THE INJUSTICE OF ALIENATION

Like the statue of Glaucus, which was so disfigured by time, seas, and tempests, that it looked more like a wild beast than a god, the human soul, altered in society by a thousand causes […] has, so to speak, changed in appearance, so as to be hardly recognizable. […] we find in it only the frightful contrast of passion mistaking itself for reason, and of understanding grown delirious.

- Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*

ABSTRACT: I articulate and defend a Rousseauvian theory of alienation and argue that thus construed non-alienation is a requirement of justice. On the Rousseauvian account, alienation is a process whereby social and economic conditions produce a particular sort of moral-psychological failure (alienated persons). Alienation is undesirable in itself, but it also makes the alienated person miserable, wicked, and unfree. Since our social and economic conditions are chosen, we should choose those that do not have these undesirable consequences.

1. Introduction

In this essay I present a Rousseauvian theory of alienation and argue that alienation thus construed is an important political concept. It is important, because alienation is an undesirable result of political choices, so our political choices should be sensitive to the risk of alienation. In short, non-alienation is a requirement of justice.

On the Rousseauvian account I defend, alienation exists where people fail to relate (in feelings, thoughts, and acts) to others and themselves as they should, because their moral psychologies are corrupted by their social circumstances. The normativity of this account (‘should’, ‘corrupted’) stems from a Rousseauvian moral psychology combined with assumptions about how persons ought to think and feel about themselves and other persons.

Alienation is thus a process with three parts: alienating social conditions, failures of moral psychology (the alienated person), and a causal link between those social conditions and those failures of moral psychology (the process whereby the conditions alienate persons). Alienating conditions are insufficient for alienated persons; it is possible to live in alienating conditions and not be alienated by them, but the risk of becoming alienated is a function of the degree to which a person is in alienating conditions. Conversely, it might be possible to suffer failures of moral psychology similar to those of an alienated person without living in alienating conditions, but in such cases, those suffering these failures would not, by the theory I defend, be alienated.
Why do I turn to Rousseau rather than Marx for a theory of alienation? For three reasons. First, where Marx’s theory of alienation has been the subject of much good scholarship, the Rousseauvian theory has not, I believe, received the attention it deserves. Second, the Rousseauvian theory of alienation can help us make sense of some social and political maladies that Marx’s theory does not cover. Third, the sort of alienation that worried Rousseau should worry us today, and these worries can and should inform political thought and practice much more than they do. Worries about alienation find little expression in the classics of political philosophy.

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1 The primary distinction between Rousseau’s and Marx’s theories of alienation is that for Rousseau alienation is a relation between a subject and itself, a failure of the subject’s moral psychology; whereas for Marx alienation is a relation between subjects and objects, a failure of relating appropriately to objects, processes, other subjects, to oneself as creator, and even one’s social world. David Leopold offers a helpful overview of different theories of alienation in “Alienation”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/alienation/.

2 Marx’s theory of alienation is clearest in his earlier writings such as The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (International Publishers, 1964), 106-119. The importance of alienation to Marx’s later economic theory and the fruitfulness of relying on this concept as source of social criticism is debated, see e.g. Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism” in For Marx (The Penguin Press, 1969), chapter 7; Shlomo Avineri, The Social & Political Thought of Karl Marx (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1968), chapter 4; Sean Sayers, Marx and Alienation: Essays on Hegelian Themes (Palgrave MacMillan, UK 2011); Bertell Ollman, Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society (Cambridge University Pess, 1971), chapters 25 and 32; John P. Plamenatz, Karl Marx’s Philosophy of Man (Oxford University Press, 1975).

3 Though Neuhouser’s recent work on Rousseau has done much to reestablish the political importance of Rousseau’s moral psychology, cf. Rousseau’s Theodicy of Self-Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter 2; Rousseau’s Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014). My reading of Rousseau is close to Neuhouser’s. Similar readings can be found in Nicholas Dent, Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory and Rousseau (New York: Routledge, 2005); Joseph R. Reisert, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Friend of virtue. Not all interpreters would agree with the theory I present, see e.g. Jonathan Marks, Perfection and Disharmony in the Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Laurence D. Cooper, Rousseau: Nature and the Problem of the Good Life (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).
from the latter half of the 20th century, and the concept plays no role in contemporary debates about justice. I aim to show that we should revive the Rousseauvian concerns about alienation in the face of contemporary neglect.

There are, I think, two explanations for this neglect, and each explanation also presents a challenge to my claim that alienation is an important political concept. First, while alienation was central to mid-century socialism, the concept was under-defined and was used to express a hodge-podge of disparate dissatisfactions. Thus, Schacht concludes in his 1970 study of the many uses of alienation that the term, “communicates little more today than tapping one’s glass with one’s spoon at a banquet; neither does more than attract attention. […] it has become a fetish word.” Apart from disapproval, Schacht finds no common factor to the uses of the term: “there is no such thing as alienation.”

Schacht allows that the concept of alienation meaningfully could be used for either of two kinds of relation: relations between persons and something other than themselves, and relations between persons as they are and as they ought to be. In the former case, we should only use the

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4 There’s barely a mention of alienation (or discussion of the idea under a different heading) in any of the following influential books: Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (though part III offers some resources that I discuss in section 4) or *Political Liberalism*, Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Hayek’s *The Constitution of Liberty*, Habermas’s *Between Facts and Norms* (but his earlier work on rationalities offers some resources), Pettit’s *Republicanism*, Walzer’s *Spheres of Justice*, Anderson’s *Value in Ethics and Economics*, Dworkin’s *Sovereign Virtue*, Sen’s *The Idea of Justice* (or earlier works on collective choice, freedom, and equality), and Gaus’s *The Order of Public Reason*. Even so-called communitarian critics of liberalism such as MacIntyre or Sandel avoid the term, though MacIntyre is working with the theme (and more directly in his earlier writings on Marx).


word descriptively, to mark the separation between a person (or persons) and something with which they used to be united. In the latter case, by contrast, we should use the word normatively, to mark the “disparity between a person’s actual condition and his essential or ideal nature.” The Rousseauvian theory of alienation is of the second sort. Indeed, I add two restrictions, for alienation is not any failure of persons to be as they should; rather, it is a particular sort of moral psychological failure caused by particular social conditions.

