Integrity, Commitment, and Indirect Consequentialism

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1. Introduction

Bernard Williams introduced the idea of criticising moral theory on the grounds that commitment to it undermines the integrity of moral agents, using the idea in a famous critique of utilitarianism. The argument has engendered a large and important literature on the relation between moral theory, moral motivation and integrity.¹ It would be fair to say, however, that Williams’s argument has failed to win general acceptance and part of the reason for this is that in framing the objection Williams presupposes a crude and unpromising form of consequentialism, direct act-utilitarianism.

Direct act-utilitarianism is a theory of both right action and right moral deliberation. Act-utilitarianism offers a famously straightforward account of right action and direct act-utilitarianism adds an interpretation of the practical nature of this account. According to direct utilitarians, an account of right action furnishes moral agents with a correct procedure for deliberating over moral matters. In particular, the direct act-utilitarian assumes a responsibility to explicitly reflect on the best available consequences in every morally significant situation and act accordingly. Williams tries to show that holding true to this course inevitably undermines the integrity of the agent.
Direct utilitarianism, and direct versions of consequentialism more generally, contrast with indirect versions. Indirect utilitarians propose an account of right action along utilitarian lines, but replace the prescriptive use of utilitarianism as a practical decision theory with a utilitarian evaluation of moral deliberation and related features of moral agency. By refocussing the prescriptive demands of utilitarian commitment away from right action and toward features of moral agency influencing long-term moral effectiveness, or productivity, indirect versions of utilitarianism can accommodate limitations of ordinary moral agency in important and interesting ways. Over time, there is only so much moral productivity to be squeezed out of an ordinary person before exhaustion and an emotional incapacity to care about the good of others take over. Over time, there is only so much good we can do for people without some personal involvement in their plight. Indirect utilitarianism, it seems, is able to accommodate psychological limitations on moral agency such as these. Features of moral agency falling under judgment of an indirect utilitarian are those that could in fact have been cultivated over a lifetime’s moral effort and these are *per force* limited to what is humanly and psychologically possible. If it turns out that it is not psychologically possible for us to sustain an unlimited concern for the troubles of unknown and distant others, then it will be no expectation of the indirect utilitarian that we do so. It is unfortunate that Williams’s integrity objection is aimed at direct utilitarianism, because many utilitarians take themselves to have strong independent grounds to avoid direct utilitarianism and direct consequentialist theory in general.\(^2\)

The concept of integrity, however, is broad and might be said to conflict with commitment to a moral theory in numerous ways.
2. What Are Integrity Objections to Consequentialism?

Integrity objections to consequentialism have it that commitment to consequentialism undermines the integrity of agents and this either makes consequentialism incoherent or morally bankrupt. There are various possible ways of developing the objection. There are also various kinds of consequentialist commitment at which it might be directed. Williams’s integrity objection, for example, is aimed at a version of utilitarianism in which right action is a function of the best available consequences of individual acts, where best consequences are defined in terms of maximised utility. However, versions of consequentialism that would have us abandon utility as a common measure of the good, and with it the idea that there exists a theoretical equation between best consequences and maximised utility, also fall within the scope of interesting integrity objections.

Nonetheless, the scope of integrity objections to consequentialism is limited. Integrity objections to consequentialism are fundamentally objections to consequentialist moral commitment. They are that consequentialist commitment tends to undermine the integrity of agents. Where a consequentialist recommends that ordinary moral agents not explicitly commit to consequentialism, but proceed naively, say through traditional social reinforcement or under the command of moral mandarins, it is difficult to sustain integrity objections against it. Strictly speaking, it is not the integrity of agents that appears undermined in this case, but their autonomy.

Philosophers who make integrity objections to consequentialism hypothesise a breakdown of some kind between a moral agent’s wholehearted commitment to consequentialism and conditions necessary for the agent to live with integrity. On the one hand, we might argue that wholehearted commitment to consequentialism
necessarily undermines the integrity of moral agents. On the other hand, we might press the more modest objection that wholehearted commitment to consequentialism tends, in ordinary circumstances, to undermine the integrity of moral agents. According to the more modest objection, it is highly likely that ordinary moral agents wholeheartedly committed to consequentialism will find their integrity under assault in various ways.

