good, she cannot fully *commit* to them: she must be prepared to abandon them the moment the deliberative calculus shifts in favor of doing so.

Even worse, we must take equal account of the projects and commitments of others, weighing their contribution to the overall good in the same way and to the same extent as we weigh our own. Our own projects are not truly *ours* if they don't mean any more to us than those of others. We can thus neither genuinely commit to anything nor identify with what little commitment is left to us.

This picture of agency is a threat to our integrity. We cannot understand ourselves in the way consequentialism requires, at the risk of losing our grip on ourselves.

One way of bringing the problem of alienation into focus—of getting clear on what, exactly, is estranged from what—is offered by Railton (1984). Railton is concerned in particular with whether consequentialism encourages us to be the kinds of agents who cannot meaningfully commit to friendship or love. With those who regard their spouses as sources of utility or opportunities to fulfill general duties, he notes, "there would seem to be an estrangement between [agents'] *affections* and their *rational, deliberative selves*; an abstract and universalizing point of view mediates their responses to others and to their own sentiments" (Railton 1984, 137, emph. added). Railton thus diagnoses alienation as a threat to intra-psychic harmony.[4]

---

[4]Compare Michael Stocker, whose central case (1976) involves someone explaining their choice to visit a friend in the hospital by appealing to the duties of camaraderie. For Stocker, 'moral schizophrenia' consists in a disunity of one's motivations and values. "One mark of a good life," he claims, "is a harmony between one's motives and one's reasons, values, justifications" (1976, 453). If moral theory is to help us understand what it is to live a good life, it must be able to make sense of how such harmony is possible.

Railton's solution is a sophisticated form of consequentialism that allows—or even requires—an agent to commit to practices with certain internal ends and to cultivate traits of character well-served to meet them. He argues that morally good agents may commit to relationships that require the devotion of resources that might sometimes do more good elsewhere, provided it's better overall that such relationships exist. Sustaining such relationships will require character traits that ground psychological harmony. This is consistent with the agent meeting his moral demands if, Railton concludes, "while he ordinarily does not do what he does simply for the sake of doing what's right, he would seek to lead a different sort of life if he did not think his were morally defensible" (Railton 1984, 151). In other words, the psychologically unified agent does not reason on an act-consequentialist basis while ignoring partial motivations, but has a background belief that consequentialism supports being the kind of (psychologically unified) person who has such motivations.

Something in the neighborhood of Railton's formulation has since become the dominant understanding of alienation in analytic moral philosophy. Is it fair to read this understanding of the problem back into Williams? I think it is. Here the infamous drowning spouse example can serve as a touchstone. Admittedly, the all-too-brief passage where Williams discusses it admits of multiple readings. Perhaps most prominent among them, however, is that the intervention of a universalizing, moralizing perspective is an alien intrusion, one that would disfigure the husband as a human agent. The form of agency required by moral theory, the story goes, is one on which we are held at some distance from our own humanity, in the concrete forms of love and commitment. In contrast, what Susan Wolf calls the 'standard view' of Williams's ideal holds that "the agent always does the moral thing, but does not always have to think about it" (Wolf 2012, 79).

Reading the example in the context of Williams's other work—and equipped with Railton's psychological diagnosis of alienation—we arrive at the following interpretation: for Williams, the projects and commitments that are uniquely ours make us who and what we are, and moral theory threatens to alienate us from them, and thus from a core part of ourselves, when it insists that we hold them at some distance from our deliberation, acting on them only when the intervening faculty of moral calculation grants approval. In the drowning spouse case Williams is happy to stipulate that morality and personal integrity are aligned, unlike the examples in *Critique*, which involve conflicts between personal integrity and utilitarianism. What he wants to reject is the idea that a loving spouse must adopt the standpoint of universal morality in order to validate his loving inclination to save his wife. Impartial, abstract moral theory is a threat to agency even when it does not conflict with personal integrity because it requires us to exercise an explicit calculative faculty, rather than to rely on the ways that simply being a person with values, commitments, projects, and so on can directly guide us to act in ways that we should not, on behalf of moral theory, try to disallow.[5]

---

[5]As a criticism of Kantian ethics this is incomplete. Christine Korsgaard and Barbara Herman,

An agent with integrity resists the demand to suspend his projects and commitments. An agent with integrity thus lives an internally unified life, but somewhere along the way the other has dropped out of the analysis. What does having a well-ordered soul that have to do with my spouse, my friend, or any other ethically significant person with whom I come into contact? If I do manage to regard my commitments and projects as uniquely my own I may do so without being integrated into a social context in the right way—integrity in this sense is partly a matter of maintaining *separateness* from others and their projects, something that he argues Kantian moral theory takes itself to be able to do better than utilitarianism, but in fact cannot do well enough. The demand for integrity, understood this way, reflects a concern for what one is or ought to be like psychologically, and not primarily for how one must stand and see oneself in relation to others.

