



Against commitment

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Abstract

In his famous ‘Integrity Objection’, Bernard Williams condemns utilitarianism for requiring us to regard our projects as dispensable, and thus precluding us from being properly committed to them. In this paper, I argue against commitment as Williams defines it, drawing upon insights from the socialist tradition as well as mainstream analytic moral philosophy. I show that given the mutual interdependence of individuals (a phenomenon emphasised by socialists) several appealing non-utilitarian moral principles also require us to regard our projects as dispensable. This means that those who endorse those principles cannot appeal to Williams’s argument against utilitarianism. It also puts pressure on his thought that moral theories ought to permit commitment – in fact, it suggests that they ought not.

Regarding one’s projects as dispensable may be alienating, and this may motivate us to hang onto commitment and reject these non-utilitarian principles along with utilitarianism. However, commitment also threatens a kind of alienation – from other people. Drawing upon the socialist tradition again, I argue that avoiding this form of alienation is necessary for proper engagement with our projects, and thereby with ourselves.

Keywords Bernard Williams · Utilitarianism · Integrity · Commitment · Alienation · Ethics Socialism

1 Introduction: the Integrity Objection

Bernard Williams introduces the idea of a project. He gives no explicit definition, but gives examples (Williams, 1973, pp. 110–111): desires for oneself, family and

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friends to have basic necessities, and for the ‘objects of taste’; ‘pursuits and interests of an intellectual, cultural or creative character’; political causes; ‘projects that flow from some more general disposition towards human conduct and character, such as a hatred of injustice, or of cruelty, or of killing’; the utilitarian project of maximising well-being. Williams often says that actions ‘flow’ from projects, implying that projects typically motivate the agents who have them. But projects cannot be *whatever* motivates action – a habit or addiction would not be a project, and neither are all desires. We are conscious that our projects guide our actions (unlike mere habits), and we have some sort of positive attitude towards them, or would were we to reflect on them (unlike at least some addictions and desires). That actions flow from our projects is what makes them especially *ours*.

Williams is especially interested in the subset of projects he calls ‘commitments’.¹ ‘One can be committed’, he writes, ‘to such things as a person, a cause, an institution, a career, one’s own genius, or the pursuit of danger.’ (1973, p. 112) What distinguishes commitments from other projects is *vague*. It has something to do with the greater strength of the attitude one has towards them, suggested by the words ‘thorough’, ‘deep and extensive’ and ‘serious’. A commitment is not simply a very strong desire, though; it is a project that in some way defines the person who has it. Consider the desire to eat – which, according to Williams’s examples, counts as a project but not a commitment. When one is very hungry this desire may be overwhelmingly strong, but it is hardly something that defines one’s character. Williams writes that one could treat a cultural pursuit as a commitment. One’s relationship to that pursuit would then be ‘at once more thoroughgoing and serious than their pursuit of various objects of taste, while it is more individual and permeated with character than the desire for the basic necessities of life.’ (1973, p. 111) Enjoying the tune of some aria does not count as a commitment, even if it motivates you to attend an opera. Being an opera-lover, on the other hand, which involves educating oneself about the history and subtleties of the form, keeping oneself informed about current productions, regularly watching and listening to operatic music, defending its value in argument, and so on, could be a commitment. There is a distinction between an opera-lover and someone who merely enjoys the opera: the former’s relationship with opera is partly constitutive of their identity. If we relate to a project in this way, then performing those actions it motivates expresses who we are. This means that a different degree of integrity is at stake in the actions flowing from our commitments. Actions flowing from our projects are *ours*; actions flowing from our commitments are not only *ours*, they are *us*.

Utilitarianism is the view that one ought to do whatever maximises overall well-being.² Williams’s famous ‘Integrity Objection’ claims that utilitarianism is incompatible with commitment and therefore should be rejected.³ In this paper, I will concede

¹ Williams seems to use ‘commitment’ in his *Critique of Utilitarianism* (1973) in a similar (possibly equivalent) way to his use of ‘ground projects’ in *Persons, Character and Morality* (1981a). It is the former whose terminology and arguments I focus on here.

² This definition does not encompass everything referred to as ‘utilitarianism’; it notably excludes ‘rule-utilitarianism’, which derives recommendations from the set of rules that would maximise overall well-being. Williams’s objection is aimed at utilitarianism as I define it here.

³ For somewhat similar objections see Rawls (1982, pp. 180–181), Raz (1986, Chap. 13), and Wiggins (2006, p. 189).

this incompatibility but argue that we should reject commitment, not utilitarianism. Once we recognise our interdependence with others, we will see that commitment is incompatible with several moral principles with wider appeal than utilitarianism, and that having commitments risks alienation from others that is inimical to proper engagement with one's projects and oneself.

Why is utilitarianism incompatible with commitment, for Williams? The following passages form the crux of the objection:

how can a man, as a utilitarian agent, come to regard as one satisfaction among others, and a dispensable one, a project or attitude round which he has built his life, just because someone else's projects have so structured the causal scene that that is how the utilitarian sum comes out?

'It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires.' (both passages Williams 1973, p. 116).

According to utilitarianism, for any two options, one is more choiceworthy than the other insofar as it is more conducive to well-being. For any project – however much it means to you – the utilitarian conceives that the world could be such that dispensing with it is most conducive to well-being, and thus what you ought to do. This is what happens to Williams's famous characters George and Jim (Williams, 1973, pp. 97–99). The former, a chemist, is offered a job in a chemical warfare laboratory. He decides that he cannot accept, since he is opposed to chemical warfare. George cannot accept even though his unemployment causes him and his family to suffer, and even when he is told that the person who would be hired in his place would pursue the research in such a way that more dangerous chemical weaponry would result. Meanwhile Jim, in a foreign land in the aftermath of an uprising, is made an offer by Pedro, an army captain. Pedro will execute twenty innocent prisoners as a warning to dissenters unless Jim agrees to shoot one himself, in which case the other nineteen will be released.