The fundamental thought behind the objection is this. Integrity is such an important, indeed essential, feature a good and worthwhile life that moral theorists ought not make it a matter of great fortune that moral agents be persons of integrity. This does not mean that luck ought play no role at all in our managing a good and worthwhile life. It means only that subscription to a moral theory ought not itself introduce this element of luck into the equation. It seems to be a considerable flaw in a moral theory that, great fortune aside, subscription to it must be bought at the cost of our integrity.

3. Direct Utilitarianism and the Problem of Commitment

To a large degree personal and moral integrity is a matter of holding fast to our principles and commitments, especially in the face of obstacles and temptations. The objection to consequentialism we will consider here, the problem of commitment, picks up on the quality of fidelity to our commitments. While this may not be all there is to integrity, a widespread failure to stand by our commitments defeats integrity and the problem of commitment attributes such a failure to a successful consequentialist agent. A preliminary case against direct utilitarianism is relatively easy to mount on this basis. A direct utilitarian has an overriding commitment to act to optimally pursue the general good. The trouble is that this is a highly formal
commitment. It does not specify any particular end or goal, and it does not describe a person’s engagement with the world and with others in any particular way. A person cannot act purely under the brief to do as much good as possible. Actions are necessarily directed at specific ends, not formally defined states. Utilitarian commitment thus serves as a constraint or filter on the pursuit of particular ends, rather than as a direct provider of these ends.

As a filter on the pursuit of ends, direct utilitarianism proves harsh. At every point of decision, agents face the option of working toward an established end or switching tack to a new end. Direct utilitarians would have us filter out all sub-optimally productive actions so that the moment a more productive option enters the equation a switch of ends is required. Goals have a kind of momentum and it is sometimes counterproductive to give them up the moment a seemingly more attractive proposition comes to our attention. Nonetheless, utilitarian calculation does not require us to pay special heed to fidelity to our current goals and requires us to recognise the instrumental value of such fidelity only on the occasions that continuing to pursue an established goal yields a determinable practical benefit. Often enough, this benefit is obscure or is outweighed by other factors, including the opportunity costs of on-going commitment.

The charge against direct utilitarianism, therefore, is that it requires agents to abandon commitments the moment acting for them becomes sub-optimal. Direct utilitarian agents are compelled to act as the moral wind blows. They become a kind of moral wanton and their integrity appears to be undermined in some important way. But how important is this aspect of integrity? What moral quality is threatened when an agent’s steadfastness and constancy is undermined in matters subsidiary to her one overriding commitment? Why should faithlessness to lower-level commitments
matter from a moral point of view given that it is brought about by faithfulness to an overarching higher-level commitment? These questions illustrate a clash of moral intuitions. On the one hand, fidelity to a general moral conviction might appear to exemplify moral integrity. On the other hand, however, the ready abandonment of concrete commitments appears to exemplify a deeply unsatisfactory aspect of character. The integrity thus threatened has both a personal and a social aspect. It is the social aspect of integrity that figures most strikingly in the moral case against utilitarianism.

We readily find ourselves in the midst of social commitments based on such things as passion, friendship, neighborliness, shared interests and projects, professional engagements and civic duty. Such commitments are not always explicit in the way that promises and vows are explicit. Often they involve expectations and obligations that arise implicitly as interactions ramify and shared situations develop. Social commitments are important avenues to the good, but a direct utilitarian agent is under an obligation to abandon them the moment they become sub-optimal. Friendship furnishes one illustration of this. Letting down friends carries a heavy moral cost, in the moment and into the future, but this is just grist to the utilitarian mill. Acts of friendship also have significant costs, including very significant opportunity costs, and the sums are unlikely to favor faithfulness to friends in the long term. Occasionally, a direct utilitarian agent may chance upon commitments that pass through a utilitarian filter over and over again, to which they are thus entitled to remain true. But such conditions are as rare as they are happy.