While the cases that motivate Williams and Railton involve a perverse erasure of morally significant others from the sorts of considerations that show up in a moral theory, this criterion of integrity is a curiously psychologistic one. So understood the problem of alienation is an internal concern about the psychology of a single agent. An attempt to resolve it will have to show that psychological unity is possible, and in particular that the correct normative theory (whatever that turns out to be) is consistent with that unity.

Before foisting a troublingly individualistic agenda onto Williams—and on the basis of a high-level, intertextualist reading of a notoriously vague passage no less—some qualifications are due. Even if Williams is especially focused on making sense of the possibility of psychic unity, mightn't he still have the space to insist that a fully virtuous person will exhibit other-directed virtues, like generosity, charity, benevolence, or honesty? And for that matter, in making room for loving commitment does he not thereby already make room for socially significant relations, even if the element of them that he emphasizes is their internal, psychological realization?

There are reasons to think that both in the moral and the interpersonal domains Williams himself is in fact unconcerned with anything about our sociality beyond the marks it leaves on the psyche. While a proper understanding of virtue may not be available independently of an understanding of social integrity of the kind I'm trying to uncover here, at least for social virtues, Williams's conception of virtue as correspondence of practical judgments and motivations rules it out, particularly given the Humean moral psychology he adopts elsewhere (Williams 1979). In (Williams 1980), for example, his discussion of the virtue of justice is almost entirely confined to virtuous and vicious motivation. It is striking how little Williams has to say about what virtue does

---

to name two influential examples, have powerfully made the case that a commitment to the moral law is something we each make on our own through the spontaneous activity of practical reason, so Kantian ethics is not only compatible with personal integrity but better fit than the alternatives to promote it. Elsewhere I discuss the ways that Kantian constructivism in particular is well-suited to address psychological alienation (see Samuel MS), but what is important for my purposes here is that whether or not Williams succeeds in tarring the Kantian with an alienated conception of agency, we can see in his critique a pervasive concern for alienation *within the self,* and not between persons.

demand of us—it is at least a stylistic if not a substantive theme in Williams's work that his thought experiments center individuals (always men) who *resist* being constrained by the putative demands of morality. Perhaps the clearest example is Gauguin in (Williams 1976*a*), where Williams holds it against moral theory that it might attempt to block the painter from abandoning his family and moving to Tahiti to be an artist.

Personal integrity, for Williams, has little to do with accounting for the ways we are socially situated. The drowning spouse case is in this respect an outlier, and yet in context one may reasonably conclude that Williams takes the significance of the drowning spouse to be that, for the protagonist of the thought experiment, loving her is a project that gives his life meaning. In the context of the article, "personal relations" enter the argument as an example of an "area in which difference of character directly plays a role in the concept of moral individuality [i.e. agency]" (15). In other words, he seems to be thinking of personal relations as relevant to understanding human agency insofar as they leave a mark on our individual character. Further, he identifies their significance to the individual as valuable in the same way other projects are:

> A commitment or involvement with a particular other person might
> be one of the kinds of project which figured basically in a man's
> life... unless such things [deep attachments to other persons] exist,
> there will not be enough substance or conviction in a man's life
> to compel his allegiance to life itself. Life has to have substance if
> anything is to have sense" (17–8)

I don't want to overstate my case here. Nothing I've said proves that Williams understands love or virtue in exclusively individualistic terms. But it does indicate that his prevailing concerns are with their interior, psychological manifestations. Whether or not Williams can account for social alienation, he does not appear interested in it. It is not enough to say that ethics must make room for personal relationships, because the difference between psychological alienation as theorized by Railton and (allegedly) Williams and social alienation is largely a matter of how personal relationships are understood, how their significance is theorized. Philosophical reflections on love, for example, often treat it as a bundle of beliefs, affective states, dispositions, and reasons an agent has, rather than fundamentally as a relation two (or more) agents stand in together. For instance Setiya (2014, 270–1) explains the justifiability of saving one's spouse over three drowning strangers in terms of facts about one's mental states: "the rationality of your action does not depend on aspects of love that go beyond the disposition you manifest in saving M, a disposition to give priority to her needs." In contrast, and gesturing toward something like what I will be exploring under the heading of 'social integrity,' Buber characterizes love as irreducibly relational:

> Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love... Love does not
> cling to the I in such a way as to have the Thou only for its "content,"
> its object; but love is between I and Thou. The man who does not

> know this, with his very being know this, does not know love; even
> though he ascribes to it the feelings he lives through, experiences,
> enjoys, and expresses. (Buber 1923, 19)[6]

It would be uncharitable to saddle Williams with the individualistic, psychologistic reading I've been setting up as a stalking horse, given how little he tells us, at least in (Williams 1976*b*), about what he wants to do with the drowning spouse example. My official view, notwithstanding the suspicions aired in the foregoing, is less ambitious: whatever Williams is trying to do with the example—whether in his diagnosis of what's gone wrong the other has gone missing, or he's just chasing down a different but compatible objection—it is striking that while working through an example that highlights the special kind of significance an other can have, he appears uninterested in asking the question to which taking social relations seriously is the beginning of an answer. And whatever Williams himself makes of this case, others have found in it an avatar for the problem of what I'm calling psychological alienation. The enduring lesson of Williamsian alienation critique, and of Railton's seminal response, is that moral theory risks alienating us from important parts of ourselves, and not, as I am hoping to bring into view here, that it risks alienating us from one another.

