

- 205 -

SOCIAL HOLISM AND MORAL THEORY  
(A DEFENCE OF BRADLEY'S THESIS)

by Philip Pettit<sup>1</sup>

"One of the most interesting aspects of Bradley's ethical philosophy is the way in which he constantly endeavours to relate morality and its leading ideas to the study and analysis of the mind. In this respect Bradley may have a special significance for our day<sup>2</sup>"  
Richard Wollheim<sup>2</sup>

F H. Bradley's essay on "My Station and its Duties" is the classic statement of what I call "Bradley's thesis" I reject much that is in that paper but the thesis I accept Here I propose to sketch a defence of it.

Bradley's thesis is this: that under uncontroversial assumptions social holism is sufficient -- it may also be necessary -- to motivate an endorsement of special duties; that is, of duties that belong only to the occupants of certain social roles. The following is a characteristically vivid expression of it.

I am myself by sharing with others, by including in my essence relations to them, the relations of the social state. If I wish to realize my true being, I must therefore realize something beyond my being as a mere this or that; for my true being has in it a life which is not the life of any mere particular, and so must be called a universal life. What is it then that I am to realize? We have said it in "my station and its duties". To know what a man is (as we have seen) you must not take him in isolation. He is one of a people, he was born in a family, he lives in a certain society, in a certain state. What he has to do depends on what his place is, what his function<sup>3</sup> is, and that all comes from his station in the organism.

Although I defend Bradley's thesis, I shall do so from a perspective that he would reject. I take social holism in a sense that he would find excessively attenuated. And I argue

---

<sup>1</sup> Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to the Oxford Paperback edition of F.H. Bradley, **Ethical Studies**, 2nd edition (1927), Oxford University Press, 1962, p.XVI

<sup>3</sup> **Ethical Studies**, *supra* n.2, p 173.

that social holism motivates support for special duties on grounds which his consequentialist opponents would find congenial. Such revisionism and ecumenism are scarcely in the spirit of Bradley.

My excuse for these infidelities is that while Bradley provides a convenient and familiar focus for the paper, I have ulterior ends also in view.<sup>4</sup> I want to use the piece to draw together a number of different strands in my work. These involve a defence of a social view of mind;<sup>5</sup> a reconstruction of the morality of special duties;<sup>6</sup> and a reassessment of the potential of a consequentialist theory of ethics.<sup>7</sup>

The paper is in six sections. First I discuss social holism, defining the doctrine and showing how it may be defended. Then I introduce special duties, indicating their distinctive features. Third I describe a problem which special duties raise, especially for consequentialist theory. And fourth, I show that holism motivates an approach which solves the problem. In the fifth section I sketch a theory of duty built around this approach. And finally, in the sixth, I argue that this approach can be endorsed by consequentialists.

---

<sup>4</sup> So far as the defence of Bradley goes, the piece can be seen as a response to Crispin Wright, "The Moral Organism" in Anthony Manser & Guy Stock, eds, **The Philosophy of F.H. Bradley**, Oxford University Press, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> See my "Wittgenstein, Individualism and the Mental" in **Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Proceedings of the Seventh International Wittgenstein Symposium**, Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, Vienna, 1983, pp.446-55; "Kripke's Puzzle About Belief", **Ratio**, Vol.26, pp.181-94; and "Broad-Minded Explanation and Psychology" in John McDowell & Philip Pettit, eds, **Subject, Thought and Context**, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> See Philip Pettit & Robert Goodin, "The Possibility of Special Duties", **Canadian Journal of Philosophy**, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> See my "Satisficing Consequentialism", a symposium with Michael Slote, in **Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society**, Supp. Vol.56, 1984, pp.165-76; my "A Consequentialist Case for Rights", unpublished typescript; and Philip Pettit & Geoffrey Brennan, "Preemptive Consequentialism", unpublished typescript.

## 1 Social holism.

Social holism is the denial of an atomistic theory of society. Where atomism holds that all the significant properties of people are of a certain individualistic kind, holism maintains that some at least are not.

A property is individualistic in the relevant sense if - and indeed only if -- its presence is guaranteed by the context-independent character of the subject.<sup>8</sup> Keep that character constant and no matter what variations occur in the physical or social milieu of the subject, the property continues to be realised. A property is non-individualistic if this is not so: if, for example, it is a relational property which requires the continued existence of the relatum.

It is clear that people's neurophysiological properties are individualistic. At the other end it is equally clear that certain of their sociological attributes are not. Attributes, for example, such as their power and status: these, though they are not explicitly relational, presuppose that other people exist and have certain attitudes towards the property-bearers.

The debate between atomists and holists can sometimes seem to be an irresolvable and indeed uninteresting difference about which properties to regard as significant human attributes. Atomists would cast the individual in the austere mould of homo economicus; holists would parade the individual in full sociological dress. Where the one would abstract to the point of seeing in society only an aggregate of utility-maximising agents, the other would resolve the focus at a level of greater detail, discerning an organised array of doctors and farmers, nurses and secretaries, husbands and children and wives.