Working within, and further refining, Schacht’s restrictions brings us to the second explanation and challenge. For, as Schacht notes, “if the time should come when people would cease to find plausible the idea of an essential or ideal nature of man which an individual may or may not realize, the expression [of alienation] so construed would no longer have any utility.” That time has come. Essentialism for natural kinds has few contemporary defenders, and even fewer political philosophers work from an ideal human nature. Moreover, it seems that the liberal principle of legitimacy\(^\text{10}\) blocks alienation from playing any role in justifying the exercise of political authority, for any political choice justified by reference to a norm that relies on an ideal of human nature must be objectionably perfectionist.\(^\text{11}\) Thus, Jaeggi writes that a useful theory of alienation, “cannot, but also need not be grounded in strongly essentialist or metaphysical presup-

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\(^8\) Schacht, *Alienation*, 264
\(^10\) Which, in Rawls’s precise and influential formulation, says that “the exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason.” (*Political Liberalism*, 137)
\(^11\) Jonathan Quong offers a powerful critique of perfectionism in *Liberalism without Perfection* (Oxford University Press, 2011). The perfectionism that I defend in this essay is of the sort that Quong labels political perfectionism (*Liberalism without Perfection*, p. 15-21). For my direct engagement with political anti-perfectionism see ***removed for review***.
positions; moreover, it cannot but also need not rely on perfectionist or paternalistic arguments.”

As alternative, Jaeggi argues that alienation is “a particular form of the loss of […] positive freedom,” where the individual cannot (or does not) make her life her own, because she cannot appropriate (make her own) her world and her life: “leading one’s life as one’s own in a robust sense presupposes various conditions, and it is precisely these conditions that the concept of alienation addresses.”

My aim here is not to criticize Jaeggi’s theory, but to show that we can, after all, construct a theory of alienation that is clear, intuitively appealing, has powerful critical potential, and relies on claims about human nature and human goodness without becoming entangled in objectionable perfectionism.

In sum, my aims are to articulate a Rousseauvian theory of alienation, and to show how worries about alienation thus construed should inform political choices and can do so without making those choices objectionably perfectionist. In section 2 I articulate the Rousseauvian theory of alienation. In section 3 I elaborate this theory by restating the evergreen worry that capitalism is alienating. In section 4 I establish the political importance of alienation. In section 5 I reply to the worry that a politics of non-alienation must be objectionably perfectionist.

2. A Rousseauvian theory of alienation

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14 Jaeggi, *Alienation*, 199. Similarly, Richard Schmitt writes that “alienation constricts our lives, it makes it more difficult to live lives of our own, to be the persons we want to be. Alienation deprives us of freedom.” (*Alienation and Freedom*, 114)
Rather than constructing a theory of alienation from scratch, I use Rousseau’s theory of alienation as I understand it. To be clear, my argument is about a particular moral failure, not about the nature of alienation as such or about how we should read Rousseau. So, first, I am not claiming that Rousseau’s theory of alienation as I construct it is the true or only theory of alienation. It is, rather, a theory of alienation. Indeed, it is not terribly important for my argument that the theory is a theory of alienation – that is, that it offers an adequate account of this contested and murky concept. Rather, I claim that there is a particular sort of socially conditioned moral malady that Rousseau does a splendid job of articulating, and that we need to keep in mind when we make political choices. Second, it is not important for my argument that mine is the best interpretation of Rousseau. I do, of course, believe in my reading of Rousseau – but my argument does not hang on interpretive accuracy. What matters, again, is there is a particular sort of moral-psychological failure that we should care about when making political choices.

Rousseau’s theory of alienation is simply his moral psychology together with his diagnosis of how moral psychologies can be corrupted by social conditions and the detrimental results that follow. On this account, alienation is undesirable in itself, but its undesirability is amplified by its results: the alienated person is unhappy, vicious, and unfree. Moreover, the social conditions that create alienation are not given, but politically chosen, and, other things equal, our political choices should aim to avoid alienation.¹⁵

For Rousseau, the thing that sets human beings apart from other animals is a set of potentialities (or dormant faculties) the development of which depends on their social circumstances (this is what Rousseau calls human perfectibility). In some social circumstances, these faculties

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¹⁵ The general form of Rousseau’s theory of alienation will be familiar to readers of the First and Second Discourses, Emile, or Rousseau’s autobiographical writings.
develop in a rotten fashion, and the members of such societies are miserable, wicked, and unfree. But Rousseau also leaves open the possibility that the human potentialities may receive a good development in the right social circumstances, circumstances he sketches in the *Social Contract*, *Julie, Letters Written from the Mountain*, and *Emile*. So, whether human beings are good or bad depends primarily on their social circumstances – most importantly on the political and economic laws and institutions by which access to rivalrous goods (power, fame, money, etc.) are distributed. The difference between corrupting and non-corrupting social conditions (or institutions) is their effect on *amour-propre*. *Amour-propre* is the source of socially oriented desires, feelings, and passions, e.g. desires for recognition, status, power, respect, love, and esteem. In corrupting social conditions, *amour-propre* becomes inflamed, and these desires become imperious, jealous, and dominating, with terrible results for those who suffer them. (I provide more detail on the different actualizations of *amour-propre* below.)

To provide further details, I explain how alienation prevents the achievement of the components of a good human existence (happiness, virtue, and freedom) and is a source of bad human existence (dominated by misery, vice, and unfreedom). For each of these components, I sketch how natural man achieves the good incompletely, how Rousseau’s hero, Emile, achieves it completely, and how the ‘men of society’ (as Rousseau calls his alienated contemporaries) fail to achieve it entirely, because their moral psychologies have been corrupted by their social circumstances.\(^\text{16}\) Of course, natural man and Emile are theoretical fictions; like the state of nature or

\(^{16}\) I’m using Rousseau’s terms (‘natural man’, ‘men of society’), though uncomfortably so, since Rousseau’s terminological gender bias is rooted in a rather thick understanding of the differences between men and women (as exhibited in *Emile, Letter to D’Alembert*, section IX, and *Julie* Part I letter XLVI). Using Rousseau’s terminology does not imply these understandings.
the perfectly just republican constitution they provide ways to think about how we should live, not visions of actual lives led.

2.1 Unhappy

According to Rousseau, the road to happiness lies in the equilibrium of power and desires – in the ability to get what one wants. Unhappiness, correlativey, lies in the inability to get what one wants. Accordingly, the only sure route to happiness is to avoid having desires one cannot satisfy: “the road of true happiness […] is in diminishing the excess of desires over the faculties and putting power and will in perfect equality.”

Natural man is happy. His desires are few; “food, a female, and rest,” and his powers adequate to these desires. Emile also finds happiness, but his happiness is of a different kind. Emile is not “made to remain always solitary;” he is educated for and introduced into society, and his abilities are not fully adequate to his desires. Emile fears the death of those he loves and desires justice for all.

