

Moral Choice and Compliance: Exploration of Justice in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

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Abstract

Set in an urban locale of early 20th century Progressive America, T.S.Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock” narrates the lived experiences of a man namely Prufrock through his dramatic monologues. Monologues reflect an individual’s past, current or imagined future experiences with others. Considering this aspect, the chapter seeks to explore the inter-personal relation shared by Prufrock with other characters and vice versa. The exploration reveals the nature of their subjective choices in handling private as well as social relationships. This relationship is significant, since it throws focus on the idea of ‘Fairness’ or ‘Justice’ in a social context of a flourishing laissez faire economy. Social justice can be evaluated justly within the rationale of social contract. Prufrock’s monologues help us to understand the implicit social contract shared by Prufrock with other poetic characters. In this poem we will be using David Gauthier’s social contract theory known as Moral Contractarianism (based on his book *Morals by Agreement*, 1986) to understand the nature of social contract and inter-personal justice. Moral Contract, as a theory of making moral choices towards a justified distribution of resources in a free market economy makes it an apt paradigm to consolidate my arguments. Here, Prufrock, the narrator speaker of the poem and his fellow counterparts are assumed to be rational, self determinate and informed agents who are fully aware of each other’s situations, capacities, beliefs and desires. The mutual engagement of all in this setting is examined on the basis of their adherence to rational moral choice as prescribed by moral contract theory in fulfilment of the social agreement. The aim of moral contract is to facilitate a mutually beneficial society and promotion of stable compliance for realising one’s maximum utility. The paper tries to reflect whether Prufrock and others realise their maximum individual utility and a fair treatment as social contractors. Also it grapples with Eliot’s portrayal of ‘Reconciliation’ with regard to Prufrock and questions its justness.

Keywords: Rational, Choice, Constrained/Straightforward maximiser, Compliance.

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Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

(1st Stanza)

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

(6th Stanza)

Introduction

T.S.Eliot validates poet's expression as a medium, not as a personality (Eliot, 1932, p.21)¹. Through the literary medium of monologues, Eliot reveals the private emotions and motivation of an American man namely Prufrock in his early poem "The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock" (Published 1915). The poem is a reflection on the self-prioritising interests of modern American psyche. Prufrock is a reasoned male in his 40's (Perry, 2016)² and a witty observer of early 20th century America's growing consumer society. Prufrock's desires, interests as well as self-disguise are relayed to the implied readers or listeners whose presence is not realised in the poem. As a social agent, Prufrock aspires for fuller implementation of his individual agency and equity in exercising his personhood in a modern liberal society. Simultaneously he is anxious over societal judgements over his intrinsic interests. Prufrock's expressed wills reflect his covert feelings of personal insufficiency and indecisiveness. Prufrock's will towards positive action, negative action as well as his self-questioning unfold execution of his free individual choices. It reveals interesting details about the social contractarian relation (here on the standards of moral contract) shared by him with other poetic characters and vice versa. Moral contract theory propounds the act of making rational choices in matters of claiming and acquiring resources in a laissez faire economy. The rationality of choices is marker of their morality. Throughout the poem, Prufrock negotiates with his wills so as to have a justified moral standing within his social contract. This chapter analyses Prufrock's monologues through the paradigm of wills with regard to positive action, will towards negative action and lastly as his self-questioning. These divisions are aligned with the type of choices made by Prufrock and all other contractors. The choices are examined on the scale of rational choices fixed by the moral contract.

Will towards Positive Action and Reflection of Choice Dispositions with regard to Moral Contract

The poem starts with a passage from Dante's *Inferno* (Lines XXVII 61–66) from his epic poem *Divine Comedy*. The Epigraph is a confessional revelation of self identity by a corrupt Franciscan, Guido da Montefeltro to Dante. The revelation presupposes a strong conviction that Dante would never return to earth to divulge what he heard. The Epigraph of the poem settles the readers for an answer to the frequently confronted question "Who are you?" The poem is a self-explanation of one's troubled individuality in a modern era. With the beginning "Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherised upon a table;" Eliot introduces us to two persona.- One can be understood as Prufrock's objective self and the other subjective(Miller,1965)³ . Keeping in mind the coherence of the title of the poem with regard to its content, the arguments formed herein follow the assumption of Prufrock's

