

LOVE, EMOTION AND OUR OBLIGATIONS TO THE WORLD'S POOR

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the clash between the impartial demands of consequentialism, and the importance of close personal relations in our lives. It is shown that the severity of the conflict depends on at least two empirical variables: the amount of suffering and poverty in the world, and the level of compliance to consequentialism. Despite a number of sophisticated attempts to resolve the clash, it is seen that, given the current circumstances, it will be severe. It is also established that in a situation of greater compliance with consequentialism, the conflict would be far less serious. It is finally suggested that the strength of the clash in a world with little suffering would depend on the precise form of consequentialism presupposed.

Keywords: consequentialism, impartiality, love, emotion, personal relations, suffering, poverty, compliance.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el conflicto entre las exigencias imparciales del consecuencialismo, y la importancia de relaciones personales e íntimas en nuestras vidas. Demuestra que la gravedad del conflicto por lo menos depende de dos variables empíricas: la cantidad de sufrimiento y pobreza en el mundo, y el nivel de conformidad con el consecuencialismo. A pesar de numerosos intentos sofisticados que tratan de resolver el conflicto, se argumenta que es muy grave, dado las circunstancias actuales. Además, se establece que el conflicto sería mucho menos grave en una situación de mayor conformidad con el consecuencialismo. Por último, se sugiere que la gravedad del conflicto en un mundo con poco sufrimiento dependería de la forma precisa de consecuencialismo que se presupone.

Palabras clave: consecuencialismo, imparcialidad, amor, emoción, relaciones personales, sufrimiento, pobreza, conformidad.

Consequentialism (hereafter C) in its simplest form demands that we always maximise the good. It is a theory founded on impartiality. On the other hand, the emotion of love is based upon partiality. In this paper I shall investigate the relationship between the demands of C and the importance of love and

emotion in our lives, consider the extent to which they clash, and then seek out possible ways of harmonising them. I have chosen to present the discussion in more practical terms by considering our strong commitment to our close personal relationships on the one hand, and our obligation to help alleviate the suffering that exists as a result of severe poverty on the other. In this paper I understand love in a wide sense to include both its familial and romantic sorts, and I shall work entirely within the framework of C and not deviate from it.

Although both the idea of the greater good and the concept of love have a great deal of moral significance, on first glance there appears to be a definite tension between the two. Whereas C is based on purely impartial considerations of the well-being of all, the emotion of love bestows special importance upon certain individuals close to us. To use Robert Solomon's metaphor, the emotions often have a quite narrow and specific 'scope' and 'focus' that seems to be at odds with the all-encompassing view of C's impartial perspective.¹ Whilst C demands an extremely outward-looking standpoint, love (and especially the romantic sort) seems to have an individualistic, private and insular character; centred as it is upon the valuing of one or few individuals.² For example, as a result of love the relatively trivial concerns of those close to us claim far more of our attention and time than distant tragedies of a far greater magnitude, such as famine. To love is to focus a disproportionate amount of attention, time and resources on one person, so a 'love for humanity' could only ever be a highly generalised and diluted form of this.³ Furthermore, whereas the personal standpoint generates the idea of special obligations to certain people, the objective standpoint generates the notion of moral equality, that nobody is ultimately any more important than anybody else. Therefore, at first it seems that C requires us to set aside our attachments to certain people, and to take the well-being of strangers equally seriously as that of our loved ones.

This is a classic problem within the consequentialist tradition about which much has been written, but what I want to suggest here is that the seriousness of the clash between the two depends not only on purely philosophical and theoretical considerations, but also on empirical considerations concerning the way the world actually is. It seems to me that the strength of the clash depends on two key variables: (1) the amount of suffering in the world (of which poverty, the example used in this paper, is a principal cause), and (2) the compliance to C of the majority. As I hope to show, the force and severity of the

1 See Robert Solomon, *Love. Emotion, Myth, Metaphor* (New York, 1981) p. 134.

2 For an account of the individualism and insularity seemingly inherent in romantic love, see *ibid.*, p. 135.

3 See Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford, 2002).

conflict between C and our commitment to our loved ones directly depends on the state of the world we live in.