Williams's objection is not, *pace* Hare (1981, pp. 49, 130–146), to utilitarianism's recommendations in these cases: he thinks Jim ought to shoot one prisoner, as utilitarianism requires (Williams, 1973, p. 117). Neither is it, *pace* Ashford (2000), the broader claim that moral theories ought not demand that agents sometimes abandon their commitments (so the Integrity Objection is distinct from the oft-discussed 'demandingness objection'). Williams believes that insofar as an agent accepts utilitarianism, they cannot have commitments. This is because, as the passage quoted above suggests, one cannot regard one's commitments as dispensable.⁴

Regarding is an attitude, not an action or disposition to action. It is not that one *can* never dispense with a project to which one is committed. A commitment may give

⁴ Mulgan (2001, pp. 15–16) and Tanyi (2015, pp. 502–505) offer similar interpretations of Williams's objection, but (correctly) distinguish it from the demandingness objection to consequentialism, which is the primary concern of their writings. Harcourt (1998) offers another similar interpretation alongside an alternative, which seems mainly to apply to preference-satisfaction utilitarianism, and which I discuss elsewhere.

rise to what Williams terms ‘moral incapacity’ (1992) or ‘practical necessity’ (1981b), which is the sense in which it is true that George *cannot* take the job. But this does not mean it is physically impossible for him to do so, nor that there are no circumstances in which George could bring himself to accept. As Williams says, ‘ingenious coercion or brutal extremity can almost always produce such circumstance’ (1992, p. 69): if George accepted the job when a gun was put to his wife’s head, this would not undermine his claim to be committed to opposing chemical warfare. Nor is it that one *should* never dispense with one’s commitments (Williams thinks Jim should do just that). The modality involved is internal, it is about how agents see their possibilities: as Williams says, his cases show ‘most importantly of all, what would be implied by certain ways of thinking about the situations’. (1973, p. 96)

What is it to regard a project as dispensable? For Williams, I think, *to regard a project as dispensable is to entertain as alternatives outcomes in which one dispenses with that project.*

What is it to dispense with a project? One might imagine that it involves ridding oneself of positive attitudes towards it and the associated patterns of motivation. But that would not address the cases of George and Jim. They are, Williams thinks, asked to dispense with their commitments. But they are not prevented from continuing to believe in the wrongness of chemical warfare, or of killing, nor from living their lives, beyond these tragic episodes, in accordance with those beliefs. Thus for Williams to dispense with a project does not necessitate fully ceasing to believe in and pursue it. Performing certain one-off actions that are to a sufficient degree at odds with it – such as killing, with respect to the commitment not to kill (‘stepping aside’ from the project, as Williams puts it) – also counts as dispensing.

Now, if agents were unable to conceive of circumstances in which they would dispense with their commitments, commitments would be obviously morally unattractive. For any project you have, I can ask you to imagine that Satan has promised to wreak untold suffering on humanity if you do not dispense with it. If the committed agent must hold that even in such circumstances they would not dispense with their commitments, they appear to be not principled but dangerously fanatical.

Williams’s position was not as implausible as this. By ‘entertaining as alternatives’ he does not mean merely conceiving of them. He writes:

‘it could be a feature of a man’s moral outlook that he regarded certain courses of action as unthinkable, in the sense that he would not entertain the idea of doing them... Entertaining certain alternatives, regarding them even as alternatives, is itself something he regards as dishonourable or morally absurd. But, further, he might equally find it unacceptable to consider what to do in certain conceivable situations. Logically, or indeed empirically conceivable they may be, but they are not to him morally conceivable, meaning by that that their occurrence as situations would represent not a special problem in his moral world, but something that lay beyond its limits.’ (1973, p. 92).

If Jim and George are committed to their respective projects of not killing and of opposing chemical warfare, Williams suggests, the situations in which they find themselves require a very different way of thinking to that which they employ in

other situations. It is not that they cannot, or don't like to, think about situations in which they have to kill, or do military research. It is that their commitments circumscribe a set of alternatives that they are willing to entertain, and this is partly constitutive of their outlooks on life. (In the case of moral commitments, entertaining such alternatives may be 'dishonourable', the situations 'morally inconceivable'. But not all commitments are moral ones, for Williams: situations may perhaps be inconceivable with respect to an agent's politics, aesthetics, or other values.) Their commitments are usually inputs, or constraints, on their deliberation. In the kind of situations in which Jim and George are placed, they find themselves required to deliberate without them, as the commitments themselves are up for debate. What was solid in their thinking melts into air; they are compelled to question what was previously bedrock. This is what makes taking the job, for George, seem 'absurd'.⁵ To return to the terminology of Williams's other works, it is why he is morally incapable of taking it, and why rejecting it is a practical necessity for him (though commitment may not be the only thing that gives rise to these modalities, in Williams's framework).

So for Williams, entertaining some outcome as an alternative is not merely conceiving of it. It is being willing to conceive of it within the constraints set by one's outlook on life. Commitments set such constraints: a committed agent is unwilling to conceive of outcomes in which they dispense with their projects. This does not mean they never do, but that when they do, a novel and (to them) unsettling mode of deliberation is required.

This is not the case for the utilitarian agent. It is a distinctive (and to some attractive) feature of the utilitarian outlook on life that it does not shirk difficult decisions, applying one simple formula to all moral choices. The cases of Jim and George are to utilitarians, like all cases, cost-benefit problems – with the sad fact that one of the costs is the agent's dispensing with a project. The only inputs to utilitarian deliberation are facts about the well-being that a course of action will produce, and, as the cases of Jim and George suggest, there will always be possible alternatives in which dispensing with a project maximises well-being. Therefore, the utilitarian must entertain alternatives in which they abandon any of their projects.^{6,7}

To put Williams's objection schematically:

⁵ For a similar (though more general and less negative) account of absurdity, see (Nagel, 1971).

⁶ Frankfurt disagrees (1988, pp. 180–181). He argues that a utilitarian may be so sure that a project of theirs will never be inimical to well-being that they do not entertain such outcomes, and that even if they did they may be sure that in such circumstances they would not be able to bring themselves to dispense with it. Though both phenomena are possible, I don't think they save utilitarianism. An agent who is as Frankfurt describes would probably not be complying with utilitarianism (because such surety is unlikely to be warranted, in either case). When evaluating utilitarianism here we should take the ideal utilitarian agent as our test subject.

⁷ It may be thought that the utilitarian project itself is an exception to this rule: one could be committed to maximising well-being whilst regarding that project as dispensable. Regarding it in these ways would, perhaps, simply be part of one's commitment, rather than in tension with it. (On the other hand, one might argue that this shows commitment to utilitarianism to be impossible.) I do not think that Williams, nor those persuaded by his Integrity Objection, would be satisfied with this response to it. They typically insist on the need for commitments other than to utilitarianism – Williams alleged that utilitarianism would be 'vacuous' without them (1973, p. 110), though this seems false as long as well-being can stem from things other than the pursuit of commitments. Therefore, I will set aside this possible exception.

1. If one is committed to a project, one cannot regard that project as dispensable, that is, entertain as alternatives outcomes in which one dispenses with that project.
2. If one accepts utilitarianism, one will entertain as alternatives outcomes in which one dispenses with one's project, for all projects.
3. Therefore, one cannot accept utilitarianism and have commitments.
4. Therefore, utilitarianism falls foul of the following adequacy condition for moral theories: an adequate moral theory should permit agents to have commitments.

I have described Williams's arguments for 1 and 2; 3 is their logical consequence. In the remainder of this paper I dispute the move from 3 to 4. I do so on the grounds that it is not an adequacy condition for moral theories that they permit commitment. I show that given the mutual interdependence of individuals, several appealing non-utilitarian moral principles also imply that one should regard one's projects as dispensable. This puts pressure on the adequacy condition for moral theories that they ought to permit commitment – in fact, it suggests that they ought not.