But it is misleading to represent the debate in this way. Being primarily concerned with how to do social theory, atomists and holists are agreed about which are the significant properties of agents: they are those which must be recognised for an understanding of human behaviour. The question dividing atomists and holists is whether any such action-relevant characteristics are non-individualistic; in particular, whether any of them presuppose the existence of other people or their practices.

---

<sup>8</sup> Context may be taken to include everything beyond the brain, or just everything beyond the body, or whatever. Here I take it to involve only those objects and people which, intuitively, are distinct from the agent

The question becomes more precise in the light of a further agreed assumption: viz, that the characteristics of people which explain their actions are states of mind; specifically, that they are attitudinal states such as beliefs, desires, perceptions, attachments, and the like. The question is whether attitudinal states of this kind are ever of a non-individualistic type. Do they include properties which obtain, not just in virtue of how it is within the head or hide of the agent, but also because of how things are in his physical or, in particular, his social context?

Recent philosophy of mind has seen the appearance of a variety of arguments for a holist answer to this question: though this, without much appreciation of the significance of the arguments for holism. One sort draws on the fact that we standardise across a community in<sup>9</sup> ascribing contents to the attitudinal states of individuals. Another appeals to the fact, alleged under some interpretations of Wittgenstein, that when such a state involves a rule-following disposition towards its content,<sup>10</sup> then it requires the presence of a community context. A third, and probably the most common, sort of<sup>11</sup> argument invokes a line of thought from semantic theory. I am persuaded by these arguments, though I shall only offer a presentation of the third.<sup>12</sup>

The third line of thought deploys two premises. The first is the received assumption that attitudinal states are individuated by their contents. This means that a belief that p, for example, remains the same type of attitudinal state -- and, for our purposes, survives -- only if it retains the proposition expressed by the p-sentence as its

---

<sup>9</sup> See Tyler Burge, "Individualism and the Mental" in **Midwest Studies in Philosophy**, Vol.4, 1979. Burge is keenly of the individualist issue.

<sup>10</sup> See my "Wittgenstein, Individualism and the Mental", *supra* n.5, for an overview.

<sup>11</sup> The line of thought is nicely summarised - I follow the summary here - in Gregory McCulloch, "Scientism, Mind and Meaning" in McDowell & Pettit, eds, **Subject, Thought and Context**, *supra* n.5.

<sup>12</sup> I believe that resistance to the arguments is motivated mainly by a sense that non-individualistic states cannot serve in the causal explanation of action. I try to show how they can in "Broad-minded Explanation and Psychology", *supra* no.5. One of the most common modes of resistance is to question the decompositional principle that I identify in "Kripke's Puzzle About Belief", *supra* n 5.

content The premise squares with common sense, since we would not say that two credal attitudes which had different contents were really instances of one and the same belief. One and the same belief just is a belief with one and the same content.

The second premise derives from recent semantic theory. It says that the contents of certain beliefs and other attitudes -- the meanings, if you prefer, of certain content-giving sentences -- are determined in part by how things are in the world of the subject, including his social world. Contents or meanings, in Hilary Putnam's phrase, just ain't in the head<sup>13</sup> -- or indeed in the hide. This premise is now widely accepted and I shall attempt only to illustrate and motivate it.

Suppose that the sentence used to give the content of someone's attitude contains a demonstrative or proper name or natural kind term. Say the person believes that that woman is Australian, where the demonstrative phrase is used to pick out someone in his surroundings. In such a case the content of the sentence is fixed by the context of utterance. Imagine a context in which things are indiscernible from the agent's point of view but in which it is a different woman who is present and the content of the belief varies too; imagine a context in which there is only the illusion of a woman and there is no demonstrative belief at all. Across such contexts the person may continue to believe that there is an Australian woman before him but he does not sustain the belief whose content is: that woman is Australian.

Since attitudes are individuated by content, and since content may be bound to context in the manner just illustrated, it follows that the individuation of attitudes may be context-bound too. Many of the beliefs and desires and other attitudes that we ascribe to people are such that were the context different, and different even in a way which did not affect the bearers, then those states of mind would not exist.

This conclusion means that social holism is true, for of the attitudes that are context-bound, some will be bound to social context. They include the thoughts and wishes and attachments that we direct to our acquaintances. Such attitudes would not exist were their objects different or illusory - even indiscernibly different or illusory. I see that stranger, I am envious of that friend, I love that woman, only so far as the people picked out in those

---

<sup>13</sup> See Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", reprinted in the second volume of his philosophical papers: **Mind, Language and Reality**, Cambridge University Press, 1975

ascriptions really exist. My mental life extends into the social world, embracing and encompassing the reality of others

The context-bound theory of attitudes which ensures the truth of social holism stands in contrast to a context-free theory of mind. The most common context-free theory, variants of which have dominated philosophy since Descartes, is representationalism.<sup>14</sup> This would suggest that, appearances notwithstanding, the contents to which our attitudes relate us are always representations of the real world; in particular, representations which preserve their identity independently of how the world actually is. These representations may be images or descriptions or whatever. Their common feature is that they are the property of the attitude-bearers, remaining available as the contents of attitudes regardless of how the world actually is.