1. THE ACTUAL WORLD

An obvious and natural starting point for this discussion is the actual world we live in today, for after all this is not only the environment in which we have to decide how to live, but is the scenario that many consequentialist philosophers seem to have envisaged in their writings. For these reasons I shall mainly focus on the circumstances of the world as it is. In our current situation, the two key facts that determine the strength of the conflict between C and love are the following: (1) millions of people are suffering greatly as a result of severe poverty, and (2) although we in the western world are in an extremely good position to tackle and remove this poverty, there is a general lack of political or popular will to do so. In short, hardly anybody complies with C. These circumstances seem to make the clash between C and our personal relationships especially acute. On the one hand, any consequentialist will agree that we have a clear obligation to alleviate such intolerable suffering. On the other hand, there is so much severe poverty that needs tackling in the world today that it is unlikely that we will ever be free from this obligation. Since there is *always* great suffering to relieve, there will be no room left for the goods of love or friendship, despite their central place in our lives. The problem worsens when we see that the smaller the number of people that are working to alleviate poverty, the greater the moral obligations of individual consequentialist agents will be, as there will simply be far more to do. Given the current indifference of the majority of westerners, the burden on the minority will be formidable.⁴

There are numerous ways of responding to the severe demands that C generates in the current circumstances. One highly uncompromising response is to state that the demands of C simply trump our individual loves and emotions, and that in the case of a clash between them, C wins. On this strongly impartialist model, although C is not 'blind'⁵ to either the value of love or the pain involved in the sacrifice of it for the greater good - as individual relationships are valued and accounted for in the consequentialist calculus for the happiness they can promote - in this current world they will not count for very much compared to the dire need of millions. As Shelly Kagan has argued, what would be justified in a world of plenty simply cannot be justifiable in the current circum-

4 I leave aside the question of whether it is fair that the inaction of the majority should generate such severe demands upon an individual. For a discussion of this see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984) p. 30.

5 See Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford, 1989) p. 366.

stances.⁶ On this view love starts to seem morally problematic, as it becomes an obsession, an anti-social self-indulgence or even a plain irrationality; and its potential favouritism and need for emotional privacy makes it something to be overcome rather than valued. The thoroughgoing consequentialist could also point out the considerable emotional pain and *dis*-utility caused by the vulnerability that love potentially fosters; claiming that our time is often better spent promoting the good. This is of course a highly counterintuitive position, as it essentially adds up to saying that if living up to morality means abandoning the emotions which give our lives meaning, then we should simply abandon them.

However, the standard but yet very forceful objection to this view is that it is simply not psychologically (or perhaps even genetically) plausible to expect us to always completely relinquish our close relationships for the sake of the greater good.⁷ Even if we were able to overcome some of the other psychological barriers that prevent us from promoting the good and to clearly perceive the suffering caused by others' poverty,⁸ our relationships would still have great worth from our perspective, and would still act as a natural obstacle to the realisation of the greater good. The personal perspective is so basic that it is not at all easily overcome, and its full repression seems almost impossible.⁹ In this sense, to use Shelly Kagan's terminology against his argument, C doesn't even *minimally* reflect the nature of persons, let alone reflect it *fully*.¹⁰ Some partiality that gives rise to close relationships is in this way inevitable and indispensable for us as human beings. Although the forms that love takes vary greatly from culture to culture, all humans appear to have a deep-seated tendency to form close ties with the people around us. Therefore, although C will have to allow at least *some* room for loving relationships, in the current circumstances this space might be conceded only begrudgingly, even after having factored in their contribution to human well-being. However, despite the need for *some* space for the emotion of love to flourish in, C can still justifiably insist that this space should be far smaller than what we are currently accustomed to, and can demand that we nevertheless strive to restrict the role that love currently plays in our lives. Therefore, although the impartial harshness of C has been softened, it has hardly been removed entirely. Yet before accepting such a cold conclusion, we should not overlook the possibility of finding

6 See *Ibid.*, p. 361.

7 Shelly Kagan calls this the 'negative argument.' See *The Limits of Morality*, p. 271.

8 See *Ibid.*, p. 283 for examples of such psychological barriers, such as the 'paleness of belief', where the suffering of others is only considered in the abstract and not as fully real.

9 See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1986), chapter IX.

10 Kagan claims that although C does not *fully* reflect the nature of persons, it does reflect it *minimally*. See *The Limits of Morality*, p. 263.

a means of reconciling the two in a fuller and more balanced way. I shall now briefly consider some of these possibilities.¹¹

Firstly, one possible way of harmonising the demands of C with love in our poverty-stricken world has been suggested by Shelly Kagan, who has briefly argued that the multi-faceted nature of relationships mean that they need not necessarily involve favouritism, as our undertakings to promote the good could involve or even require what he calls 'partnerships'.¹² In theory, although we could continue to value our loved ones in themselves, our involvement with them would be morally justified by their role in the promotion of the good. Combating poverty would thus become a shared project for the two partners. Of course this would rule out most of the relationships that we currently have, given that they are hardly ever geared towards the fight against poverty. However, the main problem with this idea is that although in theory relationships could help the promotion of the good, as soon as such a partnership led to obviously sub-optimal results it would have to be abandoned, which is anathema to the loyalty needed in loving relationships. In short, it seems that this approach cannot justify real close relationships, but merely a pale imitation of them.