Regarding one's projects as dispensable may be alienating, and this may motivate us to hang onto commitment and reject these non-utilitarian principles along with utilitarianism. However, commitment also threatens a kind of alienation – from other people. Drawing upon the socialist tradition and again appealing to the facts of mutual interdependence, I argue that avoiding this form of alienation is not only important in itself, but is also a precondition of proper self-understanding.

Some utilitarians deny the inference from 3 to 4 in another way. They claim that utilitarianism is self-effacing: it requires us not to accept utilitarianism. This allows them to accept 3 whilst arguing that it is no mark against utilitarianism: whatever attitudes the agent who accepts utilitarianism has towards their projects are not required by utilitarianism as a theory (Eggleston, 2013; Lazari-Radek & Singer, 2010; Parfit, 1984, Chap. 1; Railton 1984). I do not pursue this strategy here, partly because I believe that it is unlikely that utilitarianism is self-effacing (Venkatesh, 2021). What is likely is that utilitarianism recommends that we regard our projects in a non-utilitarian manner some of the time – constantly thinking only of maximising well-being would lead to a life that produced little of it. However, this does not mean that, some of the time, in some part of deliberation, we ought not use utilitarianism as a means of deliberating about our actions and our projects. And such deliberation need not be rare, triggered only in extreme situations like Jim's and George's: it will be an important part of a utilitarian agent's normal way of thinking.

Note that I am not arguing that we ought not have the kinds of projects that can become commitments. That is, I am not arguing against moral convictions, political struggle, cultural pursuits, intimate relationships and so on. I am arguing against pursuing these things *as commitments* – where this implies not regarding them as dispensable – rather than as mere projects. I am also not arguing against many of the attitudes that may in ordinary language be referred to as 'commitment'. Williams uses the term in a particular way, according to which it is a conceptual truth that committed agents cannot regard projects to which they are committed as dispensable. It is against commitment so defined that I argue.

2 Mutual interdependence

Some of our projects – such as desires for food and water – are naturally determined. Williams does not think that such projects can be commitments. They are qualitatively identical with the projects of all other humans; they are not, in Williams's words 'individual and permeated with character' (1973, p. 111).⁸ Thus it does not show admirable robustness, or one's distinctive way of seeing the world, for one to satisfy one's own desires for food and water at the expense of others.

The projects to which we can be committed are things such as cultural pursuits, careers, political causes and moral convictions. They can define us, and we can hold these projects in distinctive ways. They do not tend to be naturally determined. Often, we choose them. But we do not make the choice in conditions of our own making – and the choices we make affect many others. Our projects are mutually interdependent. The core of my argument is that this social fact, together with some attractive moral principles, supports the view that we should regard our projects as dispensable.

Socialists traditionally emphasise the fact of our mutual interdependence, as have some mainstream analytic moral philosophers. Marx describes several aspects of mutual interdependence in this pithy sentence from the *1844 Manuscripts*:

'Not only is the material of my activity given to me as a social product (as is even the language in which the thinker is active): my own existence is social activity, and therefore that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society and with the consciousness of myself as a social being.' (Marx 1988, 105).

The material point is the least controversial, but perhaps the most overlooked. To pursue any activity one needs certain material resources, and these resources are socially produced. Most basically, simply to live, we need food, water, shelter, healthcare and the like. Once we are alive, pursuing the projects that make our lives meaningful requires particular resources: practising medicine requires drugs and surgeries; birdwatching requires coats, notebooks and binoculars; marriage (in the conventional form) requires rings and a place to live together. Some projects require other people's presence (doctors require patients; marriage requires a spouse and celebrants at a wedding). Some projects require time; this depends on an economy that produces enough (and distributes enough of what it produces to you) to permit you to spend some of your waking hours doing more than merely working for your survival. In the modern economy, having these resources depends on the actions of countless others across the world.

Secondly, regardless of resource constraints, projects depend on social meanings. What things are available projects for us depends upon which social forms are recognised in our society. This is one interpretation of Marx's parenthetical claim about language. Joseph Raz – neither a socialist nor a utilitarian – has emphasised a similar point (1986, 1996). As he writes:

⁸ Typically, at least: the hunger striker's desire for food has a distinctive meaning, for instance. Thanks to Peter Railton for this example.

‘one cannot practise medicine except in a society in which such a practice is recognized. Notice that in principle one may be born into a society with no medical practice or knowledge endowed with an innate knowledge of medicine. One could then cure many diseases, but one could not be a medical doctor, of the kind we have in our society. It takes more than medical knowledge or curing powers to do that. A doctor participates in a complex social form, involving general recognition of a medical practice, its social organization, its status in society, its conventions about which matters are addressed to doctors and which not... and its conventions about the suitable relations between doctors and their patients.’ (1986, pp. 310–311).

As for careers, so for other pursuits:

‘Bird watching seems to be what any sighted person in the vicinity of birds can do. And so he can, except that that would not make him into a bird watcher. He can be that only in a society where this, or at least some other animal tracking activities, are recognized as leisure activities, and which furthermore shares certain attitudes to natural life generally.’ (1986, p. 311).

Raz’s point is that the kinds of projects which we could adopt as commitments (what Raz calls ‘comprehensive goals’) are only on the table for us because of social conditions.⁹ These conditions are made up of the attitudes and actions of large numbers of other people in our society: the respect they have for doctors, the way they relate to birds and nature, and so on. Without others doing certain things and being certain ways the projects that are available to us would not be.¹⁰ Moral convictions, such as George’s and Jim’s, may not require material resources for their pursuit. But they require certain ways of life, conceptions, institutions and meanings, and so depend on society in this second way. Williams himself recognises something like this point in later work (Williams, 1985).

Not only are our lives materially dependent on others, then, but also the range of possible lifestyles available to us is determined by the attitudes of others in society. As Bakunin, Marx’s factional enemy in the nineteenth-century socialist movement, puts it:

‘Man becomes conscious of himself and his humanity only in society and only by the collective action of the whole society. He frees himself from the yoke of

⁹ See also Walzer (1983, pp. 6–10). Walzer suggests, beyond Raz, that all goods – or at least, all those whose distribution is the concern of justice – are social products.

¹⁰ It might be thought that this only goes for a subset of the projects that could be commitments, namely, ones that accord with prevailing social norms. But Raz argues that its scope is wider. Even when our projects involve transgressing social norms, they can only involve that because those norms exist. Raz considers a couple who pursue an open marriage (1986, p. 309). This is not a social form that society normalises. But it is conceivable only because there is a standard social form of marriage, which the couple use as a basis for innovation. Even further, we might consider a couple who make it central to their identity that they do not marry – as an act of rebellion against patriarchal norms, perhaps. Their pursuit of this project still depends on there being an institution of marriage: you cannot rebel against what does not exist. Such transgressive projects still depend on social forms, and hence on the actions and attitudes of others.

external nature by collective and social labour, which alone can transform the earth into an abode favourable to the development of humanity. Without such material emancipation the intellectual and moral emancipation of the individual is impossible.’ (1973, 236–37).