As the context-bound theory of attitudes guarantees the truth of holism, so a theory like representationalism would support atomism. It would depict individuals as corpuscularian entities: monads whose mental states are constituted in a self-enclosed fashion. It would cast them as mutually independent centres of activity, each locked up within his own system of representations. If such agents relate to one another they do so only by virtue of a contingency: the fact that the representations on which they focus serve to pick out other people. That contingency may be generally realised but it is not copperfastened.

Without going far afield, there is little more that I can say in definition or defence of social holism. I will limit myself to two observations. Both serve to distinguish holism from other approaches: on the one side, a weaker approach; on the other, a stronger.

The weaker approach is an assertion -- and usually a sustained reassertion -- of the fact that people causally influence one another's attitudes. Where holism insists that attitudes are often constituted out of social materials, and are in that sense social properties, this line proclaims that at least they are formed under social pressures. The claim is certainly reasonable but it is scarcely significant. Even

---

<sup>14</sup> Here I ignore a quite new sort of context-free theory: the so-called two components view which presents many propositional attitudes as non-individualistic but argues that in each case the important psychological component is individualistic. See for example Colin McGinn, "The Structure of Content" in Andrew Woodfield, ed, **Thought and Object**, Oxford University Press, 1982.

those who take a context-free view of the mind can admit that attitudes may be the product of contextual factors <sup>15</sup>

The stronger line from which I distinguish social holism is appropriately described as collectivism. It suggests, not just that people depend causally or constitutively on one another, but that they are parts of what is in some sense a greater whole: usually, a greater whole in the sense that it has got causal powers that transcend the powers of individual agents.<sup>16</sup> This line holds no attraction for me and is not supported by the holist theory that I defend.<sup>17</sup> Holism is different both from the causal thesis and from the collectivist one. In order to mark those differences, we might better describe it as "connexionism".

## 2 Special duties.

In common-sense morality, certain special obligations -- that is, prima facie obligations -- loom large. These are duties which are laid upon agents, be they individuals or groups, in virtue of their distinctive identities, relationships or histories: because of who they are, how they are linked to others or what they have done in the past. The particularistic basis of these obligations means that no one but the agent in question is engaged by such a duty. It is that agent's alone.

These special obligations include duties towards oneself, towards one's dependants and towards those to whom one has made certain commitments. In each case they prescribe partisan treatment. The beneficiary is to enjoy a benefit which may not be especially important in the global scheme of things, and which may even be obtained at the cost

---

<sup>15</sup> Even Bradley sometimes writes as if it were enough for his purposes to defend the causal thesis. See for example **Ethical Studies**, supra n.2, pp.171-72.

<sup>16</sup> I characterise and criticise collectivism in a number of places: Graham Macdonald & Philip Pettit, **Semantics and Social Science**, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, Chapter 3; "In Defence of 'A New Methodological Individualism': Reply to J.E. Tiles", **Ratio**, Vol.26, 1984, pp.81-87; and "The Varieties of Collectivism" in Otto Neumaier & Paul Weingartner, eds, **Mind, Language and Society: Proceedings of the International Congress for Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science**, Vienna, 1984, pp.158-66.

<sup>17</sup> Bradley would disagree See **Ethical Studies**, supra n 2, p.166, for example

of others' being deprived of benefits that are equally or more important in some cosmic sense

An agent's special duties towards himself require that he pay particular attention to his own interests. They involve duties to develop his capacities and talents; to guarantee his physical, psychological and social welfare; and to remain true to his basic projects and principles, refusing to compromise them just because some higher moral cause may thereby be served.

An agent's special duties towards his dependants require him to make particular provision for those entrusted to his care. Just as he is expected to attend in a special way to his own interests, so too is he obliged to provide for his dependants in a manner which exceeds the call of general benevolence. The bearer of such an obligation will as often be a group as an individual. Parents are required to provide in a special way for their children, organizations for their members, governments for their citizens, and so on.

Finally, an agent has special duties towards those to whom he has implicitly or explicitly made certain commitments. These are obligations to fulfil those commitments, even though the general welfare might be improved far more by ignoring them. They require the agent to discriminate not now in favour of himself or his dependants, but to the advantage of those to whom the commitments have been made. Examples include the duty of the person who makes a promise to keep it, of the individual who accepts a favour to return it, and of each party to a contract to honour its terms.

If we are to characterise special obligations adequately, it is necessary to introduce two separate distinctions. The first is a logical division, based on a formal feature of the content, between relativised and unrelativised duties. The second is a distinction of an epistemological kind between independent and dependent obligations; it is founded on the manner in which the case for the obligation is made.