self as real, objective. Thus, in the beginning lines, Eliot draws us to a social setting of free speech and individual liberty. For the character Prufrock, the evening is an anaesthetic patient ready to be operated. Prufrock experiences his daily evenings as a span of uncertainty and externally induced vitality, ready to forego any consequence. It establishes him as an experimental modern man. Prufrock proposes his lady partner to walk along with him through the half deserted streets which follow like a 'tedious argument of insidious intent' (Lines 8, 9). He is also interested to share the experience of 'a restless night' with her in any cheap hotel. But he is a modest pleader, not a coercer. His desire to visit the elite social hub of Michelangelo talkers despite its intellectual vacuity (Lines 12, 13, 14) and his dormant will towards a future meet with his partner's acquaintances, even with a concocted identity (Lines 26, 27, 28) posits him as a man seeking upward class mobility on the standards of American dream⁴. But Prufrock is sceptical regarding the consistency of his will. His desire to assume the identity of a crab of 'ragged' claws with free movement in silent sea-floor (Line 73, 74) is indicative of his disenchanted self as a social contractor and his intention of withdrawing from current social contract. His mentioning of "Ragged claws" is important. He does not divest himself of the ability or potentiality for triggering agency. Agency is defined as an individual's capacity to effect change in current action and in subsequent results⁵. The imagery of the hurriedly moving crab is significant of his desire to circumvent others attention or appeal which might induce him to a social relation. The isolatory disposition of a modern individual is evident through Prufrock's desire. Also Prufrock compares his personhood to Biblical Lazarus⁶, (Line 94, 95) when he attempts to say what he intends. He doesn't want to be the infamous, indecisive Prince Hamlet (Line 111). He wants his designation as an attendant Lord who is capable of exercising his agency in various ways within a social contract. Stanza 15 says: "Am an attendant Lord, one that will do/To swell a progress, start a scene or two/Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,/Deferential, glad to be of use,/Politic, cautious, and meticulous;/Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse....". But Prufrock's choice of habitat as somewhere away from human voices (Line 129, 130, 131) under 'chambers of the sea' makes him retreat to a non-societal space at the end of the poem.

A close analysis of Prufrock's explicit desires revealed through these specific monologues help us take a closer look at his choice dispositions and attach moral dimensions to it. The morality in this case will be seen in Gauthierian framework, where rationality endorses morality (Vallentyne, 1991, p.1, 2)⁷. Gauthier's moral contract position puts priority on strategic choice than parametric choice for a sustainable moral claim⁸. Strategic choices are those which are taken keeping in mind the consequences of choices of other rational agents and parametric choice refers to choice situations where agent's choices are only meant for advancing one's self interest in a fixed choice situation (Vallentyne, 1991, p.6). Choice parameter binds the rational individuals the time they realise that cooperated life is better than a life of non-cooperation, (an invocation of Lockean Proviso)⁹ and out of individual consent enter into a rational contract where they agree to be mutually beneficial and advantageous. A situation known called Initial bargaining position¹⁰. If the agents don't comply with each other for a beneficial network, they will be considered going against reason and hence not moral in their choices. The actions promulgated through their mutual choices will affect the distributory principle in a class structured society. In Prufrock's admission of wills towards positive action, we see a person who desires active agency and an altered self identity in matters of advancement in love, socialising and in worksphere (His admittance to be an attendant Lord and not Prince Hamlet). In contradistinction to it, Prufrock also desires to withdraw from current social contract either by becoming lone crab or by drowning under sea at the sound of human voices. As a modest pleader and as a person who tries to level class distinctions through a made-up identity, Prufrock turns out to be strategic chooser. He

constantly meditates and reflects on people's responses towards his choice dispositions and modifies his instrumental relation in the social contract. But his strategic choices fail to bestow him a realisation of individual utility, which is the desired goal of a moral contract. Utility, as Gauthier defines is value which is subjective (depending on the affective attitudes of the individuals) and relative (Different for different individuals) (Vallentyne, 1991, p.6). The dissatisfaction of Prufrock is imminent in his current social network, due to which he decides to opt out from initial bargaining position. He chooses to be in a non-cooperative set up. It raises doubts on the nature of other's choices towards Prufrock. As readers, our only source of knowing about other's in the poem is through Prufrock's monologues. Prufrock speaks of going with his lady to the social gathering through which the readers consider her as a woman for whom socialising is a meritorious act. Though, we do not know her level of contentment in the process. Prufrock's imagined necessity for an altered identity to meet the expectations of his lady's acquaintances indicates them to be parametric choosers, bothered about straightforward maximisation. Straightforward maximisers¹¹, in this context is understood as those who advance their self-interests without checks and balances and even at the cost of breaking the rational agreement of social contract. In then America, their choices, preferences and cultural orientations are fixed and mostly determined by profit maximisation. The profit can be assumed as the formation of convenient partnerships which may temporarily camouflage class, gendered and racial disparities. Its practitioners might potentially become imposers of their expected norms as the appropriate rational standard. Prufrock's admission in lines 55,56,57,58—" And I have known the eyes already, known them all--/The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,/And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,/When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,..." validate Prufrock's fellow social contractors as the imposers of their norms advancing their straightforward maximisation. Prufrock, who desires active agency through quality performances in daily chores, meditates on people's responses towards him and shifts his behavioural disposition accordingly. It establishes him as a constrained maximiser¹² in directing his choices. Constrained maximisers are those who advance their self interest keeping in mind other contractor's claims. Moral contract prioritises constrained maximisation over straightforward maximisation for attributing rational dimension to choices¹³. The rational marker of choices makes them moral. With respect to choice towards positive action, Prufrock stands out to be 'more moral' in his social contract than rest of the counterparts.