To the material and conceptual bounty of society we could add the special kind of meaning our lives – or at least many of the activities within them – attain from their effects on others. As Marx says, I make myself ‘for society’. Recently, Scheffler has made a similar point, reflecting on what it would mean for us if humans were to go extinct a generation from now:

‘many of the activities that we had previously regarded as worthwhile would no longer seem to us as appealing. We would see less reason to engage in them. Some of those activities might even seem completely pointless. We might see no reason at all to engage in them. To be sure, some activities, such as spending time with family and friends, would almost certainly continue to seem worthwhile to most people. Overall, however, our capacity to find value in our activities would be seriously eroded.’ (2018, 43).

Consider someone who builds their life around producing art, or furthering scientific knowledge. If there were no other people to enjoy that art or use that knowledge, their life would be less meaningful. Similarly, for Marx, meaningful production in general is production for other people (Kandiyali, 2020), and it is the tragedy of capitalist production that it obscures the others for whom we produce (we produce for our own wage, for our employer, for a market – but not usually directly for another) and thus alienates us from our own working selves. So we have three ways in which we depend on others: they produce the material resources that make our lives possible; their attitudes determine the concepts that determine the lifestyles that are available to us; doing things for them adds meaning to our lives.

Our pursuit of projects, then, is shaped by others. But, of course, I am an other to others. The implication is that just as my projects are partly produced by others, I play a role in producing theirs. That is to say, as far as the pursuit of projects goes, we are *mutually interdependent* (Marx & Engels, 2000, p. 185) with respect to one another. This is the social fact that I believe makes tenable utilitarianism’s insistence that we regard our projects as dispensable.

3 Dispensability

In this section I offer three appealing moral principles that imply that we ought to regard our projects as dispensable. An agent regards a project as dispensable if they entertain as alternatives outcomes in which they dispense with that project. Agents who accept utilitarianism regard their projects as dispensable because, as Williams points out, the utilitarian outlook entertains all outcomes as alternatives, applying the same cost-benefit standard to each. This will include – as in the cases of George and

Jim – outcomes in which agents are required by utilitarianism to dispense with their projects.

In this section, I will describe three other principles, weaker and more appealing than utilitarianism, that each also require agents to entertain alternatives in which they dispense with their projects. Therefore, they each imply that agents ought to regard their projects as dispensable, and hence that commitment, as defined by Williams, is impermissible.

3.1 Rescue

In her response to Williams, Ashford (2000) argues that all plausible moral theories will ask agents to step aside from their projects in situations when others are in serious danger, immediate to the agent, from which the agent could save them at the cost of abandoning one of their projects. Though I do not endorse Ashford's reading of Williams, I will make use of this element of it. The principle at stake is something like the following:

Rescue: When one is able to save others in one's immediate vicinity from serious and urgent dangers one ought to consider doing so.

Rescue should have broader appeal than utilitarianism. It is in fact a less demanding principle than Ashford seems to endorse, since it requires agents merely to *consider* saving others; one could in theory comply with Rescue without doing any actual saving. Many utilitarians endorse Rescue, since they believe that saving people from serious, urgent danger tends to be conducive to well-being, and this makes considering helping in such cases a good general strategy (though there will be rare circumstances where this is outweighed by countervailing considerations). Utilitarians typically place no weight on the immediacy of the endangered to the agent: famously, Singer (1972) extrapolates from the duty to save a child from drowning in a nearby pond to the duty to save children on the other side of the world from starvation.¹¹ This means that utilitarians will probably endorse a stronger version of Rescue, without the 'immediate vicinity' clause, as well as endorsing Rescue as written. Many non-utilitarians think immediacy *is* morally significant. Many also think that we are not obliged to help people *whenever* doing so would be more conducive to well-being. These non-utilitarians could still endorse Rescue, since 'serious and urgent dangers' is a narrower category than 'threats to the optimisation of well-being'. Ashford notes that Williams himself, in later work, endorses something like Rescue (Williams, 1985, p. 186).

Rescue falls foul of commitment for the same reason that utilitarianism does. In some circumstances, namely those in which it is necessary to save others immediate to one from serious and urgent danger, one ought, according to Rescue, to consider dispensing with one's projects. One ought, for instance, to at least consider missing an interview for a job about which one deeply cares to save a drowning child.

¹¹ Rescue is not the same as Singer's principle: 'if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.' (1972, p. 231) Rescue is weaker in that it does not require doing anything beyond considering, and does not apply to all bad things – but it also does not carry Singer's 'comparable moral importance' caveat.

As noted above, that there are some extreme circumstances in which an agent will dispense with their projects is not sufficient to undermine commitment. It is rather if such circumstances are entertained as alternatives within the constraints set by the agent's outlook on life, if they do not appear as 'beyond the limits of their moral world', that commitment is undermined. So the question is whether Rescue requires an outlook on life that makes projects dispensable in this way. I think that there is enough chance Rescue suggests considering dispensing with projects with sufficient frequency that complying with it requires such an outlook.

Why think that we are frequently in situations in which we can save others, immediate to us, from serious and urgent dangers, at the cost of our projects? There are not children drowning in front of us on every commute. But as we saw in the previous section, our lives are intertwined with others around the world. This fact, in times of war, natural disaster and poverty, connects us to many people who are in serious and urgent danger. Our interdependence with them should make them count as 'immediate' to us. Ashford quotes Williams's own words:

'We should be more concerned about the sufferings of people elsewhere... We should not banish the category of immediacy, but we must consider what for us, in the modern world, should properly count as immediacy...' (1985, p. 186).

Williams does not go on to propose an answer to the question of what should properly count as immediacy. But the way he poses the question implies that what counts as immediate has expanded in modernity to cover a wider geographical range. Thus, immediacy cannot be fixed by geographical proximity. Moreover, we should expect that the determinants of immediacy explain its expansion. If mutual interdependence were one such determinant, this would be explanatory. Centuries ago, most people were interdependent on a small number of others in their local community. Back then, immediacy in the sense relevant to moral principles such as Rescue would be geographically limited. Nowadays, there is a global network of social relations that constitute mutual interdependence between just about every person on the planet, as I argued in the previous section. This is why the category of immediacy is to be expanded.¹² We should extend 'immediacy' to mean, not simply the child drowning in the pond on your own street, but the child scouring the refuse heap halfway across the world where your old plastic bags are shipped, and their mother who stitched your trainers. Modernity has intertwined our lives with theirs in similar ways to how our lives are intertwined with people in our hometown. If immediacy extends so far, then every day there are many people facing serious and urgent dangers, who are immediate to us.