A duty is relativised if and only if the content is identified by back-reference, usually employing a pronominal device, to the bearer. It is the obligation laid on A that he do such and such or that such and such be done to him or his. What is crucial is that the person mentioned in the content of the duty -- by "he", "him", or "his" -- is picked out by referring back to the duty's bearer. This appears in the fact that, putting aside contextual implicatures, we ascribe a distinct duty if we replace "he", "him" or "his" by "A" or "A's". "A" is called upon to see that he does such and



such" is an instantiation of "Everyone is called upon to see that he does such and such" "A is called upon to see that A does such and such" is an instantiation of "Everyone is called upon to see that A does such and such".<sup>18</sup>

Where the content is identified without back-reference to the bearer, a duty is unrelativised. The content of such an obligation will usually be entirely general, demanding a form of behaviour or state of affairs which can be specified without mention of any individual entity. On the other hand it may sometimes be particular, as in the case of everyone's being required to see that A does such and such or that such and such is done to A. The important feature is that the duty's content is identified independently of who it is that bears the duty.

To come now to our second, epistemological distinction, a duty is independent if and only if its content engages -- and, if not over-ridden, obligates -- an agent on its own intrinsic merits. This is, it does not engage him just because of his being bound by some other duty whose fulfilment requires that it be honoured. Where the content only gets a hold on the agent through being represented as instrumental in the realisation of a distinct obligation, the duty is derivative or dependent.<sup>19</sup>

It should be remembered that the fact that a duty is independent does not mean that it is conclusive. Thus an

---

<sup>18</sup> Relativised duties are discussed under the title of agent-relativity in: Derek Parfit, "Prudence, Morality and the Prisoner's Dilemma", in **Proceedings of the British Academy for 1979** (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp 555ff; Thomas Nagel, "The Limits of Objectivity", in S M. McMurrin, ed., **Tanner Lectures on Human Values**, vol.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp.75-139; Amartya Sen, "Rights and Agency", **Philosophy & Public Affairs**, vol.11: 1982, pp.3-39.

<sup>19</sup> Someone may argue that every other obligation is dependent on the duty to do what is right. It is true, indeed it is logically true, that for any moral call on A to see that -p, that demand holds only if he is called upon to do what is right. The very necessity of this connection however rules it out as a case of dependence. Where the duty to see that -p is dependent on another duty to see that -q, we require that it should be no more than contingently true that A is called upon in the first regard only if he is called upon in the second. It must be logically possible that he should be bidden to see that -p without being obliged to see that -q. Dependence supposes distinctness and otherwise doubt is cast on whether the duties really are distinct.

agent may be faced with a number of incompatible independent obligations. In this paper I shall have nothing to say on how such conflicts should be resolved. It should also be noted that the independence of a duty **vis-à-vis** other distinct duties does not mean that its claims are independent of all other moral considerations. An agent may find it engaging only so far as there are distinct moral reasons which can be adduced in its support. We shall be considering such reasons indeed in the final section of this paper.

Our two distinctions cut across one another, generating the matrix displayed below.

	Dependent	Independent
Relativised	RD	RI
Unrelativised	UD	UI

Our claim is that, on the common sense understanding of them, special obligations are characterised as RI duties: as relativised and independent moral demands.

That special duties are taken to be relativised does not need to be argued. In all of the examples given, we find the pronomial back-reference which is characteristic of relativisation. A person is called upon in common sense morality to see that **he** develops **his** talents, that **his** children are given a good start in life, that **he** despatches **his** promises, and so on. It may be taken as a definitional feature of special duties that they are relativised in this way

But relativisation is not sufficient to distinguish special from non-special obligations. A relativised demand may be imposed on a derivative basis, as the means of fulfilling an unrelativised obligation. Every unrelativised duty to see that **-p** lays on the bearer the relativised demand to see that **he** does **his** best for the realisation of **p**. Yet common sense would not count such a duty as a special demand.

Common sense casts special duties, not just as relativised, but as independent. This point emerges from the following line of thought. (1) When common-sense moralists ascribe the special duty of A of seeing that he develops his talents, or that his children get a good start, that is not because he or his children are thought to be Mozarts or Einsteins, the nurturing of whose gifts is of such importance on the world scene that it makes a moral demand on people generally. (2) Nor is A's special duty in such a case thought to depend on an unrelativised obligation to promote self-development or parental favouritism. If it were, it would only bind him in cases where his developing his talents, or favouring his children, were the best way of furthering that consequence; in other cases it would actually

preclude him from following that course. But this is directly contrary to common-sense intuitions. (3) Nor, if common-sense morality is to be consistent, can A's special duty be cast as dependent upon an obligation to promote some other unrelativised end such as human welfare -- only if (1) or (2) were false could a connection be made with such a general good. (4) But (1) - (3) exhaust the ways in which special duties might be cast as dependent. Common sense morality therefore construes them as independent.

I conclude that the special duties recognised -- and indeed given prominence -- in folk morality are at once relativised and independent obligations. They bind each one of us in regard to him or his, and they bind in their own right.

### 3 The consequentialist problem with special duties.

Special duties raise a problem under certain assumptions that are typical of standard consequentialism. Here I want merely to state the problem. In the next section I will show that one of the assumptions under which it arises is implicitly atomistic and that holism would motivate a modification which promises to solve the problem. In the section following I will systematise the approach suggested by the modified assumption. And then in the final section I will argue that the approach can be cast as consequentialist.