Wills with Regard to Negative Action, Choice Dispositions with Regard to Moral Contract

Rejected wills manifest through self or via others within the social structure. Prufrock's rejected will is his inability to convey his inner conviction to his lady partner (Line11, "Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"). It is a major motif which runs across the whole poem. The rejection is triggered through self, but influenced by other's choice parameters. Throughout the poem, Prufrock's partner too does not seem to show interest to know Prufrock's hidden perception. The reason can be either her non-cognizance of Prufrock's latent will or a mutual compliance in not coercing him to convey his thoughts. On a presupposition that Prufrock's partner is too a curious agent desiring to understand Prufrock's question but constraining her desire, she stands out as a constrained maximiser who is interested in furthering mutual reciprocity. She can be assumed to have rejected her will of knowing Prufrock more, after encountering his absence of volition to do so.

Prufrock denies to be Prophet¹⁴ (Line 83) and Prince Hamlet (Line111) which signals to the degree of utility Prufrock attaches to himself. He says "Though I have seen my head (grown

slightly bald) brought upon a platter, /I am no prophet—and here’s no great matter;” Prufrock does not consider himself rewarding or alluring to make bait for other’s contentment. This realisation does not torment him nor alleviates his agency. He understands that his internal fear justifies his admission of non-profitability to others (Lines 84, 85, 86). His recognition of his non-profitable personhood due to his fear and inertia makes him a poor contributor towards moral contract. As a constrained maximiser, he overleaps and stretches his constrained principle reducing his utility. Lines 91, 92 and 93-“To have bitten off the matter with a smile, /to have squeezed the universe into a ball/to roll it towards some overwhelming question,” are all imageries reflecting Prufrock’s imagined perceptions after revealing his nurtured question. The immediate consequence is the rejection of his will of self expression. The refrains “That is not it, at all” (Lines 98,109) and “That is not what I meant at all” (Lines 97,110) are reflective of Prufrock’s defensive strategies against any undeserving treatment in imagined conversation with his lady. Prufrock tries to avoid undue treatment befalling his life. By the end of the poem we see a discouraged Prufrock who is fully divested of an affirmative expectation from his compatriots. It is evident when with respect to sea-mermaids Prufrock says—“I do not think they will sing to me” (Line 125). The realisation is a consequence of Prufrock’s desire of hearing from mermaids.

Prufrock’s series of rejected wills depict a situation when strategic choosers are not reciprocated fairly by parametric choosers within a social network. Prufrock as a constrained maximiser pushes himself to the extremities of constraining his voice too, to maintain a stable compliance. He feels subversive within this contract relation, though he adhered to the parameters of rational moral choices. The cause of the discontent lies with other contractors. Prufrock’s discontentment reveals other’s choices, whose degree of contentment is difficult to know. Prufrock’s psychological debilitation rises with realisation of his non-profitable standing in the moral contract. But he blames none. The others (inclusive of Prufrock’s consort) are not shown to be alienated and disgruntled as Prufrock. Despite deviating from moral choices they continue acting subversively in the moral contract leading to the burgeoning of many men like Prufrock –“Of Lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?”(Line72)

Prufrock’s critical Self-Questioning and Choice Dispositions with Regard to Moral Contract

The poem introduces us with Prufrock’s self questioning in a refrain of three words- “Do I dare?”(Lines 38, 45). The refrain reaches its completion when Prufrock utters “Disturb the universe?” The universe is the modern American individualistic society of feigned caricature. We see an agitated and revolting Prufrock. The poem again presents Prufrock’s refrains-“How should I begin?”(Lines 59, 69) and “How should I presume” (lines61, 68). Disturbing the universe can be accounted as reformulating the existing personal and social relations. His repeated insistence of initiating a fresh start with others, signal to a gradual erosion self-esteem. Prufrock’s counterparts in the poem are not shown to have adopted a self change for other’s approval. Or perhaps they desire to do so, implicitly. Prufrock is the representative of many urban people caught in the web of social conformity or self- contentment purely for one’s own sake. His delayed configuration in asking question, defeated sense of aging (Line 122-“Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?) reveal his conflicted status in the moral contract. In his middle age, Prufrock contemplated on people’s perception on his bald spot (Line40), his emaciated arms and legs (line 44), but tried least to change those perceptions. The old Prufrock is edged to a corner where he questions his ability of retaining his individuality.