To account for Emile’s happiness, we need to distinguish between the simple happiness of natural man and Emile’s more complex happiness. The distinction lies in the different facul-

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17 “[U]nhappiness consists not in the privation of things but in the need that is felt for them.” (Emile, 4:305/211) Similarly: “[Man] is unhappy only when he, in his senseless desires, puts in the rank of the possible what is not possible.” (Emile, 4:819/634)

18 Emile, 211/4:303.

19 Second Discourse, 3:143/142.

20 Emile, 4:654/497.

21 I thus disagree with Neuhouser, who says that the education of Emile aims to “ensure that his desires never outrun his powers.” (Rousseau’s Critique of Inequality, 143). This aim would be
ties they exercise and the different kinds of pleasures that result. The pleasures of complex happiness are realized when certain social passions are satisfied. Many social passions are sources of misery – vainglory, vanity, envy, jealousy, and so on. Yet other social passions are the sources of true happiness – love (whether friendly, romantic, or familial), social esteem, self-respect, and the love of virtue. These feelings can only be experienced through the exercise of the higher human faculties and in society with others, and satisfying the corresponding desires leads to sweeter pleasures and a happiness deeper than what a solitary person (natural man) could enjoy.22 Emile finds true friendship with his tutor, true love with Sophie, social esteem, and the self-respect proper to an honorable person.23 Thus, when Emile finally arrives at adulthood, “he is as happy as a man can be.”24

Amour-propre is thus not inherently malign.25 Social feelings, desires, and passions are not themselves vicious, nor do they necessarily lead to a vicious character or vicious acts. It is when amour-propre becomes malignant that it is the source of vicious desires and unhappiness.

impossible, as I think Rousseau understood. Paradoxically (and Rousseauvian), (simple) unhappiness is the price we pay for (complex) happiness. The education of Emile aims to keep the price as low as possible, not to avoid paying it.

22 Recall that in the SD Rousseau says that conjugal and parental love are “the sweetest sentiments known to man.” (Second Discourse, 168/164)
23 “I distinguish [between] honor [...] drawn from public opinion, and that which derives from self-esteem. [...] Worldly honor can be advantageous to fortune, but it does not penetrate into the soul and has no influence on true happiness. Genuine honor on the contrary constitutes its very essence, because only in it can that permanent sentiment of inner satisfaction be found which alone can make a thinking being happy.” Julie, 2:84/69, see also Julie, 2:225/185, 2:300-310/246-247.
25 Cf. Dent’s description: “Amour-propre, in and of itself, may be benign or may be perverse, and must therefore be connected to capacities, concerns, sentiments that can take on a benign or a perverse character, depending on specific factors which affect these in identifiable and explicable ways.” (Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory, 21, see also 54-5). See also Neuhouser Rousseau’s Theodicy of Self-Love, 1, 13, 29-37, 44-5, 70-89, 145-6, 222-9.
How *amour-propre* develops in an individual, and whether it becomes malignant or not depends on “the accidents that modify it and that depend upon customs, laws, ranks, fortune, and our whole human system.”

Malignant *amour-propre* results from corrupting social conditions and causes misery. Benign *amour-propre*, on the other hand, is ingredient in the sources of complex happiness: love, friendship, and citizenship all involve being properly regarded by others – as worthy lovers, friends, and compatriots.

The men of society suffer from malignant *amour-propre* and, therefore, are unhappy in both senses. They desire most of all the regard of others, and they seek it for elusive achievements; “wealth, nobility or rank, power, and personal merit.” In this “empire of covetousness,” persons are obsessed with the “fantasy of station,” and driven by an insatiable “frenzy to achieve distinction.” Their abilities are grossly inadequate to their desires, for what they want they must get from others, and they all want what only few can have (to be best, most famous, richest, most beautiful, etc.). Worse, they cannot find love or respect, nor enjoy self-esteem and the love of virtue, for they are not lovable, estimable, or virtuous.

2.2 Wicked

According to Rousseau, “[t]here is no original perversity in the human heart […] not a single vice to be found in it of which it cannot be said how and whence it entered.” Indeed,

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26 *Julie*, 2:491/403.
28 *First Discourse*, Last Reply, 3:93/82.
29 *Julie*, 2:200/163.
30 *Second Discourse*, 3:189184.
31 *Emile*, 4:322/225.
there is no vice or evil except from that which is produced by human activities: “moral evil is incontestably our own work.”32 Yet, the source of vice is not individual choices, but the institutional and cultural conditions that foster vice: “man is naturally good [...] society depraves and perverts men.”33

Natural man exemplifies this original innocence.34 Emile, by contrast, embodies virtue, a kind of moral self-mastery: “[v]irtue consists not only in being just, but in being so by triumphing over one’s passions, by ruling over one’s own heart.”35 Thus, the tutor’s prescription: “Command your heart, Emile, and you will be virtuous.”36

In some ways, virtue is better than innocence. The innocent person is not bad; the virtuous person is good. Natural man is not a responsible being, and his innocence is not admirable; Emile’s moral goodness is a proper object of admiration and esteem. This is one of the reasons that virtue is a precondition of true (complex) happiness. The ingredients of complex happiness – love, friendship, social esteem, and self-respect – have virtue as their proper object.37 The case is easy to make for virtue as the proper object of self-respect and social esteem – the main ingredient in respectability is virtue. The case for love (whether friendly or romantic) is not conceptual, but no less clear in Rousseau’s writings. It is not merely that persons must be virtuous to be lovable; rather, what makes persons lovable is (in large part) their virtue. It is when Sophie sees that

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32 *Emile*, 4:587/443. Recall also the first sentence from *Emile*: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of nature; everything degenerates in the hands of man.” (4:244/161)  
33 *Emile*, 4:525/391.  
34 “Savages are not wicked precisely because they do not know what it is to be good; for it is [...] the calm of the passions and the ignorance of vice that keep them from evildoing.” (*Second Discourse*, 3:154/151-2)  
36 *Emile*, 4:818/634.  
37 Love of virtue is itself a source of happiness. In the state of nature there “would be neither goodness in our hearts nor morality in our actions, and we would never have enjoyed the soul’s most delicious feeling – love of virtue.” (*Geneva Manuscript*, 3:283/158-9)
Emile helps others in need, and when Emile sees Sophie caring for the sick, that their love is settled.