One might worry that extending immediacy so far exhausts it of meaning. If everyone is immediate to us, nobody is – or at least, there is no need for an immediacy clause in moral principles like the one in Rescue. But though basing immediacy on mutual interdependence expands the category, it does not universalise it. We are not in such relations with uncontacted tribes, with extra-terrestrial life (should it exist) or

¹² It also constitutes an explanation other than moral progress for the phenomenon Singer calls 'moral circle expansion' (Singer, 2011).

with far future generations (should they exist). And indeed many of us do think that our duties of rescue towards these beings are less, or perhaps non-existent. To serve my purposes here, what is important is that immediacy in the modern, interdependent world is likely to put us in touch with people in serious and urgent danger. A sad fact about the world is that few of us need to expand the concept through many degrees of separation to find such people.

Can we save them from those dangers? Ashford believes so: for people towards the top of the global wealth distribution in particular, she thinks, there are cases in which one's charitable giving could save lives, and these are so frequent that attending to them will often mean abandoning one's projects. As she puts it:

'the current state of the world is a constant emergency situation; there are continually persons whose vital interests are threatened and, given modern communications, the relatively well-off are continually able to help them.' (2000, p. 430).

For instance, it might mean abandoning your vocation in philosophy to take up a more lucrative career that will enable you to donate more money to charity, or, in Railton's example (1984, p. 159), failing to see your spouse so that you can spend your time fundraising, thereby risking your marriage.

This claim is based on some non-obvious empirical claims about how effective charitable giving in fact is (Macaskill, 2015 makes the case for giving; see Wenar 2011, and Budolfson & Spears 2019 for qualified dissent).¹³ If they are right, it would not only be in extreme cases, but very often, that we could save others immediate to us from serious and urgent dangers. Therefore, Rescue will require us to entertain alternatives in which we dispense with our projects on a frequent basis; thus, it precludes commitment to our projects.

Even if we doubt that the likes of Singer, MacAskill and Ashford are correct about how frequently we are in a position to save others at the cost of one of our projects, Rescue may still suggest such attitudes. We ought to have some credence in their claims: they are sincere, intelligent and well-informed. If we endorse Rescue, then their being right would alter our moral duties significantly. So we should at least entertain the possibility that they are right, try to evaluate their claims, and be prepared to respond if we become convinced by them. Rescue says that we should respond, if they are right, by considering dispensing with our projects. Therefore, when we are investigating whether they are right, we should be prepared to consider dispensing with our projects, if our inquiry vindicates them. But this preparation itself amounts to entertaining as alternatives outcomes in which we dispense with our projects; therefore, of regarding our projects as dispensable. To put it another way, if you are committed to your projects, in Williams's sense, then you hold that if Ashford et al. turn out to be correct you will contravene Rescue, because you rule out in advance that you could dispense with those projects to which you're committed.

¹³ Note too that there may be other ways to save people from serious and urgent dangers, such as political activism or scientific research. So even if giving is ineffective, those of us who can be effective in these ways might frequently face the demands of Rescue.

If you truly endorse Rescue and think Ashford's claims have enough credibility to be worth investigating, this would be a strange position to hold.

So Rescue – a principle with wider appeal than utilitarianism – is also at odds with commitment, given our mutual interdependence and at least some chance that the empirical claims of people like Ashford are true. But perhaps you reject those empirical claims, or Rescue itself. There are at least two further principles with similar implications for commitment.

3.2 Non-Instrumentalisation

The next principle has a Kantian flavour: it concerns the immorality of treating others as mere means. As Derek Parfit puts it:

‘we treat someone *as a means* when we make use of this person's abilities, activities or body to help us achieve some aim... we treat someone *merely as a means* if we both treat this person as a means, and regard this person as a mere instrument or tool: someone whose well-being and moral claims we ignore, and whom we would treat in whatever ways would best achieve our aims.’ (Parfit, 2011, p. 213).

Parfit rejects the principle that an act is wrong if it involves using someone merely as a means. I think he has good reasons for doing so. In a case he gives (2011, p. 231), a gangster who regards everyone but his own family as instruments uses the body of another person to save his own child's life during an earthquake, causing minor injury to this other person. This action is not wrong. But Parfit endorses the claim that one ought not to *regard* other people as mere means (2011, p. 232). There is something wrong with the gangster, but it is the attitude he has towards the other person, not the fact that he uses him to save his child. We may draw from Parfit this principle:

Non-Instrumentalisation: If one makes use of some other person's abilities, activities or body to pursue some project then one should sometimes be prepared to dispense with one's project for their sake.

The gangster violates Non-Instrumentalisation not because he makes use of another person's body to save his child, but because he does so without considering that person's moral claims – the gangster would not have held back from his aim of saving his child, using this person's body, even if that person had a good moral claim not to be so used (for instance, that they would have been killed or worse).

Mutual interdependence entails that in pursuing my projects, I make use of countless other people's abilities, activities and bodies to help me achieve my aims. It implies, therefore, that the antecedent of Non-Instrumentalisation is true for all of our projects. We cannot avoid treating others as means. Therefore, to comply with Non-Instrumentalisation we must, for all projects, sometimes being prepared to dispense with our projects for the sake of those on whom our success in achieving those projects relies. If one accepts Non-Instrumentalisation, therefore, one must entertain as alternatives outcomes in which one dispenses with one's projects for the sake of others – not to entertain such possibilities would be to instrumentalise those others on whom one's pursuit of one's project depends.

The thought is this: we use others – this is unavoidable given mutual interdependence – but we shouldn't use them as tools. Avoiding using them as tools means entertaining possibilities in which we dispense with our projects for their sake. What those possibilities are is left undetermined, and so Non-Instrumentalisation is compatible with a wide variety of further moral principles specifying them.

Note that Non-Instrumentalisation does not prohibit using others to pursue one's projects; nor pursuing them whenever they are at odds with the interests of those you use to achieve them. It simply says that one should *sometimes be prepared* to dispense with one's projects for their sake. One could comply with Non-Instrumentalisation by simply being prepared to dispense with one's projects when pursuing them would cause very severe, irreparable damage to those on whom you rely. One would then only dispense with one's project in extreme situations. But one should have the attitude to others, that they are sufficiently important to sometimes consider dispensing with our projects for their sake, as part of one's regular outlook on life – on pain of instrumentalising them. This would mean regarding one's projects, given that they rely on others, as dispensable.