Conclusion

The above discussion of Prufrock's monologue reveals three parties who are actively taking part in the social contract. Firstly, Prufrock and the like, who are always motivated with a constrained maximization policy and are likely to cooperate even if they are not reciprocated with a fair compliant response from the other contractarian parties. Their act of unconditional compliance for the agreement can divest them of their personhood and a moral standing in the agreement. They might be reduced to objects which can be shaped upon, built or modified by other parties or individual bargainers for furthering their individual utility. They can be deprived of their fair share of benefits in a society. The second kind of contractarian party or individuals which we see emerging are Prufrock's fellow counterparts who are driven with a policy of straightforward maximisation, as they aspire the other contractarians to adopt their rules, conventions and behave as they wish. They show interest in mutual engagement or bargaining only if they find other bargaining parties "like themselves". It suggests that they want to influence the compatibility of bargainer's mutual claims by showing interest only in similar types of individuality. The third type of contractarian party can be assumed to have been represented by Prufrock's lady partner. Rational individual like hers show compliance but simultaneously influences the choice disposition of other contractors in an implicit way. In Gauthierian framework, the bargaining principle as well as bargaining solution, known as Minimax Relative Concession (MRC) is basically concerned with 'Goods' and 'Utility' or 'Value' generated through mutually advantageous bargain of such goods¹⁵. Moral contractarianism is a principle of distributive justice. In this poem, the reciprocity of the individual or parties is not determined on the basis of their exchange of goods or commodities, but instead on their execution of choices in inter-personal relations borne out in a commodity culture. Minimax Relative Concession (MRC) is understood as a process of minimising concessions/reductions demanded from every rational individual to be in the agreement. The more we reduce our inherent wish/desire/claim, the less chance of getting satisfaction in a co-operative agreement. Satisfaction depends on reducing concessions and move closer towards original claim without affecting any other party's or individual's claim. At the same time, the rational individuals are bound by the duty of minimising their original claim too, as a sort of directing the contract for a fair distribution of resources. MRC aims to reduce the amount of concession each individual has to make in relative to the other, so that no one feels burdened and profit deprived, within the contract and enjoy the maximum fruit of fair share in a rational agreement.

The ending of the poem where Prufrock speaks out his will of drowning under sea in company of sea-mermaids away from 'Human voices' signify his retreat to a non-contractarian standing, prior to initial bargaining position. It might be due to his discontentment at realising that "People can be better off by only making someone worse off". In this context, the worse off ones are people like Prufrock. This realisation is a result of continuous marginalisation and deprivation of a moral standing in the social contract. His retreat also suggests that MRC regarding implementation of choices by other contractarian parties was not fair to him. He has not been given a fair chance of independent self expression of his identity and equal participation in public space. Though he always returned the same. The other contractarian parties executed their optimum claim in matters of appropriating bodily form, mannerisms and ways of action. Prufrock's manifestation as a modest pleader in dealing with his lady partner, his will of assuming the identity of an active crab deep inside the sea, of Biblical Lazarus, attendant Lord and abnegation of Prince Hamlet shows his flexibility in modifying his attitude to suit situational needs. He concedes his desires of achieving, but this feature of concession does not get minimised in his lifetime, due

to lack of compliance from other contracterian parties in adhering to the norms of Maximin Relative Concession. The second party, i.e. Prufrock's fellow contracterians throughout the poem are shown to be interested only advancing their claim, not in any form of concession. Since they are least inclined towards any concession, so there was no need for minimisation of their concession. The third party to the contract which might include Prufrock's consort can be said to have stood in the midway between conceding self interest and furthering them. They comply with the rational agreement by keeping their self interest in checks and balances but at the same time exert a covert influence on other contracterian parties to comply with their terms and conditions. This party might perhaps be called a better executer of MRC than the other two parties, though Prufrock does not seem to stay contented with his partner either, since at the end of the poem we find him alone without his previous lady company.