The men of society are afflicted with malignant *amour-propre* and inclined to vice. They desire love without being lovable; respect without respectability; and therefore must pretend and appear to be other than what they truly are: “they can only live together by obstructing, supplanting, deceiving, betraying, destroying one another!”38 Moreover, because the goods they desire are rivalrous, and because they desire to have more than others, if not most of all, the men of society are tempted to undercut others as the easiest way to increase their relative share. In a sufficiently corrupt society, self-interest and duty are directly opposed, and the men of society will sense that only suckers are good in such circumstances: “they must be wicked if they are to be wise.”39

2.3 Unfree

There are many concepts of freedom in Rousseau. For the purposes of this essay, the important distinctions are between internal and external freedom and between negative and positive freedom. Internal freedom is freedom of the will, or the *moral freedom* that obtains from acting in accord with right reason. Moral freedom involves both a *negative freedom from determination by immoral passions* (i.e. those of the malignant *amour-propre*), and the *positive freedom achieved in self-determination in accordance with right reason*: “moral freedom […] alone

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38 *Preface to Narcissus*, 2:968/100.
39 *Preface to Narcissus*, 2:969n/101n.
makes man truly the master of himself; for the impulsion of mere appetite is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom.” Positive moral freedom presupposes negative moral freedom, but not *vice versa*.

External freedom is freedom from subjection to the arbitrary will of another. Negatively, external freedom consists in the absence of unjust impediments, threats, and similar coercive pressures, and negative freedom is paradigmatically limited by tyrannical regimes. Positively, external freedom consists in republican citizenship, for in a republic the external freedom of each is made consistent with the freedom of others through a system of legislation that express the general will: “Inasmuch as the individuals have subjected themselves only to the sovereign, and the sovereign authority is nothing other than the general will [...] each man who obeys the sovereign obeys only himself.”

Since natural man has neither immoral passions nor moral reason, he enjoys the negative but not the positive sort of moral freedom. Emile, by contrast, exemplifies the hoped-for achievement of moral freedom. Emile is virtuous; he achieves the self-mastery of right reason. Thus, in the passage where the tutor commands Emile to be virtuous, the tutor also ties virtue to freedom: “Up to now you [Emile] were only apparently free. You had only the precarious freedom of a slave to whom nothing has been commanded. Now be really free. Learn to become your own master.”

Natural man also enjoys negative but not positive external freedom, but here it seems Emile is worse off, for he enjoys neither negative nor positive moral freedom. The tutor sends

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41 *Emile*, 4:841/461.
43 *Emile*, 4:818/633.
Emile off to find a city with a just constitution where he and Emile can settle. We learn from the unpublished sequel Emile and Sophie (tellingly subtitled Les Solitaires), that he did not find it. They settle in Paris, “that pit of prejudices and vices,” and soon Sophie is unfaithful and Emile a slave of the Dey of Algiers! Yet, Rousseau does not maintain that positive external freedom is necessary for positive moral freedom, or that external unfreedom is sufficient for moral unfreedom, for Emile learns that even a slave can have internal freedom. Even so, external unfreedom normally inflames amour-propre, and Rousseau clearly hopes that a republican constitution, and the positive external freedom enjoyed there, lessens the danger of inflamed amour-propre.

The men of society are unfree in all four dimensions: externally, they are dependent and subjected to an unjust system of laws; internally they are driven by vicious passions rather than right reason. The men of society depend on others for the satisfaction of their needs – not just because they cannot produce or deliver all the goods and services they need, and not just because many of these needs are defined by the regard of others, but also because they need cooperation from others to get these goods. The case is clearest for the laborer who depends on others for a job, but dependence applies equally to the employer, who depends on the workers, suppliers, and market demand: “subjugated by a multitude of new needs to the whole of nature, and especially to those of his kind, whose slave he in a sense becomes even by becoming their master; rich, he needs their services; poor, he needs their help.” The men of society are also morally unfree, for they are vicious, and “slave is the man who does evil, for he always does it in spite of himself.”

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44 Emile and Sophie, 4:885/688.
45 Emile and Sophie, 4:922/270.
46 Emile and Sophie, 4:917-8/715.
47 Second Discourse, 3:170/175.
48 Emile, 4:857/667.
It is almost impossible to be virtuous in corrupting society, and where virtue is rare, so is moral freedom. In a corrupting society, “all are the slaves of vice.”

2.4 Summary

The Rousseauvian theory of alienation can be summarized as follows:

➢ The subjects that are alienated are individual human beings.

➢ They are alienated in that their moral psychologies are bad. They think and feel wrongly about themselves and others. They desire what is not truly desirable; admire those that are not admirable; envy those that are not enviable; and want, in turn, to appear more desirable, admirable, and enviable than others, without being so. Their needs for love, respect, and recognition are perverted into immoral needs for superiority, privilege, possession, and domination.

➢ Their alienation is caused by social conditioning; their moral psychologies have been corrupted by their social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances.

➢ Their alienation has further disastrous results: because they are alienated, they are unhappy, wicked, and unfree.

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49 Rousseau’s advice for avoiding vice is to avoid temptation, and his insistence on leaving society can be understood in light of this advice and the impossibility of avoiding temptation in corrupting society, see *Dialogues*, 1:823-824/126-127, 1:855/150-151; *Confessions*, 1:56/47, 1:424/356, 1:468/393.

Alienation is exemplified by the men of society. Envy, vainglory, greed, schadenfreude, and similar maliciously other-regarding desires and feelings dominate their moral psychology.\textsuperscript{51} The result is heinous: “a deceiving and frivolous exterior, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness.”\textsuperscript{52} In a word, then, the men of society are alienated; they fail to be what they ought to be, and to relate appropriately to themselves and others, because their moral psychology has been corrupted by their social circumstances. Of course, people can think, feel, and act wrongly without being alienated, but when they are alienated, they are sure to do so.

We can disagree with any of the elements of Rousseau’s account: his definitions of human nature and human goodness, the well-functioning and dysfunctional cases, or the explanations he provides for the differences between well-functioning and dysfunctional. However, the general account seems indubitable: some social circumstances engender bad moral psychologies that produce unhappiness, vice, and unfreedom.

In the next section I try to make the Rousseauvian theory of non-alienation more concrete and relatable by illustrating the danger of alienation in relation to one of the most important political choices, namely, how we should design the economy. I look at the complaint that a capitalist design of the economy predictably creates alienation. While this complaint is well-worn (almost threadbare), it is worth revisiting; if the argument of the following section is sound, we have reasons to consider alternatives to capitalism, or at least to consider modifications of capitalism that dampen its tendency to create alienation.