Secondly, another classical response is that our close relationships are justified by C because our intimate knowledge of and proximity to our partners, friends and family means that we can help them so much more effectively.¹³ For instance, the emotional well-being of our loved ones often depends upon our behaviour towards them in a way that obviously doesn't apply to strangers. This argument does seem to work particularly strongly in the case of babies and children, for they depend directly on their parents for help to survive. However, this only justifies caring for children *we already have*, since in this world we will be able to do far more good helping the world's poor than diverting our resources in order to have another child. Moreover, it certainly doesn't justify deep attachments such as friendships or romantic loves, for the following reasons. As it stands, the claim that we are more able to help our loved ones than strangers is ambiguous, as the question arises of what we are exactly in a better position to help them *to do*. Here it is important to distinguish between

11 Many attempts to reconcile the two have resulted in deviations from C. However, to repeat, this paper works solely within the framework of C, excluding such approaches. Nevertheless, interesting examples of such departures from C include Samuel Scheffler's 'hybrid theory' and Michael Slote's 'satisficing' C. See Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, (Oxford, 1982) and Michael Slote, *Common-sense morality and consequentialism* (London, 1985).

12 See Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, p. 366.

13 For example, J.S. Mill has claimed that only the 'public benefactor' has to attend to the well-being of all, whereas for everyone else, the 'interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to.' See Roger Crisp (ed.), J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Oxford, 1998.) In contrast, Brad Hooker has suggested that, in contrast to Mill's day, this defence is now inadequate in the globalized world we now live in. See Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford, 2002).

the importance of helping to provide for basic *needs* on the one hand, and helping to further personal *projects* on the other. Because basic human needs (for example, food and shelter) are practically universal and apply equally to everybody, the provision of them doesn't involve any contact or knowledge of the person aided. On the other hand, projects (for example, one's career, enthusiasm or ambition) are personal and particular, so helping someone to further a project *does* require knowledge of them, making loved ones often best placed to provide such support. Now the satisfaction of basic needs is a pre-requisite for having personal projects in the first place, simply because a needy person can have no other project beyond meeting their own basic needs in the short term. Moreover, the suffering caused by unmet needs in general will often outweigh the happiness caused by a project fulfilled. In this sense, C grants basic needs a primary importance, and projects are secondary in comparison. The next step in the argument is to point out that whilst we may sometimes have to meet basic needs for our friends and partners, our position in the rich world means that they will nearly always be already satisfied. In order to comply with C, the agent will consequently have to prioritise the needs of strangers over the secondary projects of their loved ones. Therefore, although this argument shows that we are justified in caring for any children we already have, it does not legitimise other forms of loving relationship. Thus in this world we are not always better placed to help those close to us than strangers.

Thirdly, another possibility is that happier and more psychological stable people are often more able to promote the good than those suffering from the alienation that adopting a consequentialist life would entail. Loving relationships would thus be justified as they indirectly enable us to fight poverty and suffering more effectively. For example, in Peter Railton's example, 'the ones who can stick with it and do a good job of making things better are usually the ones who can make that fit into a life that does not make them miserable.'¹⁴ This links to certain forms of *sophisticated C* which make a sharp distinction between moral *deliberation* on the one hand and *justification* on the other, claiming that a life justified on consequentialist lines might not actually involve consciously trying to be a consequentialist.¹⁵ On this view, despite appearances at first sight, developing dispositions that don't consciously aim to promote the good – such as cultivating close relationships – can be compatible with C, for they empower us to do more good in the long run.¹⁶

14 Peter Railton, *Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality*, in Samuel Scheffler (ed.) *Consequentialism and its Critics* (Oxford, 1988) p. 111.

15 For examples of sophisticated or indirect C, see *ibid* and Robert Adams, *Motive Utilitarianism*, in James Rachels (ed.) *Ethical Theory 2* (Oxford, 1998).