4. Direct Consequentialism and the Problem of Commitment
The problem of commitment unveils a problem with direct utilitarian agency, but does it constitute an objection to direct consequentialism? Consequentialists recognise a plurality of goods over which optimal outcomes are defined, but such goods are impartial goods and optimality is an agent-neutral operation over them. Let us consider a version of direct consequentialism that recognises friendship as an intrinsic good. People committed to such a theory might find that they are often morally compelled to act in support of friendship, but the only grounds on which they should think themselves justified in privileging their own relationships over those of others are practical grounds. We are usually better placed to tend to our own friendships than to advance the friendships of others. If consequentialists remain faithful to their friends, this will be because they value friendship and wish to see more of it. Direct consequentialists will seek to optimise realisation of the value of friendship whenever this is an optimally productive act. They will not respond to the value of friendship by acknowledging the agent-relative significance their own friendships have for them. They will not honor friendship in this way.4

Such an attitude may have a disastrous effect on the depth and authenticity of relationships available to consequentialist agents, but this is not the essential point of the argument at hand. The core claim advanced here is that direct consequentialist commitment has an inhibitory effect on the moral agent’s disposition to remain true to social commitments in general. In quite ordinary circumstances, direct consequentialists will find themselves compelled to act against their social commitments because they place no special store in their remaining true to them. It is a practical consideration whether remaining true to our social commitments will be morally optimal, and such a consideration is defeated readily enough. Direct consequentialists will live with a raft of social commitments that they remain less than
fully committed to. If a disposition to remain true to social commitments just because they are commitments we have entered into is an essential component of personal and moral integrity, then direct consequentialist commitment tends to undermine integrity.

5. Indirect Consequentialism and the Problem of Commitment

Is indirect consequentialism vulnerable to the problem of commitment? An argument that it is not goes as follows. A disposition to flit wantonly from one superficial commitment to another is the product of short-term thinking, not the product of consequentialist thinking. Generally speaking, it is bad policy to start a thing and not see it through to the end. Our chances of maximising the good depend on taking a consistent and committed approach to particular ends. Thus indirect consequentialists are obliged to cultivate that strength of character required to remain true to commitments in the face of many obstacles and temptations. Far from presenting a chronic threat to the integrity of moral agents, indirect consequentialism obliges agents to do all they can to cultivate and protect their integrity.

As plausible as it sounds, I do not think the argument works. The problem of commitment is not a challenge to indirect consequentialists’ strength of character, which measures a capacity to stay the course, but a challenge to indirect consequentialist strategies of character. No doubt, continually moving from one complicated pursuit to another is bad policy, so indirect consequentialists are unlikely to be in danger of becoming caricatures like the moral wanton. But it doesn’t follow from this that the optimal strategy for consequentialists will involve respecting commitments in a way that is fully consistent with their integrity. What would an optimally productive strategy toward commitment be? It must be realisable through accessible motivational states and yet put consequentialists in a position to bring
about as much good as possible. Three rival strategies recommend themselves: the
strategy of honoring commitments, the strategy of intrinsically valuing fidelity to
commitments, and the strategy of treating commitments as practical tools.