\textsuperscript{51} These failings are nicely captured in Kant’s “vices of culture”, the passions for honor, superiority, and wealth (\textit{Religion}, 6:27; see also \textit{Religion}, 93-4; \textit{Anthropology}, 7:268-70).
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Second Discourse}, 3:193/187. How, exactly, we get from natural man to the men of society that Rousseau finds so despicable is a complex topic that we need not go into here. Neuhouser offers a reconstruction in \textit{Rousseau’s Critique of Inequality}. 
3. Alienation and capitalism

The choice of economic system is not simply the choice of how to produce and distribute the things we want; it is also the choice of conditions that determine what we want, how we pursue our wants, and how we think and feel about ourselves and others.\(^5\) The choice of economic system is a choice of whom to become.\(^4\)

In capitalist societies, the means of production are privately owned, markets are used to determine what is produced and how it is distributed, and production is directed towards the pursuit of profits rather than to satisfy needs (that is, needs are understood in terms of effective demand). Though Rousseau could not have had capitalism in mind, there are reasons to think that any capitalist society must produce the sort of alienation that concerned him. Below I sketch these reasons. While these reasons do not conclusively establish the alienating power of capitalism, they establish that worries about alienation should inform our choice of our economic system.

3.1 Self-interest

\(^5\) “Economic development […] remakes the whole society and the personalities of those in it. […] choosing an economic system is not merely choosing a machine for satisfying wants but rather choosing a machine for producing certain wants in the future.” (Brian Barry, Political Argument, 76-7)

In many ways, capitalism is wonderful. It harnesses our self-interest to the public good without the need for coercive laws. People develop their talents, work hard, produce, invest, innovate, distribute, and relocate with little concern for the greater social good, and yet the result is more of what we want: cheaper products, technological leaps, innovations that are improved upon in a matter of months, and wealth on a scale that would astonish most human beings that ever lived. All this as the accidental result of self-interest freely pursued! Moreover, while capitalism produces vast disparities of economic wealth, it tends to provide more for most. Indeed, capitalism is so productive that the existence of absolute poverty has become a political choice.

Capitalism thus understood is a productive, spontaneous order process that exists when multitudes of individuals freely pursue their self-interest in the marketplaces of a system with private ownership of the means of production. The fuel of this process is self-interest. The economic world that is constructed, navigated, manipulated, destroyed, and reconstructed is self-interest in motion. However, one might worry that these same self-interested motivations driving the capitalist wonder are both immoral and dangerous. As Cohen describes it:

[T]he market posture is greedy and fearful in that one’s opposite-number marketeers are predominantly seen as possible sources of enrichment, and as threats to one’s success. These are horrible ways of seeing other people, however much we have become habituated and inured to them, as a result of centuries of capitalist civilization.

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55 This is a general theme of Hayek’s defense of capitalism, cf. *Constitution of Liberty*, part I.
In market transactions, we standardly try to maximize our own benefit and without care for the benefit of other market actors except as it helps ourselves. When engaged in the capitalist economy, individuals proceed on the basis of economic rationality, which cares about other people and the natural and cultural environments primarily as levers, obstacles, and opportunities to manipulate, circumvent, or pursue as required by the imperatives of self-interest. In Kantian terms, market interactions invite us to treat others as mere means, not also as ends in themselves. The contractualist reply to this problem is that we do so by mutual consent and within legal constraints that ensure the permissibility of our actions. Yet the worry is not with the permissibility of the actions, but with the permissibility of the ways of thinking and feeling about other human beings that are rationally required in this form of interaction.

These thoughts and sentiments are worrisome enough when confined to the market and our economic activities, and confining them seems impossible. The capitalist economy tends to encroach on non-market spheres of human co-existence, both through increased commodification of mutually beneficial interactions and through the spread of market-rationality to traditionally non-market spheres.57

The motives of fear and greed that are normal to capitalism are aggravated by the capitalist tendency to crisis that Marx diagnoses in Capital.58 When and why these crises happen seems mysterious – not just to ordinary citizens, but to economists and politicians as well – and without warning millions of families are plunged into material ruin; their livelihood, identities, homes,

and neighborhoods – their ways of life – destroyed. Who could not be fearful in the face of this risk? Who would not be greedy, when the best (only?) safeguard from crisis is wealth?

Fear and greed are rational. Indeed, in capitalism other persons are threats and opportunities, so our fearful and greedy thoughts and feelings are well-motivated. But they are not how we should think and feel about other human beings. We should be in circumstances that would not make us think and feel in these ways.

3.2 Economic inequality

Economic inequality has two interrelated components: wealth inequality and inequality of income. The exact degree of either sort of economic inequality and the composition of the classes of rich and poor are functions of context, history, and the regulatory framework, but both sorts of inequality are unavoidable in capitalist societies.

Those who own wealth get to employ those that do not. The terms of employment are set in the contract of employment, but the relationship between employer and employee is nevertheless one of unequal authority in two ways. First, it is never really true that the terms of employment are the result of a free bargaining between free and equal persons. Even when the terms of employment are negotiated, the negotiation is about the details of terms otherwise dictated by the employer. Second, once hired, the employer has the authority to tell the employee what to do (within the contractually defined limits), and to fire the employee if she is unwilling or is deemed of insufficient use-value. In most workplace relations the employer is the boss, he, she, or it (in

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59 Piketty lays out the distinction, their interrelation, and historical development in *Capital in the 21st Century*.
corporate settings) has a lot of authority to tell their employees what to do.\textsuperscript{61} We need not say that such relations of unequal authority are immoral \textit{as such}, to find them worrisome. Rather, we can say that they breed the moral psychologies of domination: the dominated resent their domination, but also want to dominate in turn; the dominators feel superior, and want to hold on to that superiority.

Income inequality brings additional worries. Differences in wages are seen to reflect, and to a large degree actually do reflect, differences in worth. Not in moral worth, to be sure, and maybe we should not care about differences in economic worth to employers, but market value is valuation, and it is \textit{very} hard to be found less worthy than others – even \textit{un}worthy, having less, little, or no economically interesting use-value – and not develop the sentiments of resentment, envy, and low self-esteem.

It is also in the domain of these economic inequalities that Marx’s theory of alienation has full purchase. Because of the inequalities of wealth (and capital) and the relations of ownership, unequal authority, and workplace authority that this produces (in a word, classes of capitalists and proletariat), workers may be alienated from their work and the products they produce, from themselves, from employers, and from other workers. They may think of their labor and the products they produce belong to their employer. They may relate to themselves, their employers, and other workers as levers and obstacles to navigate and manipulate; means to getting the highest pay at lowest effort. They may resent those who earn more than themselves, and feel superior to those who make less. Marxists have done much to show how class division and the structure

of employment in a capitalist economy have undesirable consequences to moral psychology, well-being, and behavior.\textsuperscript{62}

3.3 Winners and losers

Finally, in a capitalist society there are winners and losers, and the distribution of the spoils has little to do with merit or deservingness; it is a function of luck in the social lottery, luck in the draw of talents, luck in the marketplace, ruthlessness in the pursuit of opportunity, and willingness to sacrifice non-economic interests for economic gain.