The assumptions characteristic of standard consequentialism are these.

1 There is an intersubjective metric by which to gauge the value or goodness of any state of the world.<sup>20</sup>

2 Duty -- and, more generally, the right -- is a function of the good to be realised in the world: the right input, as the function is usually understood, is that which maximises objectively expected value.<sup>21</sup>

3 The function which determines what is right is also the

---

<sup>20</sup> Sen, "Rights and Agency" *supra* no.18, argues that this assumption is part of traditional consequentialism and then explores the effect of its relaxation.

<sup>21</sup> This is rejected in universalistic or rule-consequentialism, in which the criterion of input evaluation bears, not on the effects of that particular input, but rather on the effects of everyone's making or trying to make that input. See Pettit & Brennan, "Preemptive Consequentialism", *supra* n 7.

function that ought to be applied in deciding what to do: it serves at once to evaluate inputs, and to select them <sup>22</sup>

The standard consequentialism defined by these assumptions constitutes a scheme for the distribution of duties. As such its most striking feature is, in a phrase, that it is panoramic. It gives each agent an equal concern, modified only by the range of inputs under his control, with the totality of the good. Every moral subject is taken to act in loco deorum, surveying the range of goods available and seeking to do his best, not in the province of what might be thought to be his proper concerns, but by the world at large

Such a panoramic approach to duty is naturally contrasted with a perspectival one. Where the panoramic distribution makes the moral enterprise a matter of maximising the common good, a perspectival approach would enforce a division of labour, making each moral agent responsible only for the promotion of goods that come distinctively within his sights. These may include common goods that overlap with the goods pursued by others. Equally however they may include goods that are of concern only to him. All goods may be visible to each but on a perspectival distribution, an agent would be responsible only for promoting those that are particularly salient in his position.

The panoramic character of consequentialism makes for a problem with special duties. The reason is that, being relativised and independent, special duties present each person with a different set of goods to be pursued. I look to me and mine, you to you and yours. We may have other aims in common but the goals projected in our special duties are divergent and even sometimes divisive.

All that standard consequentialism can hope to do for special duties is to offer some surrogates. The substitute offered for A's obligation to care for his child will be a relativised duty but a duty dependent on an unrelativised one: in this way the connection with the common good will be preserved. The unrelativised duty may be an obligation to promote some unrelativised end like human welfare or a relativised end such as the state of affairs constituted by parents' each looking after their own children. A's duty to care for his children will be contingent on this being the

---

<sup>22</sup> This is rejected in the variety of approaches which I describe as preemptive consequentialist; the best known is motive consequentialist. See Pettit & Brennan, "Preemptive Consequentialism", *supra* n 7

best way to promote human welfare or parental favouritism or whatever

We know from the last section that no such surrogate captures the real thing. All that I want to emphasise in addition here is that this failure should not be regarded lightly or complacently. If we are forced to replace special duties by the sort of surrogates on offer, then we are required to revise the established conception of our most intimate obligations. We ought to think twice before facing the brave new world which such a revision would force upon us

In order to see the depth of the revision required, consider how it would affect the duty of patriotism: this may be a suspect special duty but it serves as a particularly clear example. The patriot is someone, on the received interpretation, who acknowledges an obligation to put his country first in certain ways. A consequentialist reconstruction would depict him as a person who does this only so far as that is the way to promote welfare or national loyalty or whatever. But the reconstructed patriot is an age and a world removed from his original. His fidelity is entirely provisional, since the call of the impersonal good must leave him equally prepared -- and not just by way of solving a tragic dilemma -- to betray his country as to honour it. To call such a man a patriot is newspeak.

What holds for the reconstruction of patriotism holds for the surrogates offered in place of all the special duties. I conclude that if a standard consequentialist line is adopted, then we lose a grip on all that is distinctive and important about special duties. The problem which those duties raise then is no marginal difficulty. It is a problem which urgently needs resolution.

#### **4 Holism and a solution of the problem.**

If the problem is to be resolved, then one of the three consequentialist assumptions must be amended. I wish to focus on the claim that the right is a function of the good since, on the fact of it, this proposition is not convincing. We naturally want to say: the right may be a function of the good, but only under constraints dictated by factors like the information and ability of the agent. After all, the right

must take account, not just of what there is to be done, but also of who is to do it <sup>23</sup>

Still, second thoughts suggest that perhaps the formula already allows for factors that are characteristic of the agent. It leaves room for the relevance of agent-information, since it tells us what is objectively right -- that is, right for the fully informed agent -- not what is subjectively so. And it takes account too of agent-ability, since it defines the right with regard only to options that are within the agent's control.

If these thoughts lead us after all to endorse the formula, then that is because we believe that there are no further agent-distinctive features which need to be accommodated. For all that remains, agents -- or at least adult and balanced agents -- are symmetrically related to the good. They are placed in positions to hearken to the call of the good which for relevant purposes are indiscernible.