On the strategy of honoring commitments, indirect consequentialists interpret
their commitments as introducing specifically agent-relative demands upon them. An
asymmetry exists here between agents’ attitudes to their own commitments and their
attitudes to the commitments of others. Consider an example in which I have
promised to pick up a colleague from the airport. As I am leaving for the airport, my
neighbor approaches asking to borrow my car to fulfil an obligation of her own. Her
own car has just broken down and she has promised a friend that she would pick him
up from hospital, where he has spent the day having minor surgery. From an
impartial point of view, and considering only the relative importance of the two
promises, my fidelity to my promise and my neighbor’s fidelity to her promise are on
a par. Were I simply interested in fidelity to promises per se, there would be little to
choose between the two options before me. And were she to need the car to satisfy
two separate promises, I should perhaps lend her the car on the grounds that the
breaking of two promises is worse than the breaking of one. On the strategy of
honoring commitments, however, there is no real contest between the two options.
The agent-relative reasons furnished by a commitment are accorded special status
over and above agent-neutral reasons furnished by an appreciation of the good that
fidelity to commitment represents generally. It would require a genuine emergency or
a great mismatch between the significance of two commitments to tempt me to
override a disposition to be true to my commitment in favor of my promoting my
neighbor’s fidelity to her commitment.
The strategy of honoring commitments should not be confused with rigid deontological concern for fidelity in general and promise keeping in particular. Circumstances often change and it is sometimes wise to give up on commitments. Understanding can improve, showing up some commitments as mistakes. Commitments may clash, and it is sometimes necessary to choose between them. The strategy of honoring commitments is not one of slavishly remaining true to commitments no matter what, but involves a fundamental disposition to accord our commitments a specific, defeasible agent-relative importance.

There are two clear rivals to the strategy of honoring commitments. One is to intrinsically value fidelity to commitments. On this strategy, attitudes to fidelity remain agent-neutral. Agents take themselves to have reasons to promote fidelity to commitments and to facilitate worthwhile social commitments in general, not because, or not only because, they recognise that fidelity is productive of certain independent goods, but because fidelity is itself a good. This contrasts with the strategy of treating commitments as nothing more than practical tools, in which agents only recognise the instrumental value of fidelity. The issue between these two strategies turns on a characterisation of the good to be pursued. In other respects, they are variations upon the same theme. By according fidelity to commitments intrinsic value, we are provided with reasons to be true to commitments that go beyond their instrumental usefulness, but these reasons remain resolutely agent-neutral. The good constituted by our remaining true to commitments enters into competition with other available goods. If we take commitments to be merely practical tools, on the other hand, this competition is carried out on a slightly different basis, but it is fundamentally the same kind of competition.
Consider my example of the airport lift. Were I to accord fidelity only intrinsic value, then I would be left without a reason to choose my fidelity to my commitment over my neighbor’s fidelity to her commitment. But fidelity does not only have intrinsic value and the issue is therefore likely to be settled by a comparison of instrumentally derived goods. Were my neighbor on her way to pick up a frail and ill friend from hospital, someone who would likely suffer from the lack of her help, the balance of reasons would probably shift toward my breaking my promise. If the issue turns in this way on a comparison of goods, then the intrinsic goods of fidelity are in agent-neutral competition with all other goods in the vicinity. On the strategy of treating commitments merely as tools, however, the issue is entirely settled in terms of a comparison of instrumental goods. Both strategies treat commitments as tools, but one of them treats commitments as no more than tools in service of an independently conceived good and the other rates fidelity to commitments as one kind of good among others.

Adoption of either of these strategies is incompatible with the integrity of moral agents. Integrity requires that we hold ourselves uniquely responsible for ourselves. It requires that we hold ourselves responsible for our principles, our basic life-choices and, importantly, for both the commitments we enter into knowingly and for the genuine and important commitments we find ourselves in the midst of. Treating commitments as if they furnish no more than agent-neutral reasons to act undermines the possibility of our taking our own commitments seriously in this way. Only by honoring our commitments do we demonstrate integrity. The strategy of honoring commitments thus appears to accommodate an important feature of what it is to live with integrity and makes for a generally attractive picture of moral agency, provided the commitments involved are morally defensible. But does it make for an
optimally productive life? If indirect consequentialists can show that it does, then we should conclude that indirect consequentialist commitment does not, after all, tend to undermine the integrity of moral agents. However, it highly unlikely that, in the circumstances of an ordinary life, a strategy of honoring commitments would prove more morally productive than its rivals.