Partially because there are winners and losers, and partially because the distribution of winners and losers is disconnected from any true merit,\textsuperscript{63} the losers may envy and resent the winners, but also wish that they should be so lucky. The winners tend to think that they deserve their relative positions (they did, after all, work hard and sacrifice much), and do what it takes to keep them. Rousseau’s description seems spot on: “consuming ambition, the ardent desire to raise one’s relative fortune less out of a genuine need than in order to place oneself above others, instills in all men a black inclination to harm one another […] competition and rivalry on one hand,


\textsuperscript{63} As even the most ardent defenders of Capitalism would agree, cf. Hayek’s \textit{Law, Legislation, Liberty} (in vol. 2, \textit{The Mirage of Social Justice}), chapter 9.
conflict of interests on the other, and always the hidden desire to profit at another’s expense. 

Is this not an apt description of capitalist society?

The worries about the alienating effects of capitalism sketched in this section might be overblown, for the degree to which a capitalist economic system has these alienating effects is a function of its regulatory framework, and we might imagine that a well-designed capitalist economy could avoid or diminish most of the problems sketched above. But that is precisely my point: the design of the economy is a matter of political choice and this choice should be informed also by the aim of non-alienation. In the following section I describe in more detail the general case for making non-alienation an important political concern.

4. Alienation as a political concern: the general case

In the previous sections I explained the Rousseauvian theory of alienation and sketched how a concern for non-alienation should inform the choice of economic system. In this and the following section I argue that worries about alienation should inform and can justify political choices more generally, because:

First, worries about alienation should figure into the articulation and defense of principles of justice (alienation as an indirect, meta-theoretical concern).

Second, non-alienation is a direct requirement of justice; justice prohibits alienating institutions.

Third, there are concerns other than concerns of justice that should inform and can justify political choices, alienation is one of these.

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64 Second Discourse, 3:175/171.
To fix the subject, I’m assuming a broadly Rawlsian framework for understanding justice. My arguments could be restated for other theories of justice, but I do not show as much in this essay.

In the Rawlsian framework, the role of justice is to issue principles by which we can live and cooperate together as free and equal moral persons. This role divides into two. On one hand, justice serves an enabling role, where it requires that all members enjoy the institutional preconditions for living and working together as free and equal persons. On the other hand, justice serves a distributive role, where it requires that the distribution of the benefits and burdens of the cooperation they engage in is fair to all members of society. To be clear:

The *roles* of principles of justice are to enable all members of society to live and cooperate as free and equal moral persons, and to secure that the benefits and burdens of their cooperation are fairly distributed,

The *subject* of principles of justice is the basic laws and institutions that define, enable, and regulate coexistence and cooperation (in a word, the basic structure), and

The *requirements* of justice are the principles that best serve the above-defined role for the given subject.

The requirements of justice are expressed by the two principles of equal basic rights and democratic equality (which combines fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle) and the attendant priority rules. The first principle performs the enabling role by requiring that all members are secured the institutional preconditions for the development and exercise of the
moral powers of free and equal citizenship. The second principle performs the distributive role by requiring that the distribution of the burdens and benefits of their cooperation is fair.

On this understanding, justice is non-teleological (or deontological), meaning that justice is not the principles that best allow us to achieve some antecedently defined ends such as utility, freedom, or human perfection. Rather, justice constrains how we can pursue our ends. Justice also constrains which ends count as valid, for ends that are inherently unjust (say, satisfying racist desires) have no political value. The idea, then, is that we can permissibly pursue our ends separately and through cooperation only on terms that respect the freedom and equality of each member of society. These terms are stated by the principles of justice.65

4.1 Non-alienation as a meta-theoretical concern

Rawls is not blind to the malleability of human nature or the power of institutions to shape human character:

“[T]he social system shapes the wants and aspirations that its citizens come to have. It determines in part the sort of persons they want to be as well as the sort of persons they are. Thus an economic system is not only an institutional device for satisfying existing wants and needs but a way of creating and fashioning wants in the future. […] Since economic

65 In a sense, the principles of justice are the “identity grounding” commitments of liberal democracy, cf. Shmuel Nili, The People’s Duty (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 32.
arrangements have these effects, and indeed must do so, the choice of these institutions involves some view of human good and of the design of institutions to realize it."66

Moreover, Rawls’s discussion of envy as a threat to stability exemplifies how non-alienation should inform theories of justice.67 Recall, that the argument for justice as fairness falls into two parts.68 To simplify the case for the two principles, and since psychological propensities such as envy are morally suspect, the first part brackets the question of special psychologies and assumes that a “rational individual is not subject to envy […] or by various tendencies to dominate or to submit, and the like.”69 The second part then takes up the question of whether a society well-ordered by the two principles will generate “feelings of envy and patterns of psychological attitudes that will undermine the arrangements it counts to be just.”70 One worry is that the inequalities permitted by the difference principle can be so severe that they engender envy and similar sentiments that, in turn, threaten stability, since they undercut the efficiency of the sense of justice in the members of society. Rawls’s reply to this worry, in brief, is that a society well-ordered by the two principles of justice as fairness provides sufficiently robust social bases of self-respect to ward of the envy-inducing effects of economic inequalities permitted by the difference principle.71

Stability is also threatened by alienation, and this threat is not dealt with by the social bases of self-respect. Two necessary conditions of stability are that the members of society develop

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69 Rawls, TJrev., 464.
70 Rawls, TJrev., 465.
and maintain an effective sense of justice.\textsuperscript{72} The sense of justice is a disposition to act in accordance with and from justice,\textsuperscript{73} and alienation undermines its development and continued hold on us. First, members of society will develop an effective sense of justice only if they believe that behavior that conforms with and supports just institutions is congruent with the behavior that serves their conception of the good.\textsuperscript{74} But the perverse conceptions of the good of alienated persons recommend behavior that does not conform with, but actively undercuts, just institutions; behavior such as free-riding, exploiting others, dominating others, and using one’s political power for personal gain. Second, the members of society will maintain an effective sense of justice only if they expect other members of society to be governed by an effective sense of justice.\textsuperscript{75} In an alienating society, the members (correctly) suspect that other members are not so governed. This reciprocal suspicion releases the mutual assurance problem of the generalized prisoners’ dilemma.\textsuperscript{76} This problem, in turn, means that “deceptive or repressive measures”\textsuperscript{77} are needed to maintain justice, and such measures, at best, secure stability for the wrong reasons.\textsuperscript{78}

The details and soundness of these Rawlsian worries about stability are debatable. Yet, the point should be clear. Rawls’s discussion of the moral psychology of stability exemplifies how non-alienation constrains the articulation and defense of principles of justice: a society well-ordered by a conception of justice should be stable; since alienation is destabilizing, the relative

\textsuperscript{72} Cf. Weithman, Why Political Liberalism?, 10-1, 54-7, 68-70, 274-5, 284-4. In Rousseauvian terms, stability requires that citizens understand what the general will wills and acquire and maintain the disposition to let it determine their choices as citizens.