16 Even if these dispositions sometimes cause wrong actions, this isn't necessarily regrettable, for the disposition may lead to better results overall in the long run. For related discussions

However, despite the ingenuity of this view it can be said that although C sometimes may require us to develop motivations unrelated to itself, the disposition to cultivate personal relationships is only sometimes one of them. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, even if we grant that personal stability and happiness enables us to promote the good more effectively, it is obvious that love only sometimes provides us with this stability. The flip-side is that their potential for great emotional trauma is just as able to destabilise us psychologically as it can provide us with welcome equilibrium. Therefore, the enjoyment of loving relationships only sometimes strengthens our ability to promote the good. Secondly, there is no *necessary* link between happiness and the ability to promote the good. Although sometimes on the one hand happiness and psychological stability can indeed make us better equipped to fight poverty and on the other hand misery can indeed paralyse us completely, this is by no means always the case. On the contrary, personal happiness can sometimes have a blinding effect, shutting out and shunning the knowledge of people's suffering that could motivate benevolent acts. Again, it would be very difficult to tap into such an insular and private emotion as romantic love to motivate social change and action in the public sphere.¹⁷ News of the suffering of others can often be an unwelcome intrusion and interference of one's personal enjoyment. Contrariwise, personal misery might even act as a spur to moral action, since the vivid knowledge of one's own suffering can lead to a renewed appreciation of its sheer awfulness, and thus supply a motivation to try to lessen it for others too. For the miserable, a consequentialist life could even provide an escape from personal suffering, as one could contextualise one's grief in the wider world, and channel such a negative emotion towards a positive result. In short, from a consequentialist viewpoint personal misery can be as useful as happiness. It thus depends on the make-up of the particular agent as to whether their happiness or their misery will equip them to fight poverty more effectively.

A fourth suggestion has been made by Hugh LaFollette, who claims that personal relationships and morality are 'mutually reinforcing', since the former are justified almost by their *educative* role: we can't have a sense or understanding of other people's needs if we haven't learnt about them through our deep relationships.¹⁸ However, one possible objection against this again hinges

see Peter Railton, *Alienation, Consequentialism and Morality*, and Derek Parfit's notion of 'blameless wrongdoing' in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984) p. 32.

17 Love can have an 'impenetrable and even belligerent privacy. Sometimes the "outside world" simply serves as an enemy. Thus it is rightly said that love is amoral, all but indifferent to the problems of the world and the larger issues of morality and community.' Robert Solomon, *Love, Emotion, Myth, Metaphor*, p. 136.

18 See Hugh LaFollette, *Personal Relationships*, in Peter Singer (ed.) *Companion to Ethics* (Oxford, 1991) pp. 327 - 332.

on the distinction between *needs* and *projects*: whereas being able to appreciate the importance of people's personal projects may well depend on having had intimate ties, the awfulness of the starving person's suffering should be obvious to anyone who has had a deep relationship or not. No emotional depth or subtlety should be necessary in order to be struck by it. In addition, if the only thing that justifies close relationships in the consequentialist scheme is its educative quality, then once we have completed the necessary moral education, it follows that we should then cease wasting time and resources with our loved ones and get on with the task of promoting the good without them. As we have seen, although it may be psychologically unrealistic to expect us to break away from such close relationships once they are formed so firmly, C can still demand that they be given a reduced role in our lives. And as before, although this argument might justify care for children already born, in such a poverty-stricken world it certainly wouldn't allow for any more family planning, let alone platonic or romantic love.

Overall, none of the possibilities I have briefly considered remove the clash between C and our desire for love in any fully satisfactory way, given the parameters of the actual world. At best the claims I have looked at are *sometimes* justified, so for example, there are some cases in which we are better able to help those close to us, and other cases in which the happiness that can ensue from personal relationships does indeed enable us to fight poverty more effectively. The problem is just that it is far from *always* being the case. Furthermore, it seems that although caring for any children already had is justified and that at least *some* space for loving relationships must be conceded so that C stays realistic; this space will be far smaller than we would currently expect.

2. THE WORLD OF FULL-COMPLIANCE

Having reached this conclusion about the actual world we live in, I shall now move on to consider how severe the clash between love and C would be in an alternative world, where the two variables that I cited previously are different: where (1) like our world the same level of suffering caused by world poverty persists, but where (2) the population is generally committed to C, unlike ours.¹⁹ In such a situation poverty would soon be eradicated due to the efforts of all, regardless of the strength of their emotional attachments. However, as Derek Parfit has shown, in this world C would be 'indirectly collectively self-defeating.'²⁰ This is because the good of happiness that C wants to promote is in part constituted by the emotion of love and the close ties it gives rise to,

19 Although this is exceedingly unlikely to come about, it will help to establish my conclusion that the strength of the conflict depends on the empirical circumstances of the world.