The interiorizing move is one way of getting a grip on the intuitive worry but in characterizing the cause of that worry as internal we arrive at a theory that has no place for the other. We might choose, then, to focus instead on the social dimensions of these motivating cases. Throughout his article Railton gestures toward this further concern, noting early on that there is a risk of alienation not only from from one's personal commitments and one's feelings or sentiments but from other people as well. While his main focus throughout is personal alienation and personal integrity he points out that these are bound up together: "we should not think of John's alienation from his affections and his alienation from Anne as wholly independent phenomena, the one the cause of the other" (Railton 1984, 138).

In setting out a blueprint for responding to the problem of alienation he highlights the role that relationships with others must be allowed to play:

> First, we must somehow give an account of practical reasoning
> that does not merely multiply points of view and divide the self—a
> more unified account is needed. Second, we must recognize that
> loving relationships, friendships, group loyalties, and spontaneous
> actions are among the most important contributors to whatever it
> is that makes life worthwhile; any moral theory deserving serious
> consideration must itself give them serious consideration. (Railton
> 1984, 139)

---

[6]Though Kolodny doesn't directly address the question of reducibility with respect to love-relationships, in treating loving relationships as the source of at least some reasons—and thus the relation as prior to the having-a-reason property of an individual—Kolodny (2003) is in a sense closer to Buber here. He also speaks of 'alienation' from other persons in a way similar to the one I propose (157,161), though it is nowhere near his central concern.

He cautions against "the picture of a hypothetical, presocial individual" by which philosophers have become distracted, leading to the (un-argued for) assumption that self-concern is natural and requires no explanation of the kind that concern for others is taken to require (168). He points toward the need for a solution that captures the importance of "participation in certain sorts of social relations—in fact, relations in which various kinds of alienation have been minimized" (147), and insists that the starting point for ethics must be the "situated rather than pre-social individual" (171).

What I've presented as the standard reading of Williams gets us no further than the thought that things are going wrong if we conceive morality as the business of some isolable, rational part of the soul, and it would be better if we integrated our propensity for feelings with our reason. This criticism doesn't grasp the significance of misconceiving human relations. Recommending an integrated conception of practical reason (with passions not conceived as separate from reason) leaves the worry about social alienation untouched.

Though most of the article is focused on addressing what I'm calling psychological alienation, Railton in passing urges adding to this the condition of seeing ourselves as socially situated. This provides the frame for an account, but the question immediately arises: *what does it take to conceive ourselves as situated?* We will not get that right if all that we find missing in the case of the direct-utilitarian husband is a proper connection to his own feelings. It's not nothing to say that we must be allowed to have sentimental relations to one another that we're not estranged from; but this is not enough to return us to a non-alienated standpoint.

Consider a generic case of someone whom Williams would recognize as in some sense socially alienated: if we understand his alienation from his world in terms of a lack of other-directed affections, we will think it can be solved by enriching his psychology. Once he has the feelings associated with friendship and love, and once those are properly integrated with his values, the problem will have been solved and integrity achieved. But this is still only an account of *personal* integrity. It says nothing about the social relations he stands in themselves.

The object-level dispute between Railton and Williams (and between Williams and Smart, in the volume containing Williams's *Critique*) is moral theory: an account of the good and the right and a corresponding account of deliberation done well. But the worry about alienation itself is a worry about agency as conceived by moral theory; about what, given that theory, we must be like. The problem of social alienation is that moral theory alienates us not just from ourselves but from our relationships to others as well when it analyzes social relations in psychological terms and thereby attempts to translate an external dyadic relationship into an internal relationship or property. That other persons figure in our ethical worldview only as they figure in the contents of our mental states means that we lose, so to speak, the otherness of the other (in a way that I hope to make more precise as I go on). The task is to provide a philosophical reunification that keeps the focus on relationships, rather than

deflecting to psychology.

I don't mean to suggest that intra-psychic disharmony is unproblematic. It is arguably an important criterion of adequacy for moral theory that it be consistent with unified a moral psychology.[7] But this is not the only sense, and to my mind not even the most salient sense, in which Williams and Railton's cases risk producing a shattered picture of moral agency.

The psychological concern is that we could not be the way moral theory proposes to understand us because then we would be essentially fractured, restless, and at war with ourselves. It seems to me, however, that we can't be the way moral theory proposes to understand us because then we would be merely incidentally in contact, occasionally bouncing into each other—windowless moral monads, each containing the complete story of our ethical lives from our own perspectives. That my ethical representations of you and your ethical representations of me correspond at all would be a matter of grace or luck, but there would be no real existence to ethical relations, just the correspondence of monadic properties. This is a bad way to understand ourselves, one that denies the possibility of ever standing in normative relations with each other.