\textsuperscript{73} TJrev., 442. It is worth noting that Rawls’s essay “The Sense of Justice” starts with Emile.

\textsuperscript{74} Cf. chapter IX of TJ.

\textsuperscript{75} Weithman, Why Political Liberalism?, chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{76} Cf. Weithman, Why Political Liberalism?, 43-51.

\textsuperscript{77} Weithman, Why Political Liberalism?, 363.

\textsuperscript{78} Cf. Rawls’s discussion of “stability for the right reasons”, Political Liberalism, xliii, 142-3.
attraction of the principles of justice depend on whether their institutional requirements can be satisfied by non-alienating institutional schemes.

Non-alienation is also a more direct and functional constraint on the articulation and defense of principles of justice, for the role of justice is to issue the rules whereby we are to pursue ends that are inaccessible in an alienating society. That justice is deontological does not deny that there are human ends such as happiness, virtue, and freedom existing apart from the principles of justice. Nor does it deny that these ends are prior to justice in the sense that we live together and cooperate to better achieve them. Justice tells us how we may pursue our ends, and were it not for these ends, there would be no role for justice to play. Functionally, but not normatively, human ends are thus prior to justice; we need principles of justice to regulate our pursuit of antecedently given ends. If satisfying the requirements of justice meant sacrificing our happiness, virtue, or freedom, then justice could not perform its function of guiding our pursuit of these ends. So, we need to know that there exist institutional embodiments of the principles of justice that allow for the (sufficient) achievement of happiness, virtue, and freedom, and if there are no such feasible schemes to be found, then we might rethink the principles of justice (or face a truly tragic choice between justice and goodness).

In sum, alienation undermines stability and frustrates the achievement of happiness, virtue, and freedom. If all feasible institutional embodiments of a set of principles of justice are alienating, then we should rethink the principles.

4.2 Alienation as a direct requirement of justice

The two ways that non-alienation constrains the articulation and defense of conceptions of justice discussed above are, I think, friendly extensions of Rawls’s theory. However, it seems
that the Rousseauvian theory of alienation sketched above would not be allowed by Rawls to play a direct role in political choices (as opposed to a meta-theoretical role in articulating and defending the principles of justice that such choices should express), for the concept relies on a thick conception of the human good (an account of human ends defined apart from principles of justice). Rawls, by contrast, constructs the needed view of human goodness by first working with only a thin theory of the good (rationality and primary goods), second, deriving principles of justice using the thin theory of the good (as expressed in the interests of the parties in the original position), third using these principles of justice to define a partial and political ideal of the person (the person as a free and equal citizen engaged in fair cooperation with others), which then, fourth, informs his discussion of institutional design and stability in part III of A Theory of Justice. So, in the Rawlsian framework, justice is non-teleological also in the stronger sense that the principles of justice themselves make no reference to a thick theory of the human good such as the one that informs the Rousseauvian theory of alienation.

Justice is, however, directly concerned with the development and exercise of the moral powers of free and equal citizenship, which makes alienation a direct concern of enabling justice. Rawls identifies two such moral powers the above-mentioned sense of justice and the capacity to devise, revise, and pursue one’s own conception of the good life.79 Recall that Rawls’s first principle of justice requires that “each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all.”80 The modality of adequacy refers to the development and exercise of the moral powers,

so that the rights and liberties respected and protected by the first principle are all and only those necessary for the adequate development and full exercise of either of the two moral powers.81

We need not affirm the details of Rawls’s theory of basic liberties – his account of the two moral powers and the conditions for their development and exercise – to see how alienation is a direct concern of the first principle of justice. Any understanding of enabling justice involves some account of the moral powers that must be developed and exercised for social cooperation to take place, and these powers would involve some capacity to make up one’s own mind about the good life and pursue it in the world, and some capacity to develop and be governed by an effective sense of justice. Alienation threatens both of these moral powers.

In the discussion of capitalism above I sketched how a capitalist design of the economic system threatens the adequate development and exercise of both moral powers, which means that we have first-principle reasons to look for an alternative to capitalism. But even if that argument is unsound, the general conclusion stands. For I do not have to show that alienation actually or always makes it hard to adequately develop and fully exercise the moral powers; all I need to show is that we have good reason to fear that this is the case, for then we are required by the first principle of justice to ensure that our political choices avoid creating conditions that reasonably can be feared to engender alienation. Of course, the details are complicated and largely a matter of empirical moral psychology. But keeping the relevant complications in mind, we have good reason to fear that (some sufficiently high degree of) alienation prevents the adequate development and full exercise of either or both of the moral powers, and that some designs of the basic


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structure are especially prone to create the conditions where alienation can be expected. So, non-alienation is a requirement of the first principle of justice.

4.3 Non-alienation as a political end

Finally, while the principles of justice are not directly about our ends, the concern for happiness, virtue, and freedom should inform our choice of how to satisfy the principles of justice, and thus our design of the basic structure. For the requirements of justice can be satisfied by many institutional designs, and some of these might fare better at providing for the achievement of the human ends. We should, accordingly, avoid designs that can be expected to make it harder for the members of society to achieve these ends. Political choices are not dictated by justice, but, rather, constrained by justice, and within these constraints they should be informed by other concerns – including, of course, how to best achieve our shared ends. To the degree that our political choices create alienating conditions, we can use the requirement of non-alienation to criticize the choices and change the conditions.

5. Alienation and perfectionism

I have offered a Rousseauvian theory of alienation and argued that alienation thus construed should inform, and can be used to think about, justify, and criticize political choices. The most important objection to this claim, I think, is that the Rousseauvian theory of alienation is perfectionist, and that political choices aiming for non-alienation, therefore, would violate the liberal principle of legitimacy by using coercive political power to force some members to be good by a standard of human goodness they could reasonably reject. More formally, the objection goes:
1. The Rousseauvian theory of alienation is perfectionist, since it relies on a theory of human nature and human goodness.