It is at this point, I believe, that we can see the moral significance of the issue between atomists and holists. The assumption of symmetry -- once information and ability have been allowed for -- is plausible only under an atomistic view of human agents. Replace that view by a holistic one and the assumption becomes immediately questionable.

The atomist sees individuals as essentially self-contained monads. Each is characterised by a distinctive array of attitudinal states but these are entirely immanent. They coalesce around representations which belong to their bearer and they only contingently relate to the things and persons represented.

Given such an image of people, it is not unreasonable -- though neither is it irresistible -- to think of them as each suited to take responsibility for anything. Wherever their present attentions and attachments are focussed, they are focussed in a representational manner in which they might be targeted on any worthy cause. People, under the atomistic image, travel light. They are everything that one might require of moral mercenaries.

---

<sup>23</sup> Sen, 'Rights and Agency', *supra* n.7, questions the first assumption, where the doubt I raise bears either on the second or the third: this becomes clear in the final section. Both lines broach the possibility of what is here described as a perspectival rather than a panoramic theory of duty.

Replace this image by the holist alternative and a very different scenario is put on offer. Under the holist view people are not self-contained. They depend on the objects and persons around them -- and depend constitutively, not just causally -- for many of the attitudes that motivate their behaviour; these include the mental states which engage them most affectively, binding them to all they hold dear. Consider people in abstraction from their context and you lose a grip on this aspect of their mental configuration. The abstract individual -- this is Bradley's pillorying phrase -- is a mutilate; he is something less than a fully minded person.

Given the holist picture, it becomes mandatory to take account of the great difference in the way individuals are related to various potential causes. It can no longer seem reasonable to assume that each is capable equally of taking responsibility for anything. It must be relevant that every individual is engaged with some causes, and of course only with some causes, in a particularly self-involving way. Under this image people are not so much mercenaries as bondsmen. They are tied in a special manner to the milieu in which circumstances cast them.

I do not say that under atomism it is inevitable that people be seen as symmetrically positioned vis-à-vis the good; nor that under holism it is unavoidable that they be seen as asymmetrically placed. The links are of a motivational rather than a logical kind. I say only that it requires a greater neglect of relevant facts for a holist to assert the symmetry thesis. He has to overlook the fact that there are two quite different ways in which agents are related to causes that they may be expected to serve and that one of those relationships is of a particularly self-engaging kind. The atomist who maintains the symmetry thesis does not have to be quite so short-sighted.

We can see the power of these motivational links if we consider the different views which the atomist and holist are likely -- thought not required -- to take of someone who silences the claims of causes in which he is immediately involved, harkening only to the impersonal good. The atomist can see such a person in a positive light, as a saint who has redeployed his affective energies so as to be guided only by what is of global value. The holist may share some of this admiration but he must be saddened too by the spectacle.

He will see the person as uprooted and denatured, lacking the immediate bearings around which mental and emotional life is normally organised. The agent's detachment may be a conquest of self but it also has the aspect of a Pyrrhic victory. In the holist's eyes, a capacity to

disconnect must be as striking for what it puts beyond the reach of the bearer as for what it puts within

In the last section we saw that it is the panoramic character of consequentialism which gives rise to the problem with special duties. That panoramic approach, we can now see, is linked to an atomistic picture of agents. Reject that picture and the approach must give way. What takes its place under the holist alternative is a perspectival sort of ethic. See people as each involved in a distinctive nexus of relationships -- relationships required for the existence of many of their attitudes -- and you will naturally think of them as each having a different perspective on the good.

The thrust of our reflections then is to suggest that if an atomistic assumption is exchanged for a holistic one, then the problem with special duties can be resolved. The changed assumption will lead us to say that the right is a function, not just of the good, but also of the distinctive position from which each views the good. And that approach promises to leave room for special duties. Things look good for Bradley's thesis.

But there are two questions which must be satisfactorily resolved before we begin to cheer. The first is how exactly we should revise the claim that the right is a function of the good; the second is whether this revision can be squared with a consequentialist outlook. The remaining sections deal in turn with these questions.

## 5 The solution systematised

It is generally acknowledged, as we have seen, that if the right is a function of the good, it is so in a way that allows for the abilities of the duty-bearer: in this sense at least, "ought" implies "can". This concession might be expressed by saying that strictly the right is a function of two factors, the good and the possible.

The line suggested by holism is that the right is indeed a function of two factors but that the second factor involves more than the bare ability of the duty-bearer. Under the holist approach we should allow, not just for what an agent is capable of, but also for what it is reasonable to expect of him, given his embedding in a specific physical and social context. In particular, we should not require that those personal relationships which are intrinsic to his deepest feelings and commitments should count for no more than relationships that are mediated by representational contents. We should respect his psychological location.



Following this line, what we will have to say is that the right is a function, not just of the good, but also of the angle which an agent's social position gives him on the good. This will allow for the limitations of his ability but also for the limitations imposed by his being permitted not to uproot himself from his self-involving relationships.