The demand of social integrity is to have others show up in the right way in the account of what we are, in their separateness and concreteness, and not merely as reflected in our affective states. We must be able to recognize them as "a reality separate from ourselves," as Murdoch (1971, 42) puts it, and ourselves as standing in relation to them.

To get a better grip on the concern I have in mind I want to take a quick detour through the epistemology of perception.

2   Perceptual Alienation

A common criticism of traditional epistemological theories is that they leave us trapped behind a 'veil of ideas', never perceiving more than the contents of our own minds. Though not typically characterized as a worry about 'alienation,' it may as well be since it concerns a disconnect between subjects and the objects of their experience—or more generally between subjects and the external

---

[7]I suspect, however, that the importance of intra-psychic harmony is sometimes exaggerated. Not only, as I will shortly propose, might personal integrity depend on social integrity, but in some social circumstances the demands of social integrity may even *require* accepting personal alienation. Sufficiently non-ideal political environments, for example, may require that some agents distance themselves from their projects and values, and even learn to distrust their own inclinations.

The same may be true of social alienation, however: some political contexts may require not only distance from parts of oneself, but distance from problematic social relations in which one is involved. Railton notes, similarly, that "the alienation of some individuals or groups from their milieu may at times be necessary for fundamental social criticism or cultural innovation" (Railton 1984, 148). Conversely, some political circumstances may make both social and personal integrity unavailable, at least for those who occupy subordinate social positions—see generally (Fanon 1952). For Fanon both individual and social alienation can only be overcome through revolutionary social change, the outcome of which will be, "the birth of a human world, in other words, a world of reciprocal recognitions" (193).

world.[8]

In response, epistemologists attempt to explain how the denizens of the external world can genuinely feature as that to which we are related in perceptual experience, as what we perceive rather than as what we merely represent to ourselves in an inner theater. If there is room for a notion of representation in an account of perceptual experience at all, we should not be fooled into thinking that these representations are themselves the only things that we can be in perceptual contact with: rather, we *see* external objects *through* or *by* representing them. Better, however, to think of perception not in the first instance as representing things at all but as *relating* us to those things (perhaps though representations), or to understand ourselves as *directly aware* of things when we perceive them. The first criterion of perceptual integrity, so to speak, is that a theory can make sense of genuine perceptual contact with an external world.

However, perceptual alienation is about more than 'perceptual contact', as I've glossed it so far; there is a further concern about how we get *concrete particularity* into a picture where all of the resources available to us are general.[9] That is, it may not be enough to explain how perception can get us out from behind the veil of ideas without explaining how it can have a particular object, and not just a set of general attributes the object has, as itself that to which perception puts us in relation. The question of how generality can relate us to a particular—known sometimes as a worry about 'demonstrative' or '*de re*' content—is less commonly thought to establish a criterion of adequacy.[10] Nevertheless, the practical version—that others must be in view in their concrete particularity—may have more intuitive attraction. The second criterion of perceptual integrity is that an epistemological theory can make sense of the concrete particularity of worldly objects, and not just their external-worldliness.[11]

Given the prominence that the first worry enjoys in the epistemology of

---

[8]The objection is probably first expressed by Sextus Empiricus—see the introduction to (Brewer 1999) for a review of the literature framed around this question. A rare instance where the term 'alienation' is used in this context is the title of Mike Martin's "On Being Alienated" (2006), though he nowhere uses the word within the paper. In addition to those cited throughout, Charles Travis has done a lot to push in this direction, and much of the discussion here draws indirectly on (Travis 2004).

Another vocabulary for what I take to be essentially the same worry is Merleau-Ponty's (1945). He charges orthodox theories of perception with falling into either either 'intellectualism' or 'empiricism:' the first mistakenly interiorizes perception as internal representation, the second reduces it to a purely causal process. What he wants to make space for instead is our perceptual grip on a world that is external to us but which we ourselves are in (a grip in turn grounded partly in our bodily presence in the world, what he calls 'motor intentionality' 112/140), which results in our being "geared into the world" (*passim*). See (Sachs 2014) for a helpful discussion of some of the parallels between Merleau-Ponty and analytic philosophers of perception, specifically Wilfrid Sellars.

[9]See e.g. Soteriou (2000).

[10]Tyler Burge (2010), for example, argues on empiricist grounds that we ought not to expect a metaphysical difference of this kind.