One clearly does not have to be a utilitarian to accept Non-Instrumentalisation. It has Kantian inspiration, and a good degree of intuitive plausibility. Furthermore, since the specification of the 'sake' of others that we should consider are unspecified, a wide range of moral theories could endorse Non-Instrumentalisation. It could ask us to consider other people's needs, interests, rights, or moral claims of any kind. It is consistent with utilitarianism, with 'sake' read as well-being, as we are likely to perform actions which more reliably maximise well-being when we are prepared to forego our own aims to increase the well-being of others. It might be thought that there is some tension between Non-Instrumentalisation and utilitarianism, as the former emphasises the sake of those whom we use, whilst utilitarianism weights the well-being of each person equally. However, Non-Instrumentalisation simply encourages us to consider those whom we use; it does not claim that they have greater weight than anyone else's. That said, given the kind of mutual interdependence that occurs in the modern world, Non-Instrumentalisation itself might encourage us to consider the claims of every person in the global economy.¹⁴

3.3 Responsibility for Injustice

Iris Marion Young proposes the following principle as part of her 'social connection model' of responsibility (Young, 2006, pp. 102–103).

Responsibility: all who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy those injustices.

This principle may be more controversial than the previous two, but many find it plausible. Such a principle is necessary, Young argues, given that many injustices are largely determined by structural processes rather than the direct effects of action. Young's central example is the global clothing industry. Many of the workers who manufacture clothes face serious injustices, including overwork, precarity, low pay, unsafe conditions and restrictions on their rights to organise. Mostly these injustices

¹⁴ O'Neill (1996, Chap. 4) makes an argument that somewhat resembles this last thought.

are the direct effects of the actions of those who employ or manage them – usually small enterprises in poor countries, dependent on larger exporters, who are in turn dependent on large multinationals who sell to consumers in rich countries. However, Young says,

‘In this system, each of the links in the chain believes itself to be operating close to the margin in a highly competitive environment, and usually is under heavy pressure to meet orders at low cost by firms higher up the chain.’ (2006, p. 110).

Manufacturers can truthfully say that if they mitigated the condition of the workers, they would be outcompeted by a rival who would treat workers more harshly. Multinationals can truthfully say that if they paid manufacturers more, allowing them to improve working conditions, they too would be outcompeted. Their actions, then, do not generate the injustice. What of the consumers to whom they ultimately sell, and whose demand for cheap clothing puts downward pressure on costs throughout the chain? Well, these consumers are often themselves not wealthy, and are usually just trying to clothe themselves and their families in accordance with their own budget constraints and prevailing social norms. Furthermore, buying fewer clothes may make things even worse for the workers by putting them out of work, and paying more for their clothes may simply increase the profits of multinationals.

There seems to be, in this case, no single agent or agents on whom this injustice can be blamed. But, Young notes, there is some lingering feeling that all of the agents mentioned bear some responsibility for the injustice. The explanation for this is that structures are not some alien force: they are, as noted above, produced by people. Our actions produce structures, and this gives us some responsibility to do something about them when they cause injustice, namely to work to remedy it.

What does this have to do with projects and commitment? If the argument of Section II is correct, our pursuit of our projects contributes to structures. This is largely how they affect (amongst other things) the projects of others. There are, according to any plausible view, many unjust structures in the world. Because there are so many plausible views about justice, we cannot be confident which these are; nor, given the complexity of the social world, can we be confident to which structures our pursuit of projects contributes. Often, as Young says, these contributions are unwitting and many degrees removed from identifiable harms. (Pursuing a career writing for fashion magazines may contribute to structures that exploit workers on the other side of the world, that are enmeshed with local class and gender structures, that affect the political system of that country...). Therefore, if we accept Responsibility as a principle, we should acknowledge that our pursuit of our projects will give us responsibilities to work to remedy injustices.

This work to remedy injustices will often involve entertaining as alternatives outcomes in which one dispenses with one's projects. It is not that when we realise that our pursuit of some project contributes to unjust structures we ought to give up that project. Young emphasises that in cases of structural injustice, the remedy will tend to be collective, rather than individual, action. One consumer abandoning their project of trying to keep up with the latest affordable fashion will not in itself remove the

injustice; this is part of what makes the injustice structural. The work of remedying such injustice, therefore,

‘is ultimately political responsibility... [it] involves joining with others to organize collective action to reform unjust structures... Thus, discharging my responsibility in relation to sweatshop workers might involve trying to persuade others that the treatment of these workers is unacceptable and that we collectively can alter social practices and institutional rules and priorities to prevent such treatment.’ (Young, 2006, 123)¹⁵

However, engaging in that political struggle, I think, will necessitate entertaining possibilities in which we give up our projects. If one struggles for a change in the social structures to which one’s project contributes, one aims for a world in which one’s project would be radically altered. If the clothing industry really did reorganise to remove injustices in its supply chain, it is likely that the project of following fashion would be very different to what it is today. If the activist fashionista is serious about such change, they will entertain the possibility of their project no longer being available to them, as a result of their success in the work that Responsibility sets them. Even if one thinks such complete success is unlikely, and work to remedy injustices will usually result in piecemeal change compatible with retaining one’s project, that it is one’s aim means that one must entertain it as an alternative, and a desirable one.

Therefore, a moral framework including Responsibility, given that the pursuit of our projects is likely to contribute to unjust structures (as the fact of mutual interdependence suggests), implies that agents ought to entertain as alternatives possibilities in which they dispense with projects. Responsibility is, like Rescue and Non-Instrumentalisation, a principle with broader appeal than utilitarianism. Utilitarians may agree with it. As long as unjust situations instantiate less than optimal well-being, utilitarians believe that everyone ought to do whatever they can to remedy injustice: including those who contribute to the processes that cause it. Utilitarians do not believe moral responsibility ends there, of course, and this is one reason that it is sometimes thought ‘too demanding’. But those who think this can endorse Responsibility. Responsibility can be true if nobody has a responsibility to remedy injustice apart from those who contribute to the processes that produce it. It can also be true on a variety of conceptions of justice, and on a variety of conceptions of what remedying such injustices in fact involves – its demands could therefore be much weaker than the demands of utilitarianism (although they need not be).

3.4 The Upshot

In this section I have argued that, like utilitarianism, Rescue, Non-Instrumentalisation and Responsibility imply that we ought to regard our projects as dispensable, given the mutual interdependence of human lives. This means that any moral framework incorporating any of these principles will be inadequate, according to the conditions

¹⁵ Pogge (2002) also makes a compelling case for the responsibilities of citizens of wealthy countries to engage in such struggles.

suggested by Williams's objection to utilitarianism. Anyone who endorses any of those three principles, therefore, cannot avail themselves of Williams's objection to utilitarianism. Moreover, insofar as it is likely that at least one of utilitarianism, Rescue, Non-Instrumentalisation and Responsibility is true, Williams's view that an adequate moral theory should permit commitment is false.

We do not just have an argument against this adequacy condition for moral theories. We also have an argument against the permissibility of individuals having commitments as Williams defined them. Williams's argument showed that utilitarianism made commitment impermissible. This was meant as a *reductio* against utilitarianism. However, we now see that three other principles with broader appeal than utilitarianism also make commitment impermissible. This strengthens the case for thinking that commitment is indeed impermissible: otherwise, not only utilitarianism but also each of these three other principles is mistaken.