In my view the best way to respect this line of thought is to define a sphere of **ex ante** responsibility for each agent and to hold that the right is a function both of what is desirable and of what the agent is responsible for. I have collaborated in delineating such an approach elsewhere and here I would like to draw on that work.<sup>24</sup>

The suggestion is that in order for it to be demanded of **A** that **-p**, at least where this is an independent duty, it is necessary and sufficient that two conditions are fulfilled: first, that **p** is desirable; and second, that **A** is responsible for **p**, by some independent criterion of responsibility. Duty is thereby made a function of desirability and responsibility, of attractiveness and accountability.

Like many other terms, the word "responsibility" is overworked. I should make clear at the outset that I am using it in its functional rather than its causal or sanction-bound senses. We say **ex post** that someone was responsible for an outcome, meaning that he played the principal (or at least intentional-causal) role, or meaning that he is the one subject to sanction (moral or legal) under existing practices. Neither usage corresponds to mine, though they are related. An agent is said **ex ante** as well as **ex post** to be functionally responsible for a given sort of activity or consequence. What is meant is that communal conventions make it his (and possibly no one else's) job to see to the matter in question.

The following is the sort of criterion that is envisaged then for allocating responsibility.

An agent **A** is responsible for a state of affairs **p** if and only if:

1(a) **p** is (virtually) uniquely susceptible to **A**'s influence, whether that influence amounts to partial or total control;

OR

---

<sup>24</sup> See Pettit & Goodin, "The Possibility of Special Duties", **supra** n 6

1(b) p is susceptible to the influence of A and a number of other agents; and it is not possible for those agents to exercise influence simultaneously without compromising the desired outcome p or some other desired result; and A is the salient one to assume control;

OR

1(c) p is susceptible to the influence of A and a number of other agents but it is possible for these agents to exercise simultaneous control without compromising p or some other desideratum;

AND

2. A is in a position to know -- even if he is negligent enough not to inform himself -- which of those three conditions obtains.

This is not the place to argue the merits of such a criterion, since that would require a demonstration that it distributes all duties in a reasonable fashion.<sup>25</sup> What I must do here is show just that it leaves room for special obligations, sustaining Bradley's emphasis on "my station and its duties".

Special obligations present an agent with causes involving himself, his dependants and those to whom he has made certain commitments. The contents of such duties will often be uniquely susceptible to his influence. Where they are not, it will usually be the case that different agents are likely to cut across one another and he will then be the salient one to assume control: this, given almost any variation possible on our sense of salience. The criterion will have the effect then of assigning special duties exclusively to those whom common sense would recognise as their bearers. It will mean the saving of such obligations.

I conclude that the responsibility approach is a natural way of systematising the line that holism suggests. It builds on the idea that the right is a function, not just of what is good, but of the angle which an individual's social position gives him on the good. It gives each agent a patch of particular concern, albeit a patch that overlaps in part with the provinces of others. And it ensures thereby that special duties are preserved. They are fixed within the

---

<sup>25</sup> This is argued in Pettit & Goodin, "The Possibility of Special Duties", *supra* n.6.

perspectives of their bearers and are protected from the fading effect of panoramic exposure

## 6 The consequentialist character of the solution

I have identified standard consequentialism by three claims: one, that there is an intersubjective metric for gauging the good; two, that the right is a function of the good, the right input being that which maximises objectively expected value; and three, that this criterion of input evaluation is also the criterion appropriate for selecting inputs.

The holist line on special duties says that the right is not a function of the good or desirable alone, but a function jointly of desirability and responsibility. Is such a modification compatible with consequentialism?

There are two ways in which the modification might be taken: first, as a revision of the consequentialist criterion of evaluation and indeed of selection; or secondly, as a revision only of the criterion of selection. The idea in this second case would be that while the best input remains the input which maximises objectively expected value, the way to ensure such inputs may be sometimes to select them on another basis: specifically, on the basis that whether or not they maximise value overall, they maximise it under the constraint offered by the responsibility criterion.

Under the first construal, the modification means the end of standard consequentialism. It would force an amendment of the second of our three assumptions and that assumption is the centrepiece of the standard approach.<sup>26</sup> If one does not evaluate inputs just by their consequences, making the right a function of the good, there is little sense in claiming still to be a standard consequentialist

But the second construal is compatible, in my view, with the aspirations of the standard consequentialist. It is a default assumption, rather than an essential part of the doctrine, that the criterion of evaluation ought also to serve as the criterion of selection. If he sees it as the best way to satisfy the evaluation criterion, then the consequentialist has every reason to select certain inputs on another basis: say, by the responsibility-constrained procedure. In such a case he must acknowledge an obligation

---

<sup>26</sup> Construed in this first way, the responsibility approach would be an alternative to standard consequentialism of the same kind as universalistic or rule-consequentialism

to forswear or preempt calculation of what maximises value overall, concerning himself only with the constrained maximand. In a phrase I have<sup>27</sup> used elsewhere, he must become a preemptive consequentialist.

Let us agree to construe the holist modification in the second way. The question then is whether responsibility-constrained selection is ever likely to do better than unconstrained selection in maximising objectively expected value. Unless it promises to do better, the selection procedure cannot<sup>28</sup> hold any attraction for the consequentialist.