Amongst all the contracterian parties it is Prufrock's party who realises least subjective value. This unjustness indicates that other parties realised greater share of utility in terms of fair feeling in the social contract. When in a society where everyone is bound by the social contract, the duty of every rational individual is to adopt a fair policy of Maximin Relative Concession. The least adoption of which detracts social justice. Amongst many ways of holding justice, 'Reconciliation' can be described as a process of restoration of friendly relations and action of making one view or belief compatible with other. The ending of the poem doesn't suggest bestowing upon Prufrock reconciliation of any sort. Reconciliation can be seen as a way towards revival of justice. However it too calls for execution of reciprocity from both sides.

Prufrock is a potential agent now; even he withdraws from the contract. We can expect his return to reclaim his future and voice out his grievances with other social contractors. Since we live in a state of liquid reality, the other social contractors are expected to change their behavioural disposition too. To transform unjust relation into just, reasoned choices in everyday affairs mark a great way towards mending fractured relations and narrowing gap towards incompatible goals.

Footnotes:

¹ In the essay entitled "Tradition and Individual Talent" from his book *Selected Essays*, T.S. Eliot talks about divestment of poet's self from the art of writing poetry. The poet according to him ought not to express one's private emotions in the poems, rather should blend the wisdom of tradition into present and create new poetic style. He says "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality".

² Refer to 1st paragraph of the article "Who is Prufrock" by Seamus Perry. The article mentions: "Later in life Eliot, when asked, said: 'It was partly a dramatic creation of a man of about 40 I should say, and partly an expression of feeling of my own through this dim imaginary figure'".

³ In the first line of the first paragraph of the article "On the Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" by J.Hillis Miller, she accounts for Prufrock's paralysis due to his subjectivizing of everything. In the second paragraph of her article she writes of Prufrock as "imprisoned in his own subjective space and all his experience are imaginary". Miller assumes the whole poem to be taking place within the imagined space of Prufrock's subjective self.

⁴Refer to the article “Imagine Living through the Progress: A Consideration on Early 20th century American culture” by Mike Mercer. The early years of 20th century America (1900-1920) had seen massive socio-cultural changes and upsurge of social Darwinism, rise of consumer society, immigration, celebration of white masculinity and thrift as a virtue. All these features constructed the paradigm of “American Dream” which became an ideal goal to be chased by “Good Americans”.

⁵Refer to p.11, the entry on Agency (Human), *A Glossary of Terms and Concepts in Peace and Conflict Studies*, Second Edition.

⁶Lazarus is a Biblical figure which may refer to beggar Lazarus (Luke 16), who goes to Heaven after death at the same time when another rich man named Dives dies and is sent to Hell. Dives requests Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his brothers of their misdeeds and the resultant future. But Abraham denies.

Another reference can also be towards the Lazarus (of John11) whom Christ raised from the dead. For details refer to—i) <https://www.shmoop.com/love-song-alfred-prufrock/stanza-13-summary.html>

ii) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Love_Song_of_J._Alfred_Prufrock

⁷ In the first essay entitled “Gauthier’s Three Projects” from the book *Contractarianism and Rational Choice: Essays on David Gauthier’s Morals by Agreement*, Peter mentions about Gauthierian compliance with morality as an indicator towards rationality.

⁸See p.6, Vallentyne.

⁹See p.41, Vallentyne, in the essay “Two Faces of Contractarian Thought”, Jean Hampton writes “Lockean Proviso-which directs that one is to acquire goods in a way that leaves no one worse off...”

¹⁰Refer to p.6, Vallentyne. Vallentyne writes “This position determines the utility payoff that each person brings to the table and that is not subject to negotiation”. Initial bargaining position can also be understood as ‘Non –cooperative outcome’.

¹¹Refer to p.10, Vallentyne for a detailed discussion on straightforward maximisation.

¹²Refer to p.10, Vallentyne for a definition of constrained maximisation.

¹³See p.15, Gauthier, David, *Morals by Agreement*, “Overview of the Theory”. Gauthier writes: “It is rational to be disposed to constrained maximising behaviour by internalising moral principles to govern one’s choices. The contractarian is able to show that it is irrational to admit appeals to interest against compliance with those duties founded on mutual advantage.”

¹⁴The Prophet here is a reference to John the Baptist, whose head has been rewarded by King Herod to his stepdaughter Salome (Matthew 14:1-11). For more details check URL: <https://www.shmoop.com/love-song-alfred-prufrock/stanza-12-summary.html>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Love_Song_of_J._Alfred_Prufrock

¹⁵For detailed discussions on Maximin Relative Concession as bargaining solutions refer to p.8, Vallentyne. Also see p.4 of article “Notes on David Gauthier: Morals by Agreement” by Dick Arnsperg. With reference to Gauthier’s arguments, Dick writes of MRC as a bargaining solution to make the largest concession as small as possible.

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