There are some ways of modifying the Integrity Objection to respond to the arguments of this section. One would be to note that, whilst utilitarianism implies that anyone in any context should at least sometimes regard their projects as dispensable – Rescue, Non-Instrumentalisation and Responsibility only imply that we should regard our projects as dispensable contingently, in light of the facts of mutual interdependence. One might hold that a moral theory is inadequate if it *necessarily* precludes agents from having commitments, but not if it does so only contingently. Such a view would count utilitarianism as inadequate but not make the same judgment against all theories implying Rescue, Non-Instrumentalisation or Responsibility. But it is hard to see how such a modified condition could be motivated: we are making moral theories for the actual world, after all.¹⁶ Alternatively, one could modify the definition of commitment such that agents could count as committed to some project whilst regarding it as dispensable, but not whilst regarding it as dispensable *for utilitarian reasons*. Thus, non-utilitarian theories implying Rescue, Non-Instrumentalisation or Responsibility would not preclude commitment, though they would have us regard our projects as dispensable. Again, there is a need to motivate this definition. It reduces the Integrity Objection to a special version of the claim that utilitarianism does not specify the correct moral reasons. That may be so, but it is a more general objection to utilitarianism, and it is unclear why Williams would focus his discussion on commitments if this were his claim.

4 Alienation

After launching the Integrity Objection in his 'Critique of Utilitarianism', Williams went on to make somewhat similar objections to Kantianism (1981a), and to morality

¹⁶ Han van Wietmarschen points out that there might be a further important distinction between utilitarianism, Rescue and Non-Instrumentalisation on the one hand, and Responsibility on the other: the latter implies that we ought to regard our projects as dispensable only in *unjust* worlds, while the others do not. (Though in a more just world it would probably be the case that the other three principles less frequently required us to abandon our projects.) One might think that it is most implausible that commitment should be precluded in a just world, so that Responsibility is a more palatable principle. I am unconvinced about this, largely because a just world is a remote possibility, and extremely difficult to imagine.

in general (1985, Chap. 10). So it is possible that he was aware that commitment was in tension with a wide range of moral theories. My argument so far has vindicated this position, and as such should concern people who are turned against utilitarianism by the Integrity Objection, but want (possibly unlike Williams – at least, late Williams) to hold onto morality. But the argument could also be read as a *reductio* against morality – or at least, against moralities that include Rescue, Non-Instrumentalisation, Responsibility or utilitarianism, by those want to affirm commitment.

One compelling reason to reject such moralities would be that to regard all of one's projects as dispensable, as these principles require, is alienating. Williams himself uses the language of alienation in his critique of utilitarianism (1973, p. 131), as does Railton in his response (1984, pp. 134–135). In this section I use socialist insights to argue that commitment too is a source of alienation, an alienation that can be avoided by precisely by regarding our projects as dispensable.

Why would regarding one's projects as dispensable be alienating, as Williams suggests? The thought, as I understand it, is this. Alienation is a problematic separation between a self and other that properly belongs to it (Leopold, 2018). Our projects should be close to us, especially those projects so important to us that they could become commitments. To regard these projects as dispensable, to make holding them conditional on the moral demands of utilitarianism (or Rescue, or Non-Instrumentalisation, or Responsibility), is to separate them from oneself. It is to add a psychological distance – an extra thought ('ought I maintain this project?') – between recognising the project as yours and pursuing it.¹⁷

I do not wish to reject this argument here. But I will argue that *failure* to regard a project as dispensable, as one must with a commitment, is also alienating in an important way. Thus a wish to avoid alienation will give reasons against commitment as well as in favour of it. This weakens the position of those who would cling to commitment, in the face of my arguments in Section III, due to concerns about alienation.

The alienation involved in commitment is from our fellow humans. Just as our projects ought to be close to us, we ought to be close to other people. Utilitarianism, Rescue, Non-Instrumentalisation and Responsibility each, in their own way, ask us to entertain as alternatives outcomes in which we abandon our projects for other people. Commitment to those projects, which would preclude such an attitude, may bring us closer to our projects, but drive us further from those others. They do not figure in our thoughts when commitment is involved. Commitment therefore alienates us from them. As Railton puts it:

'because of his very willingness to question his life morally, [the agent who regards his projects as dispensable] avoids a sort of alienation not sufficiently discussed - alienation from others, beyond one's intimate ties. Individuals who will not or cannot allow questions to arise about what they are doing from a broader perspective are in an important way cut off from their society and the larger world.' (Railton, 1984, p. 151).

¹⁷ Note the similarity with Williams's 'one thought too many' argument. In the case he uses there, a man is alienated from his drowning wife by considering whether saving her could be morally justified (1981a, pp. 17–19).

We thus appear to have two kinds of alienation to choose between. On the one hand, regarding our projects as dispensable alienates us from them, by making us think twice before acting on them. On the other, steadfast commitment to our projects alienates us from others, by pushing them from our thoughts altogether when commitments are involved.

One might think that it is more important to avoid the first form of alienation than the second. It is through pursuing our projects, one might say, that we realise ourselves; it is our projects – in particular those projects which could be commitments – that make us who we are. It may be good, too, to be part of society, but in distancing ourselves from our projects in order to be closer to others we subsume ourselves into the collective. We are primarily, on this view, active individuals, most fulfilled when we are authors of our own lives. If the opposing view is stated as the inverse of this – that we are primarily mere parts of society and therefore must avoid alienation from others at the cost of our individuality – it is not particularly appealing. Indeed, as Williams put it in later work, ‘unless I am propelled forward by the conatus of desire, project and interest, it is unclear why I should go on at all.’ (1981a, p. 12).

But there is more to be said for the importance of avoiding alienation from others. There is not a simple trade-off between one’s projects and one’s relations with others. I have shown that at least one kind of alienation from one’s projects – a conditionality and therefore additional distance in thought – falls out of regarding one’s projects as dispensable, whilst a kind of alienation from others – absence from thought altogether, when commitments are involved – is implied by commitment. But there are other ways in which one can fail to engage properly with one’s projects. Firstly, one could misunderstand them. Secondly, one could fail to find them meaningful. These failures may be called other forms of alienation, but whatever they are called, they are problematic. I will now argue that given our mutual interdependence, avoiding both of these problems together requires non-alienation from other people. Therefore, it is not that we are faced with a choice between proper engagement with our projects, or with other people. It is rather that alienation from other people prevents proper engagement with our projects – so that the ideal of an active self-authoring individual whose projects provide the foundation for their life is at least as threatened by alienation from others as by the alienation from projects that regarding them as dispensable implies.