[11]Perhaps these are two independent criteria, perhaps they are different ways of specifying the same one—this question is not important for me here.

perception, it is striking that when we look to how other persons are involved in our ethical self-understanding we are tempted to insist on a crude psychologism, according to which our normative standing vis-à-vis others is mediated by their ability to produce motivational states in us or to instantiate universal rules of conduct. We seem content to understand ourselves as normatively cut off from one another, trapped behind a veil of motivations or intentions, of pro-attitudes or maxims. While we are disturbed by the idea that all we are ever in perceptual contact with are the contents of our own minds, in moral theory we seem untroubled by the idea that our ethical contact with others takes place at the level of beliefs, desires, maxims, etc; that others are not a part of what it is for us to be moral agents. The problem of perceptual alienation and corresponding criteria for perceptual integrity can be re-purposed to help us get clearer on what it would mean for the other to appear in the right way in an account of what we are: social integrity requires making sense of how others can be significant for us as external and as particular. Borrowing the term from Murdoch, I'll call this the *individual reality* condition on social integrity.

At a general level, one way of capturing the demand for perceptual integrity is through 'disjunctivist' theories of perception. Disjunctivists resist identifying experience itself with what is (or seems to be) common between genuine (i.e. knowledge-affording) perception and merely apparent perception (appearances, seemings, sense-data, etc.), where the genuine case involves the same content plus some extra fact about its accuracy. Instead, a genuine case is understood by the disjunctivist as one in which the experiencing subject is in contact with a concrete, particular object in the external world, and a degenerate case is understood as one in which the subject merely seems to be in this kind of contact. What is common between good and bad cases is re-interpreted as a disjunction: the appearance, seeming, sense-datum etc. is not common to both kinds of cases. Rather, one is experiencing either a *mere* seeming (etc.), and thus not really perceiving, or one is genuinely perceiving the object. While the two cases are subjectively indistinguishable, the theory vindicates that at least when things are going right perceptual experience meets the equivalent of the individual reality constraint. Whether or not we are perceiving something is not a matter of what's going on inside of us, plus the cooperation or luck of nature; it is a feature of the relation between someone and the object of their experience.[12]

3   Openness to the Other

The individual reality condition gives us the beginning of an understanding of social integrity, but it cannot be enough on its own. In the perceptual case the problem is generated by the obscurity of having an object in view in the right

---

[12]In addition to the Brewer and Travis cited above this view is probably closest to McDowell's— see (McDowell 1983; 1984; 1994). See Pritchard (2012) for an overview of epistemological disjunctivist approaches to perceptual experience.

way. Conceiving of our agency as bound up with others, however, brings along the additional demand that they show up in the story *as subjects*.

If the gold standard for an integrated theory of perception is that it makes sense of our epistemic "openness to the world", what an integrated moral theory requires is that it make sense of the agent's 'practical openness to the other.'[13] The openness required in this case isn't merely to a worldly object but to another subject—another like oneself. My practical openness to another isn't separable from their being practically open to me. If it were we would each only be open to one another as to a third person, one we each see as bearing a special normative property rather than as standing in relation to ourselves.

Compare a variation on John Perry's famous case of the shopper, who, both leaving a trail of sugar behind himself and searching for the person spilling sugar all over the store, eventually sees himself in a mirror and takes himself to be looking at "the messy shopper going up the aisle on the other side" (Perry 1979, 12). Perry's shopper is alienated from himself in this moment in a peculiar way, in that he is both the object and the subject of his awareness but not as a case of self-awareness. Similarly, I might spy one of my friends across Schenley Plaza, apparently looking not at me but into a restaurant. Meanwhile, she notices me in the reflection of the window, but because of the reflection's angle does not realize that I'm looking at her. In this situation we both recognize each other but neither of us is aware of being recognized. Our symmetrical recognition, in this case, does not constitute the shared experience of one another that characterizes properly *mutual* recognition. This is the possibility that moral theory must leave open, and which is obscured by a psychologistic analysis of alienation.

The recognition at issue here is mutual not just because both parties involved have matching recognitional attitudes towards one another but because what it is to recognize another is to recognize them as recognizing oneself. The implicit conceptual or propositional content is not just that another is a human, a person, an equal, but a fact that places her with respect to oneself. Each of us does not only recognize what the other is like but also how they stand to us and thereby we to them. They are thus not (only) the content of our awareness, as they could be while the independent reality condition was met, but sharer with us a recognitional nexus. This is not to say that every experience of another has this structure—what I'm trying to get at here is a structure that a satisfying picture of agency as a socially-embedded phenomenon must have room for, because it is a central part of how we understand ourselves that we are among others.[14]

---

[13]The phrase 'openness to the world' appears throughout (McDowell 1994).