20 See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 27.

and a consequence of everybody disregarding their relationships in favour of C would entail a great reduction of that very happiness. In short, the world would surely be a far poorer place if *everybody* relinquished their personal relationships in favour of maximising the good.²¹ Moreover, on similar lines it can be argued that the cold impartiality engendered by C is hardly a laudable human ideal, since close relationships can be among the most fulfilling things in life²² (again, despite their potential for great emotional pain.) Perhaps the impartial nature of C would also lead it to approve of a rather bland and unattractive character.²³ These various lines of thinking lead to a conclusion similar to the solution offered by the more co-ordinated and social approach of *collective* or *rule C*, which defines the right act as that which adheres to the rules whose adoption would maximise the good.²⁴ In theory it would be the perfect solution to our problem, for if everybody shared the burden then it could be eradicated without any particular individual having to sacrifice any of their deep emotional attachments.²⁵ Indeed, the need for and desirability of a collective form of C is shown by John Cottingham's observation that a pure do-gooder (ie, the model consequentialist) will generally depend upon other people *not being* pure do-gooders (for example, on others keeping the economy going to provide for their basic needs, and bringing up the next generation in their jobs and roles which individually *don't* maximise the good.) In this way his or her impartiality will be 'parasitic' upon the partiality of the majority.²⁶ In a world of full-compliance to C, however, this problem of course does not arise. Overall then, in such a world everyone would be justified in acting from their personal love, so long as they were prepared to fight poverty when need be in the rest of their lives.

21 Some philosophers make the mistake of taking moral conclusions that *would be* correct in a world of *full-compliance*, and then applying them to our world of *partial* compliance. For example, Peter Railton's character Juan justifies his marriage by arguing that 'it's a better world when people can have a relationship like ours – and *nobody* could if *everyone were* always asking themselves who's got the most need' (my italics.) The main problem here is that *hardly anybody is* currently asking themselves who's got the most need, and that in the meantime Juan could promote the good better if he himself did. See Peter Railton, *Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality*, in Samuel Scheffler (ed.) *Consequentialism and its Critics* (Oxford, 1988) p. 111.

22 See James Griffin, Review of Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, *Mind*, vol. 99, no. 393 (1990) pp. 128 - 131 at p. 130.

23 See Susan Wolf, *Moral Saints*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 79, no. 8 (1982) pp. 419 - 439

24 For one formulation of rule C see Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford, 2002).

25 See *Ibid.*

26 John Cottingham, *Partiality, Favouritism and Morality*, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 144 (1986) pp. 357 - 373, at p. 366.

3. WORLDS WITH LITTLE SUFFERING

Now I have investigated how in a poverty-stricken world the population's compliance with C alters the force of the clash between its demands and personal loves, there remain two other scenarios to consider: (1) a world in which there is little suffering and little compliance to C, and (2) a world in which there is little suffering but full compliance. What I want to suggest here is that in any world where there is little suffering, the conflict between C and personal relationships will depend on a third variable: what the particular form of C takes to be its moral aim. In this way, the question of whether C would permit loving relationships in poverty-free situations depends upon the theory of the good that it embraces. If, for example, it is assumed that the right action is that which maximises happiness, *even in a world that is already very happy and free from suffering*, then we should *still* always disregard our loved ones for the sake of the greater good, even if that would involve only intensifying the bliss that already exists. If, however, we see the moral importance of happiness and suffering to be somehow asymmetrical,²⁷ and see suffering as carrying far more moral weight than happiness; then once poverty and suffering are eliminated, C's aim will be fulfilled, the duty to relieve suffering will fade into the background, and ample moral space will open out for our personal relationships.²⁸ I cannot argue for this asymmetry between happiness and suffering in depth (although it does seem far more plausible to me than the opposite view), but the main point here is that the force of the clash between love and C depends directly upon the particular theory of the good that C happens to be plugged into.

To sum up, in this current world so full of suffering and indifference, C will continue to threaten the loving relationships we value so much. Although C can usually justify care for one's own children in this world, and must allow some space for love to operate in for the sake of basic psychological plausibility; it can still demand that love plays a reduced role in our lives. In contrast, in a world of full-compliance C will have to permit love to flourish to avoid self-defeat, showing the importance and value of moral coordination. Finally, in happier worlds without nearly so much poverty, the strength of the clash will depend on which theory of good the particular form of C happens to embrace, whether it be the promotion of happiness or the reduction of suffering. In conclusion, whilst the consequentialist can dream of a more coordinated world that shares out moral responsibility more fairly, he or she must accept that in

²⁷ See Jamie Mayerfeld, *Suffering and Moral Responsibility* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 128 - 158

²⁸ However, we would still have to continue to instil a consequentialist disposition even in an extremely happy world, just in case of a recurrence of emergencies such as poverty that would result in a sudden surge in the strength of the consequentialist duty to reduce suffering.

the real world their doctrine is likely to present a threat to their close relationships for a long time yet.

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