As I have already argued, our projects are only possible, and some only conceivable, because of the actions and attitudes of other people. Therefore, to consider them in isolation from others, as one’s own private creation, is to misunderstand them. This is not to say that projects come to us as finished social products that individuals simply choose, or have thrust upon them, adding nothing of their own. It is rather that each person’s projects (unique as they might be) are forged (with differing degrees of creativity) from elements produced socially. If we want to understand our own projects, and thus our own lives, we have to understand them in this social context – that is, we have to consider their connections with, and reliance upon, others.

Now, some may experience this realisation as deflating. They may prefer to think of themselves as a ‘self-made man’¹⁸ and their projects as an expression of their private will rather than social forces. ‘Why,’ they may ask, ‘should I build my life around projects if those projects are so contingent on other people?’ The answer is that other people matter. Recall Marx’s dictum that ‘that which I make of myself, I make of myself for society’, and Scheffler’s reflections on the meaning afforded to our lives by the supposition that future generations will enjoy what we produce. If other people did not matter to us, such motivation and meaning would be mysterious. Insofar as we value others, regarding our projects as in part their creation should not make those projects less meaningful; on the contrary, we would find meaning in our projects belonging to a vast social endeavour. There is something powerful in regarding our projects as products of millions or billions of valuable beings, as the products of centuries or millennia of history – and as aimed towards having effects upon further valuable beings in a future that is the next chapter of an unfolding human tale. We feel this power only when we have the value of others before our minds.

In this way, we can acknowledge our mutual interdependence without destroying the motivational importance of our projects. They move us because we care about others. Our care for others would be what gives us reason to ‘go on’. It is no accident that socialists such as Marx and Bakunin, who emphasise our mutual interdependence, propose that we hold others in high regard. By doing so, they can embrace the ideal of the active project-oriented self without turning to the individualism of self-made men. Avoiding alienation from others becomes a precondition for realising ourselves. Bakunin writes:

‘The liberty of every individual is only the reflection of his own humanity, or his human right through the conscience of all free men, his brothers and equals.... I am not myself free or human until or unless I recognise the freedom and humanity of all my fellowmen.... Only by respecting their human character do I respect my own. A cannibal who devours his prisoner... is not a man but a beast. A slave owner is not a man but a master. By denying the humanity of his slaves he abrogates his own humanity...’ (1973, 237).

Marx makes much the same point in his ‘Comments on James Mill’ (1844), one of the rare glimpses he offers of his vision of communism. Characteristically, Marx focuses on production rather than freedom, but the thought, like Bakunin’s, is that our individual value is affirmed, rather than alienated, by recognising the value of others.

‘Supposing that we had produced in a human manner; each of us would in his production have doubly affirmed himself and his fellow men... In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have had the direct enjoyment of realising that I had both satisfied a human need by my work and also objectified the human essence and therefore fashioned for another human being the object

¹⁸ I use ‘man’ advisedly. See Walker (2008, pp. 137–160) for an exploration of the connections between the Integrity Objection and gender.

that met his need... In my expression of my life I would have fashioned your expression of your life, and thus in my own activity have realised my own essence, my human, my communal essence.

In that case our products would be like so many mirrors, out of which our essence shone.' (2000, 132).

The metaphor of reflection in both passages suggests a positive correlation between how one values others and how one values oneself. The brighter and more vivid an object reflected in a mirror, the brighter and more vivid is the image produced. The closer one is to other people, the closer – according to these socialists – one is to one's own projects, and thereby to oneself.¹⁹

To recapitulate: if one is to properly understand one's projects, one must recognise their interdependence with others; if one is to find that this enhances, rather than undermines, the meaning of one's projects one must recognise the value of others. But how is such recognition possible when one refuses to allow considerations of other people to enter into practical deliberation where projects are concerned, as must be the case with commitment (as Williams defines it)? Thus, the alienation from others involved in commitment undermines not only our relations with others but our relations with our own projects – and thus with ourselves. Moreover, if one does recognise these things when considering one's projects, it is a small step to asking whether one's project really ought to be pursued – or be given up, for the sake of those valued others on whom it depends. Thus, regarding our projects as dispensable might be a symptom of understanding them and finding them meaningful, as much as it is a threat to our close, unalienated relationship with them.

This section began with the thought that regarding our projects as dispensable demands a kind of alienation from so severe that we ought to reject otherwise attractive moral principles that imply it. I have argued that commitment also demands a kind of alienation – alienation from others. But this latter form of alienation is itself a threat to our relationship with our projects, since to both understand them and find meaning in them requires recognition of others' role in them, and others' value. Simply that it is crucially important to engage properly with one's projects, therefore, is not grounds to favour commitment.

5 Conclusion

Williams condemns utilitarianism on the grounds that it requires us to have attitudes that make commitment impossible. In this paper I granted that utilitarianism makes such requirements. I then showed that, given the conditions of mutual interdependence in which we live, three other principles, more plausible and widely assented to than utilitarianism, also make such a requirement. Abiding by such a requirement

¹⁹ As Marx and Bakunin emphasise, such closeness might not be achievable simply by a change of mindset, but might necessitate a change of social conditions. Ideologies and socio-economic structures that obscure our mutual interdependence, and that imply that some people's lives do not matter, are significant barriers to each of us properly engaging with our projects.

may alienate us somewhat from our projects. But those same conditions of mutual interdependence suggest that there is another form of alienation that it is important to avoid – alienation from our fellow people – and it is commitment, rather than utilitarianism and these other principles, which leads to it. Avoiding such alienation is not a matter of subsuming the self into a collective, but of properly engaging with the social nature of our projects.

The convergence of Rescue, Non-Instrumentalisation and Responsibility under conditions of mutual interdependence suggests an important moral truth. Humans inevitably depend on one another to pursue their projects. This dependence comes with a moral price-tag: we must be prepared to dispense with our projects, for their sake, in at least some circumstances. This much is acknowledged by common-sense morality insofar as it includes those three principles. The modern world, largely by bringing us into contact with so many other people, has created the material and social basis for an ever-expanding range of possible projects for us to pursue. But because this has also expanded the number of people on whom we rely, this expansion of possibilities increased the demandingness of morality. That utilitarianism recognises this is, I think, a point in its favour as an appropriate moral theory for our world.

One final point. The Integrity Objection is often welcomed by those wishing to avoid the demands of effective altruism. Effective altruists are not all utilitarians (though many are), but they typically endorse something like Rescue, alongside other principles – therefore, effective altruism probably does preclude commitment, in Williams’s sense. Effective altruists often make their arguments in individualistic terms, and have been accused, not wholly unreasonably, of being ‘comfortable with ways of talking that are familiar from the exponents of global capitalism’ and thus ‘speak[ing] in the proprietary language of the illness – global inequality – whose symptoms [they] propose to mop up’ (Srinivasan, 2015). If I am right, effective altruists might better defend themselves by emphasising our mutual interdependence, and being more comfortable with ways of talking that are drawn from the socialist tradition. How this might affect other effective altruist claims is a question for another day.

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