[14]Even though it is not the structure of every experience of another, it is perhaps the structure of paradigmatic moral relationships: the most fully realized form of self-other relation. At the least it is one important form relating to others can take. Setiya (forthcoming) and Korsgaard (2018) argue for different reasons that important moral relationships are often asymmetrically recognitive, Setiya in the case of love and Korsgaard in the case of non-human animals. What I say here is intended to be consistent with both, contra Levinas (1961), for whom the *fundamental*

What I'm trying to sketch here might be understood as an interwoven, mutually constitutive practical openness to one another, such that one's practical relation to another and the other's practical relation to one are not independent but two ways of specifying the same shared self-consciousness. Consider the shared experience of a sunset.[15] Two friends are looking at a sunset together. What's happening is more than that one is looking at the sunset and the other is also looking at the sunset. It is part of the experience for each that it is shared; it is an experience of looking at a sunset with a friend. But this in turn is not just a matter of one having an experience that includes the other's having an experience in its content in addition to the other having an experience that includes the first one's experience in its content. The experience is of looking at a sunset with another who is also having the experience of looking at a sunset together. Velleman refers to this phenomenon as 'joint attention'.

This structure is sometimes analyzed reductively in terms of an infinite series of nested mental states that by definition constitute "common knowledge". The alternative that I'm recommending here (as is Velleman, in different terms) involves a recognitive element in each person's experience that is not merely symmetrical but somehow combined.[16]

A toy disjunctivist theory of joint attention will serve to at least see how an alternative to the common knowledge analysis is coherent.[17] The thought is that a true case of joint attention involves a relation that two parties stand in to one another, vis-à-vis a sunset (or whatever), rather than being factorable into what is happening in one and what is happening in the other, plus the luck or cooperation of nature that they correspond in the right way. (Recall the worry about monads, corresponding as a matter of grace.)

The degenerate case, one where I think I'm sharing such a moment with

---

moral relation is radically asymmetric. However, part of what Levinas is trying to do with this asymmetry (which he glosses as the 'invisibility' of the other—see e.g. 35) is to emphasize how forcefully the other resists being assimilated to a mere representation, in what I take to be more or less the same move as the one captured by the individual reality condition above. Whether and how to reconcile this shared aim with Levinas's conviction that achieving it is inconsistent with treating recognitive relations as paradigmatically mutual is well beyond the scope of this paper.

[15]This discussion draws on (Velleman 2013).

[16]See (Lederman 2018*a*) for an review of the literature on common knowledge, and Lederman (2018*c;b*) for additional criticism of the notion's viability. My objections to theorizing joint attention in terms of common knowledge are less technical, though Lederman's points are well-taken. I don't have the space here to discuss why I find common knowledge accounts of phenomena like these unsatisfying, though I am broadly sympathetic to those offered be Michael Thompson (2012).

Richard (Moran 2018, 120) makes what I take to be the roughly same point, within a framework congenial to my own, although the reader will note that I have avoided explicitly incorporating the distinctions in grammatical person that are key to Moran's approach (for reasons I don't have the space to elaborate here): "the difference made by a genuine encounter between the two people cannot be made out by any elaboration of further levels of beliefs and intentions they may have with respect to each other." This is because the difference is made "by [the two parties to a communicative act] being in a position to address each other, with the interplay between first-person and second-person pronouns."

[17]Disjunctivist theories have their own difficulties, and in the end we may find that disjunctivism is the way to theorize shared self-consciousness or just a convenient stopping place along the way.

a friend but she is in fact thinking about how little she gets out of our friendship and ignoring the sunset entirely while she plots to sever ties, may be subjectively indistinguishable, for me, from a case of genuine joint attention (though I would like to think that if I were perceptive enough I could spot the difference). The same can be said for a case where, unbeknownst to me, my friend has been replaced by a cleverly-disguised robot, and thus there is no one else for me to share the experience with. Still, where genuine joint attention differs from ersatz joint intention is not that I am in the same state plus something else is true: in a case of genuine joint attention I really am in the state that I seem to be in, whereas in a case of ersatz joint attention I am in fact having an experience of something that is not what it seems (itself a troubling kind of alienation).

Recognition is thus not the apprehension of a fact about another but a fact about *us,* the apprehension of which partially constitutes its object. When one experiences a mutually recognitive interaction with another there are not two symmetrical recognitional states but a single, shared experience of recognition, in which one's recognition of another is a part of the other's recognition of them, and vice versa.[18] Agency always already involves, in A. J. Julius's phrase, "interpenetrated capacities for living interpenetrated lives" (Julius 2016, 208).

This might be called the *shared self-consciousness* condition on social integration. However, it subsumes the individual reality condition—shared self-consciousness is the overcoming of separateness between two persons who are worldly and concrete and yet at the same time not only objects to each other—and so the demand for shared self-consciousness *is* the demand for social integration.

Returning to the moral case we can now say that robustly vindicating the moral significance of others (in the way that worries about social alienation demand) involves making sense of others entering our deliberation as more than mere content: they appear not only insofar as they satisfy a general representation of another, but as another voice that joins in. Others are not just objects in the external world that we can aid or thwart, harm or protect, but persons with claims on what we choose, and the capacity to recognize us reciprocally. Their authority over us is structurally like our own, if not always as strong.[19] This authority can be limited or circumscribed, or it may be merely

---

[18]This is the structure of what is sometimes called "Hume's circle", wherein one cannot make a promise without using the concept of promising, and thus the term is partially constituted by the practice to which it refers while the practice presupposes the use of the term (see Anscombe 1978). The common feature of the two cases is a state of affairs (a promissory obligation between two parties, a recognitional nexus) that is partially constituted by the fact that those involved are aware of it.