There are three conditions which must be fulfilled if constrained selection is to carry such a promise. There must be some beneficial consequence attaching to the constrained procedure. This consequence must not be forthcoming under unconstrained calculation; it must be calculatively elusive. And even more strongly, the consequence must not be forthcoming either from a mixed procedure in which the constrained criterion is computed but is then applied in choice only if second order unconstrained calculation reveals that doing so is for the best. The consequence must be more than elusive of unconstrained calculation; it must be vulnerable to its presence, even its presence in a ratifying role.

The first of these conditions is self-explanatory but the others require some comment. The reason that the consequence must be calculatively elusive is that, were it not, then the consequentialist would always have to prefer unconstrained calculation to the constrained procedure. It would involve no loss of the benefit in question and unlike the constrained procedure it would ensure in every instance that expected value was indeed being maximised. Similarly the consequence must be calculatively vulnerable or the consequentialist will have to prefer unconstrained calculation at a second ratifying level. The question then is whether there is any such consequence discernible.

I believe that there is, at least from a holist

---

<sup>27</sup> See Pettit & Brennan, "Preemptive Consequentialism", *supra* n 7. Note that, as that paper argues, consequentialists themselves have traditionally allowed for the possibility of preemption, even if they have not explored it systematically.

<sup>28</sup> Note the difference in this regard between the constraint of bare ability and that of responsibility. The former imposes itself of necessity, the latter only so far as it is a way of furthering the consequentialist project.

viewpoint. The fact that someone takes his special duties seriously, giving them weight -- albeit not infinite weight -- in their own right, means that there is a distinctive sort of benefit available both for him and for his beneficiaries. For his part, he is allowed to find a centre of affective stability, knowing his place and his people. For their part, his beneficiaries can enjoy security in his commitment to them. They know that that commitment is not conditional on his fidelity being for the best in the world at large. They can claim it just on the basis of how they relate to him: that is, as a matter of right.<sup>29</sup>

If we believe that constrained input selection can have such a consequence, the next question is whether the consequence is accessible along any more standard route. Is it calculatively elusive? And is it calculatively vulnerable?

It is certainly elusive. I defeat my own purpose if I cleave to unconstrained calculation but try to take account among the different results in prospect of the effects on my affective stability and on my beneficiaries' sense of security. To detach and calculate over my affective stability is to display and reinforce the lack of precisely that quality. Equally, to deliberate among other matters over the security of my beneficiaries, where this is inevitably known to them, is to confirm those people in an anxious and obsequious attitude: they will see that they can depend on me only so far as my looking after their welfare promises to maximise universal good.

But not only does the compound consequence elude calculative promotion, it is also vulnerable to a calculative monitoring of the constrained procedure of choice: that is, a form of supervision which allows the choice to be realised only where it promises to maximise objectively expected value. Both my emotional stability and my beneficiaries' security will be undermined by the awareness that the focus provided by the reponsibility constraint is conditional, instance by instance, on its effects in the world at large. I will not be allowed to relax in any spontaneous loyalties and affections; and my dependants will not be permitted to rest secure in my commitment to them.

These comments are brisk and unqualified. But they are sufficient for our purposes. They suggest that from a holist

---

<sup>29</sup> This theme is developed in my "A Consequentialist Case for Rights", *supra* n.7; there I draw heavily on Joel Feinberg, "The Nature and Value of Rights", reprinted in his **Rights, Justice, and the Bounds of Liberty**, Princeton University Press, 1980

perspective within which it is inevitable that things like stability and security matter, the responsibility-constrained approach to input selection will often make consequentialist sense. You may believe that the best input in general is that which maximises objectively expected value and then proceed, for that very reason, to select certain sorts of input on the basis, not that they maximise such value overall, but that they maximise it under the constraint of responsibility. You will do so if you put sufficient weight on stability and security and you are persuaded that there benefits are produced only under the constrained selection of those inputs.

The line you are taking in such a case is best cast as follows. The inputs over which you have control include not just actions but action-producing procedures such as the rule of constraining maximisation by responsibility. You choose that rule by applying the criterion of input evaluation. Given this choice however, you preempt the application of that criterion elsewhere: viz., to the actions which the rule selects. You are a consequentialist, but a consequentialist of the preemptive stamp.

There is some irony in finishing a paper written in defence of Bradley with a consequentialist flourish. Bradley was uncompromising after all about the iniquity of thinking in a consequentialist manner. "So far as my lights go, this is to make possible, to justify, and even to encourage, an incessant practical casuistry; and that, it need scarcely be added, is the death of morality".<sup>30</sup>

There is irony in the consequentialist flourish, but there is no incoherence. Bradley saw consequentialism -- or at least utilitarianism -- as a doctrine of input selection as well as evaluation and that is why he took it as inimical to the theory of my station and its duties. We need not be bound by his perceptions, since we construe consequentialism differently. We can happily maintain the triangle of connections linking a holistic social theory, a morality of special duties, and a consequentialist theory of ethics.

---

<sup>30</sup> **Ethical Studies**, *supra* n.2, p 109.