6. The Psychological Realisability of Strategies of Commitment

Indirect consequentialist strategies of commitment must be psychologically realisable in order to be optimally productive of the good. At first glance, all three strategies we have considered appear psychologically realisable. They each require acquisition of psychological traits that could, it seems, be cultivated with moral effort and well-judged education. One reason to think this is that we find correlative strategies at work in ordinary life. We encounter both people who generally take commitments seriously, either by honoring them or by taking fidelity to them to be intrinsically valuable, and people who treat commitments as tools, often in the service of their own good. It is important to get clear about this, however, so let us consider the practical nature of the three strategies in a little more detail.

There seems no clear obstacle to cultivation of a disposition to honor our commitments. However, consequentialists taking up this strategy face the tricky task of holding together two levels of thinking about moral demands. At one level consequentialists would experience and articulate an agent-relative respect for commitment. At this level they would take their own commitments to furnish agent-relative reasons for action. At another level, however, they would espouse the consequentialist position that the actual justification of an action is determined by agent-neutral reasons alone. The positions expressed at each of these levels are not
compatible, so consequentialists adopting this first strategy are likely to have to remain in two minds. They would probably have to think one thing on philosophical reflection about the fundamental purpose of their life, and another thing in the midst of day to day social action. The situation isn’t quite as simple as this, however.

For a consequentialist to honor commitments, everyday judgment about the value of fidelity must be carefully insulated from higher-level consequentialist thinking. These two levels of thought do not reflect separate realms of judgment, each responsible for a distinct aspect of moral life. They do not involve, for example, addressing questions of fundamental, long-standing purpose at one level and questions of effective action at another level. Rather, they represent different ways of answering the question, what is of value and how should I respond to this value? At one level, consequentialists answer, correctly by consequentialist lights, that they should seek, over the long-term, to optimise the quantity of intrinsically valuable goods. At another level, consequentialists answer, wrongly but usefully by consequentialist lights, that their fidelity to important social commitments is uniquely important to them, that they value this fidelity in ways that they simply do not value the commitments of others. The question is the same in both cases, but very different answers are delivered and the consequentialist agent must take care not to become victim of incapacitating cognitive dissonance.

Nonetheless, our capacities for motivated, directed attention and self-protective, often narcissistic, self-deception are in evidence everywhere. And given this capacity to turn the trick in many self-regarding aspects of life, we should be confident that consequentialists could manage as much for other-regarding attitudes and dispositions. Plausibly, the mental division required for consequentialists to respect fidelity does not undermine the genuineness of this respect. Genuine respect
for fidelity is best judged in terms of the way people are disposed to act toward their commitments, including motivational features of this disposition, and not by the success with which they formally integrate all their values and value judgments. If this is right, then there is no very serious psychological barrier to consequentialists adopting the strategy of honoring commitments. We might worry that such a failure of psychological integration is inimical to personal integrity, thus opening the door to another kind of integrity objection. But while this is true to a degree, consequentialists are entitled to respond that self-integration is a personal good, like mental health, rather than an important moral condition. It is not necessarily an objection to a moral theory to point out that it demands certain personal goods be forsaken. The problem of commitment raises a more serious challenge to consequentialists than this because it suggests that successful consequentialist agents lack an important feature of moral integrity rather than a personal good like perfect self-integration.

What of the alternative strategies, intrinsically valuing fidelity and treating commitments as tools? Are their psychological barriers to their implementation? The strategy of intrinsically valuing fidelity might involve an agent in a double-mindedness much like that characteristic of the strategy of honoring commitments. It might turn out, for example, to be optimally productive of the good that we treat fidelity to commitments as if they were intrinsically valuable even though they are not. The strategy of treating commitments merely as tools, however, brings out a different set of attitudes. The strategy requires that we value fidelity to commitment no more than instrumentally. There seems to be no general barrier to the cultivation of this attitude. However, there is one commitment that consequentialists cannot treat as a tool, the commitment to consequentialism itself. Indirect consequentialists who
adopt the strategy of treating commitments as tools, do so *modulo* the one commitment they find worthy of respect, their commitment to living as morally productive life as possible. We can readily see how consequentialists may reconcile themselves to this. Their overarching commitment to living as morally productive life as possible is uniquely worthy of respect, from a consequentialist point of view, because it is the only unconditionally moral commitment. All other commitments, all other dealings with others, are tools to its end. This clears the way for a powerful and consistent set of attitudes and dispositions. If a commitment to live as morally productively as possible is psychologically accessible at all, it seems that the strategy of treating all other commitments as tools is also psychologically accessible.