[19]The ideal of structurally similar authority can be heard in a way that risks reinforcing dominating social relations, especially those of men over women, wherein women are socialized or conditioned to treat the authority of such men as superseding their own in even the most private and personal matters. The point I want to make here, however, is fairly weak: insofar as we regard others as legitimate sources of moral authority, this authority is at least some of the time interwoven with our own agency, but this should not be taken to validate overcorrection in the other direction. Further, there may be good non-ideal reasons to reassert the superiority of individual authority under social conditions where some people's agency has been compromised

prima facie. But if we are to vindicate this basic thought what it cannot be is somehow mediated by our own. That I'm the ultimate practical authority over my actions—that any authority others have is no more than I grant them (even if the reason I grant it to them can be cashed out in constitutivist terms such that I have no choice but to grant it to them)—is a paradigmatically alienated conception of practical authority.

Conclusion

The concern underlying Williams's alienation objection to consequentialism is that it all but eliminates any recognizable notion of agency. It reduces the agent to a calculator of outcomes, to a moment of choice, with no commitments, projects, or relations to identify with.

Murdoch makes a similar criticism aimed at the image of an isolated Kantian will, and made vivid in her example of a common but mistaken conception of morality as a 'visit to a shop':

> I enter the shop in a condition of totally responsible freedom, I objectively estimate the features of the goods, and I choose. The greater my objectivity and discrimination the larger the number of products from which I can select. (Murdoch 1971, 8)

The mistake she wants to diagnose involves looking only at the 'needle-thin' moment of choice—understood in terms of the public action that issues from it—as the source of value in the world. According to the simplistic picture, agency is identified as the capacity for choice: an isolable faculty or power residing in a human creature, a "burrowing pinpoint of consciousness, inside, or beside, a lump of being" (Murdoch 1971, 47). Nothing else about this creature is of any ethical significance beyond the will it supports.

Murdoch's point, however, is not just that the life of an agent is more than a discrete series of choices. She understands agency in the first instance as a constant churning process of inner struggle—the diachronic cultivation and transformation of one's unique standpoint on the world. The process aims not just to perfect the self but to prepare oneself to be properly receptive to the reality of persons and things outside of oneself: what I have called the individual reality constraint.

Williams offers us a gloss on personal integration, and Railton identifies social integration as an interrelated problem. Murdoch urges the beginning of a vision of social integration, wherein the other shows up in moral theory in a special sort of way, not merely as a thought but as a concrete being. I take this to be part of the story of how we must understand ourselves among others, as Railton insists we must, for personal integration is impossible without social integration. The idea of intra-psychic harmony is not available in detachment

---

or subordinated.

from the idea that we are a kind of living being who stands in recognitive relations with others.[20]

The demand to get an individual reality properly into view sets up the problem of social alienation in that it clarifies the nature of what must be overcome. Overcoming it, however, requires making sense of how an individual reality can be not only a concrete object external to oneself but another subject, to whom one is joined in a mutually recognitive nexus. Getting outside of ourselves and back in again is the work of constituting what Hegel calls "the I that is We and the We that is I". And this is what I think a fuller picture of social integration must involve.[21] [22]

References

Anscombe, G. E. M. (1978), "Rules, Rights, and Promises." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1:pp. 318–323.

Brandom, Robert B. (2019), *A Spirit of Trust*. Harvard University Press.

Brewer, Bill (1999), *Perception and Reason*. Oxford University Press.

Buber, Martin (1923), *Ich und Du*. Reprinted in 2004 as *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith; A&C Black.

Burge, Tyler (2010), *Origins of Objectivity*. Oxford University Press.

Fanon, Frantz (1952), *Black Skin, White Masks*. Reprinted in 2008, Richard Philcox, Trans., New York: Grove Press.

Haddock, Adrian & MacPherson, Fiona, eds. (2008), *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge* . Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

[20]One may hear an echo here of the core Hegelian thought that, as Honneth (1996, 92) puts it, "one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee." Honneth, however, wants to naturalize this notion via the social psychology of George Herbert Mead, and thus casts the role of mutual recognition in more broadly psychological or psychoanalytic terms than I would. In particular he focuses on the role it plays in grounding self-respect—necessary for psychological development, but in that way theoretically interiorized as a causal contributor to personal integrity, in the terms above. Something closer to my approach may be found in Pippin (2008) and Brandom (2019), a suggestion I develop in more detail in (Samuel MS).

[21]I do not mean to suggest that Murdoch conceives of the individual reality of others in objectifying terms, but she has little to say about return-to-self by way of mutual recognition that I have argued is a requirement for making sense of shared self-consciousness. These Hegelian remarks are, however, consistent with what I take her to have in mind.