2. Political choices based on perfectionist considerations violate the liberal principle of legitimacy.

3. So, political choices based on the Rousseauvian theory of alienation violate the liberal principle of legitimacy.

Contra Jaeggi, and in agreement with Schacht, I maintain that any politically powerful theory of alienation is perfectionist, so this argument could be generalized to challenge any attempt to use alienation as a political concept.

I thus accept the first premise. The second premise also looks true – perfectionism is generally believed to violate the liberal principle of legitimacy. However, the argument commits a fallacy of ambiguity. There are many sorts of perfectionism, only some of these violate the liberal principle of legitimacy, and the Rousseauvian theory of alienation is not of this sort.

To start, there is a form of perfectionism that is consistent with liberalism, namely, the sort of liberal perfectionism that provides a vision of human nature and human goodness, but only as this vision can be constructed from the materials acceptable to theorizing justice: the thin theory of the good, the idea of moral powers, and the ideal of a proper development and exercise of the moral powers. As Rawls writes, “[t]o accept the principles that represent a conception of

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justice is at the same to accept an ideal of the person.”

This ideal delivers a liberal perfectionism, which indicates the falsity of premise 2. A true version of the premise would read:

2*. Political choices based on some sorts of perfectionism violate the liberal principle of legitimacy.

The question is whether the Rousseauvian theory of alienation is of the impermissible sort.

When Rawls says that “perfectionism is unacceptable” and should be “denied as a political principle,” he has in mind the sort of perfectionism that directs “society to arrange institutions […] so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence.” Thus construed, perfectionism is a teleological theory of justice that works with a controversial theory of human goodness and requires that we design society so as to make its members good.

Some of the unattractive (and illiberal) features of perfectionism thus understood are shared with other teleological theories: perfectionism can justify inequalities of status and rights, and it might not “take seriously the distinction between persons,” but treat members of society as mere vessels of goodness. Other problems are particular to perfectionism: the epistemic hurdles to defining human excellence are steep; it is, indeed, doubtful that there is such a thing as

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84 *TJrev.*, 46.
85 *TJrev.*, 289.
87 *TJrev.*, 24.
human excellence as opposed to excellence in human activities (of which there are many); persons are valued in terms of their potential for excellence, and those with less potential for excellence may be regarded as inferior and treated as means to the achievement of the excellence of others. Indeed, such perfectionism invites discrimination based on capacity for excellence: “the perfectionist idea is that some persons have special claims because their greater gifts enable them to engage in higher activities that realize perfectionist values.”

The Rousseauvian theory of alienation, even when used to justify and criticize political choices, suffers none of these problems: it is not a theory of justice, it is not maximizing, it does not rely on a controversial theory of human goodness, and it does not justify discrimination.

First, then, the Rousseauvian theory of alienation issues no perfectionist principle of justice of the sort which rightly worries liberals. The requirement that we avoid alienating institutions is a requirement of justice, but this requirement serves as a constraint on how we pursue justice, similar to how justice itself constrains how we pursue the efficient creation of desirable outcomes (as described in section 4). The requirement of non-alienation thus applies as an additional political consideration that must be kept in mind, when we think about which of the available and feasible and justice-satisfying institutional schemes we should pursue. Non-alienation is thus not an end of justice in the fashion that human excellence is an end of a classical perfectionist principle of justice; rather, the requirement of non-alienation filters the pursuit of justice.

Second, the Rousseauvian theory of alienation is not maximizing, but enabling. The theory does not require us to create the institutions that are maximally non-alienating. Rather, it works with a theory of a well-functioning moral psychology and tells us that we should (other

88 *JaF*, 152.
89 I am grateful to the reviewers for nudging me to clarify these reasons.
things equal) bring about the conditions where most members of society can be expected to develop such a moral psychology.

Third, the Rousseauvian theory of alienation does not rely on a particular conception of the good life or a controversial theory of human excellence, and so does not justify the use of political authority by reference to a controversial conception of the good. While I relied on Rousseau’s theories of happiness, virtue, and freedom to illustrate how alienation brings about misery, vice, and unfreedom, the Rousseauvian theory of alienation does not presuppose or depend on Rousseau’s understanding of these additional elements. Rousseau’s theory of alienation stands free of his theories of happiness, virtue, and freedom, though the dis-value of alienation is partially dependent on the causal links between alienation and these further maladies. Moreover, it seems plausible that alienation as it is construed in this paper would endanger happiness, virtue, and freedom even if we use other theories of these ends than Rousseau’s. So, we don’t have to rely on particular and controversial theories of happiness, virtue, and freedom to allow worries about alienation to inform our political choices.

Finally, the concern for non-alienation does not justify discrimination between members based on their capacity for excellence. On the contrary, the aim is to secure for all members equally the conditions wherein they do not become alienated. The concern for non-alienation issues no special claims of justice based on differential excellence, but an equal claim based on the shared potential for deficiency.

So, the Rousseauvian theory of alienation is not a theory of justice, is not maximizing, does not rely on a theory of human excellence, and does not justify discrimination. By contrast with the perfectionisms that rightly worry liberals which purport to justify the exercise of politi-
cal authority by a particular and positive conception of human excellence, the Rousseauvian theory of alienation thus issues a negative perfectionism. It does not tell us to create the institutions that make us good, but to not create institutions that make us bad; to avoid creating an environment where we become alienated. This negative perfectionism identifies (normally) sufficient conditions of bad human living and tells us to avoid these. We can identify the sufficient conditions of badness, the absence of which are necessary conditions for goodness, without a definite or unduly perfectionist theory of human excellence. So, the Rousseauvian theory of alienation can be used to criticize and justify political choices without those choices forcing people to be good by a measure of human goodness that they could reasonably reject. 90

If that argument is sound, then the liberal misgivings about perfectionism that are usually taken to imply that perfectionism is politically impermissible do not defeat to the perfectionism that is implied by the Rousseauvian theory of alienation. Moreover, even those who reject one or more premises of the argument offered in this section must allow that there are some sorts of perfectionism that are compatible with liberal legitimacy, so the burden shifts: it is not an objection that the position I defend that it is perfectionist, it has to be shown that the position is of the illegitimate variety of perfectionism.

6. Conclusion

Our moral psychologies are shaped by the social, political, and economic institutions by which we live together and cooperate. Some such institutional conditions create an alienating environment wherein persons develop bad moral psychologies – they become alienated – and their

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alienation makes them miserable, wicked, and unfree. Since our social, political, and economic institutions are political choices, we should choose institutional designs that do not have these undesirable consequences. Alienation is thus an important political concept, and non-alienation is a requirement of justice.

[***Acknowledgements removed for review.]

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