7. The Productivity of Strategies of Commitment

If all three strategies of commitment are psychologically viable, we must decide the issue between them on productivity grounds. Assuming that all three can be put in play, which is likely to yield the greater overall good? Not all commitments are entered into wilfully, voluntarily, or in full understanding, so we cannot reduce the problem of commitment to one of judging which commitments to voluntarily enter into. Both direct and indirect consequentialists confront the challenge of managing commitments with an eye to optimal moral productivity. But this problem is as much to do with our attitude toward commitments we find ourselves in the midst of as it has to do with self-conscious negotiations over future commitments.

There are various classes of commitment relative to production of the good. These include those necessary for adequate pursuit of the good and those unnecessary for it, those inimical to pursuit of the good, those sometimes productive of the good, and so on. There are also various classes of response to putative commitments. Such
responses include evasion and disavowal, embrace and avowal, privately cautious embrace, transparently cautious embrace, falsely enthusiastic embrace, and so on. There are numerous kinds of tactic for dealing with important extant commitments. For example, we might adopt a policy to abide by commitments unless doing so would be highly sub-optimal, or to abide by commitments unless they clash with alternative and significantly more productive commitments, or to abide by commitments unless there is a significantly more productive long-term plan in which they play no part, and so on. Of course, there are many more finely calibrated tactics available to consequentialists determined to live a life of optimal moral productivity. Commitments vary, agents vary, their circumstances vary and so appropriate tactics of benevolence are likely to vary. It would be foolish to settle on one formulaic approach to commitments and invariably apply it. What is required, it seems, is a flexible intelligence applied to the question of a commitment’s worth and the best approach to it, all the while directed at the task of achieving optimal long-term moral productivity. The question, then, is which overall strategy best accommodates the exercise of this intelligence, honoring commitments, intrinsically valuing fidelity to them, or treating them as tools?

Honoring commitments generally works against a clear-headed and intelligent engagement with the task at hand. The task is the optimising of long-term moral productivity. There is no subsidiary task, no other desiderata. The argument for indirect consequentialism over direct consequentialism is not based on a need to make consequentialism more intuitively plausible or attractive. Rather, the advantage of indirect consequentialism over direct consequentialism is that as indirect consequentialists we would be better producers of the good over the long haul. So what, from a consequentialist point of view, might the advantage of honoring
commitments be? Honoring commitments has the effect of generating strong
dispositions to fidelity. This ensures a robust constancy in our dealing with others,
which is often useful for producing the good and is perhaps also a good in itself. This
seems undeniable, however, the advantage is matched by its rivals. The strategy of
treating fidelity as intrinsically valuable also generates a disposition to fidelity, though
admittedly a weaker, more readily defeated, one. Such a strategy promises the
benefits of honoring commitments without the inflexibility that privileging agent-
relative reasons introduces into our pursuit of an optimally morally productive life.
Even the strategy of treating commitments merely as tools allows for a base-line
constancy of action. Commitments cannot function as effective tools at all unless
there is a fair preponderance of fidelity to them. An excess of fickleness destroys
confidence and undermines the point of entering into commitment, and since the idea
is to treat commitments as tools in service of the good, care must be taken to protect
their effectiveness as tools. Thus the two rivals to the strategy of honoring
commitments both accommodate what is, for the consequentialist, the basic good to
be had from honoring commitments.