[22]Special thanks to Liam Bright, Sophie Cote, Eleanor Gordon-Smith, Nathan Howard, Ned Howells-Whitaker, Kate Manne, John McDowell, Japa Pallikkathayil, Christa Peterson, Francey Russell, Keshav Singh, Michael Thompson, and Jake Wojtowicz, all of whom have offered feedback, support, or helpful criticism throughout the unusually long life of this paper, which began, in Michael's seminar on the second-person in 2016, as an attempt to spell out the 'puzzle about justice' as applied to Korsgaard's constructivism.

Honneth, Axel (1996), *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. MIT Press.

Julius, A. J. (2016), "Mutual Recognition." *Jurisprudence*, vol. 7, no. 2:pp. 193–209. Based on the Jurisprudence Annual Lecture, 2016.

Kolodny, Niko (2003), "Love as Valuing a Relationship." *Philosophical Review*, vol. 112, no. 2:pp. 135–189.

Korsgaard, Christine (2018), *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. Oxford University Press.

Lederman, Harvey (2018*a*), "Common Knowledge." In *The Routledge Handbook of Collective Intentionality*, Marija Jankovic & Kirk Ludwig, eds., pp. 181–195.

— (2018*b*), "Two Paradoxes of Common Knowledge: Coordinated Attack and Electronic Mail." *Noûs*, pp. 921–945.

— (2018*c*), "Uncommon Knowledge." *Mind*, vol. 127, no. 508:pp. 1069–1105.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1961), *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Reprinted in 1969, Alphonso Lingis, Trans., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Martin, Michael G. F. (2006), "On Being Alienated." In *Perceptual Experience*, Tamar S. Gendler & John Hawthorne, eds., Oxford University Press.

McDowell, John (1983), "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge." In *Proceedings of the British Academy, Volume 68: 1982*, pp. 455–79, Oxford University Press.

— (1984), "De Re Senses." *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 136:pp. 283–294.

— (1994), *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1945), *Phenomenology of Perception*. Reprinted in 2012, Donald A. Landes, Trans., New York: Routledge.

Moran, Richard (2018), *The Exchange of Words: Speech, Testimony, and Intersubjectivity*. Oup Usa.

Murdoch, Iris (1971), *The Sovereignty of Good*. Routledge.

Perry, John (1979), "The Problem of the Essential Indexical." *Noûs*, vol. 13, no. December:pp. 3–21.

Pippin, Robert B. (2008), *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge University Press.

Pritchard, Duncan (2012), *Epistemological Disjunctivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Railton, Peter (1984), "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 2:pp. 134–171.

Sachs, Carl B. (2014), "Discursive and Somatic Intentionality: Merleau-Ponty Contra 'McDowell or Sellars'." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2:pp. 199–227.

Samuel, Jack (MS), "Toward a Post-Kantian Constructivism."

Setiya, Kieran (2014), "Love and the Value of a Life." *Philosophical Review*, vol. 123, no. 3:pp. 251–280.

— (forthcoming), "Other People." In *The Value of Humanity: A Re-Evaluation*, Sarah Buss & Nandi Theunissen, eds., Oxford University Press.

Smart, J. J. C. & Williams, Bernard (1973), *Utilitarianism: For and Against.* Cambridge University Press.

Soteriou, Matthew (2000), "The Particularity of Visual Perception." *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 8, no. 2:pp. 173–189.

Stocker, Michael (1976), "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories." *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 73, no. 14:pp. 453–466.

Sturgeon, Scott (2008), "Disjunctivism about Visual Experience." In *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, Adrian Haddock & Fiona MacPherson, eds., Oxford University Press.

Thompson, Michael (2012), "You and I." Given as a talk at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society; vol. cxii no. 3.

Travis, Charles (2004), "The Silence of the Senses." *Mind*, vol. 113, no. 449:pp. 57–94.

Velleman, J. David (2013), "Sociality and Solitude." *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 16, no. 3:pp. 324–335.

Williams, Bernard (1973), "A Critique of Utilitarianism." In (Smart & Williams 1973).

— (1976*a*), "Moral Luck." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. supplementary volume L:pp. 115–35. Reprinted in (Williams 1981); citations are to page numbers from that volume.

— (1976*b*), "Persons, Character, and Morality." In *The Identities of Persons*, A. O. Rorty, ed., University of California Press. Reprinted in (Williams 1981); citations are to page numbers from that volume.

— (1979), "Internal and External Reasons." In *Rational Action*, Ross Harrison, ed., pp. 101–113, Cambridge University Press.

— (1980), "Justice as a Virtue." In *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., pp. 189–200, University of California Press. Reprinted in (Williams 1981); citations are to page numbers from that volume.

— (1981), *Moral Luck*. Cambridge University Press.

Wolf, Susan (2012), "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment." In *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes From the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, Ulrike Heuer & Gerald Lang, eds., p. 71, Oxford University Press, Usa.