Where the essential advantage of a strategy of honoring commitments is
shared by its rivals, the costs associated with honoring commitments are unique to it,
and the correlative advantages accruing to its rivals are unique to them. From a
consequentialist point of view, social commitments really are tools in the service of
the good even if fidelity to them is partly constitutive of the good. It makes sense,
therefore, that a strategy of treating commitments accurately, as they actually feature
in our value system, makes for a more productive strategy of dealing with them.
Fidelity is a very important part of effective agency, but good consequentialists
cannot allow preoccupation with fidelity to undermine their capacity to optimise
moral productivity. Thus dispositions to fidelity need careful management. Too much inference from management and the production line all but grinds to a halt. Too little interference and levels of productivity decline dramatically. Honoring commitments, by contrast, interferes with the implementation of many otherwise productive tactics of commitment. An insistence that my fidelity to my commitment ought to be uniquely valuable to me biases deliberation across the board and, from a consequentialist point of view, achieves no more than basic constancy in dealings with others. The strategy of honoring commitments, which is a strategy of acting with integrity, is therefore dominated by both its rivals. Its contribution to effective moral production is shared by its rivals, but their contribution to effective moral production is not shared by it. It is hard to say which of the remaining two strategies of dealing with commitments emerges as the dominant strategy. This will depend upon judgment about the intrinsic value of fidelity.

Peter Railton nicely illustrates the strategic situation confronting indirect consequentialists. He imagines the case of Juan and Linda. They live apart and Juan faces the choice of visiting Linda one weekend or donating the money he would otherwise have spent on the visit to Oxfam. The donated money would save lives. The visit would temporarily cheer up his depressed partner. Railton claims that Juan is the better consequentialist agent by staying true to his commitment to Linda, acting out of love for her, than he would be were he to act from a different character, presumably one with a more tactical attitude to the life of benevolence. Of course we tend to barrack for Juan and Linda, but why should we be confident that Juan is the better consequentialist by visiting Linda without his thinking the matter through? How many lives is he going to save by visiting Linda? How many lives is he ever going to save acting out of fidelity and particularistic love? Railton is a
consequentialist with a pluralistic conception of the good. Even so, on any plausible account of plural goods, human life is vastly more important than a love affair, just as it is more important than the temporary amelioration of negative emotion. Perhaps a more successful strategy for Juan might be to try to have it both ways. He might claim to have a cold, donate the money, and spend the weekend sending Linda sweet messages in an attempt to cheer her up. It seems the deception would degrade Juan and Linda’s relationship a little, yet it is a small lie and a lie to great moral purpose, and in a final balance sheet the disvalue of the lie may barely register. Lying to lovers is a risky business and threatens intimacy in ways that people find notoriously difficult to predict or accommodate, so it may well be that Juan’s best option is simply to let Linda down honestly. On the other hand, a truly efficient producer of the good would not be haphazardly supporting Oxfam with his travel money. He would have a plan. Without thorough argument, it is merely a pious hope that Juan’s long-term fidelity to Linda would be part of any such plan, that in the long run it will all be to the greatest good. It is better than many other ways Juan might be, but why think it is optimally morally productive? How much more effective Juan might be if his character were orientated more deliberatively toward the actual goal he faces, optimal production of the good.

Conclusion

Optimal strategies for indirect consequentialists appear to involve a flexible goal-orientated approach to social commitments, one that has agents treat commitments primarily as tools rather than honor them. The strategy of honoring commitments looks like an inefficient and ineffective way for agents to pursue their single legitimate moral goal, which is long-term optimal production of the good. However,
a watertight and perfectly general case for this is hard to make. Indirect consequentialists nonetheless bear the burden of proof in this exchange. Their claim is that contingent features of ordinary circumstances require consequentialist agents to take on non-consequentialist convictions. This is an interesting possibility, but it requires hard argument. It is all too easy to rest on a pious hope that ordinary conceptions of decent personal behaviour will fall out of consequentialist strategic calculation. There is little reason to think that it will, given the stark reality that indirect consequentialists answer to no other purpose than long-term moral productivity. The moral agent, by this ideal, is like a charitable corporation whose sole business is to optimise benevolent production over the course of a lifetime and which must ensure, along the way, that it stays in business. We should not expect an agent of this kind to live by ordinary standards of integrity. If this is right, the best response consequentialists can make to the problem of commitment is to concede the point and argue that the value of integrity is overrated.

Notes


