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Overriding Virtue

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I take beneficence to be impartial: directing us to help others as best we can, no matter whether those others be near to us or far away. I don't mean to imply by this that impartial beneficence is the *only* morally relevant norm, such that we may never do anything *but* help others as best we can. Rather, the claim is just that, *within the domain of beneficence*, impartial maximizing is correct: the reasons of beneficence favour saving a distant many over a nearby few, all else equal. Many consequentialists will of course take impartial beneficence to be all there is to morality. But it is important to stress that one needn't be a consequentialist to find *this aspect* of consequentialist thought highly appealing. Impartial beneficence could be supplemented by any number of other norms, e.g. constraints that rule out utilitarian sacrifice or rights violations even when done “for the greater good”. I also leave open that the demands of beneficence may be subject to limitations, to ensure that agents have significant leeway to pursue their own projects no matter how many others need their aid. (But I do assume that beneficence is a *significant*, non-trivial component of morality.)

Impartial beneficence, thus understood, seems an important component of a broadly cosmopolitan moral outlook. But it fits uneasily with common sentimentalist intuitions about moral virtue. For example, we typically think that a good person must be sensitive to those around them. We expect the good person to be motivated by moral emotions, such as sympathy and empathy, which are most easily engaged by those who are nearby or otherwise salient.¹ But the most objectively pressing moral needs tend not to be found on our doorsteps. Impartial beneficence may thus direct us to override our natural moral sentiments in pursuit of the greater good. Is *doing* (the most) good thereby in tension with *being* a good person? The challenge may be amplified by considering the popular adage, “charity begins at home.” We may well look askance at a moral point of view that seems to uphold Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby, with her neglected family and “telescopic philanthropy”—able to “see nothing nearer than Africa”²—as a paragon of virtue. There would at least seem something a bit morally awkward or uncomfortable about ignoring the homeless on our doorstep so as to instead donate a greater amount to global poverty relief.

¹ Slote (2007).² Dickens (1853, ch. 4).

On the other hand, it would seem excessively complacent to just assume that our evolved psychologies and emotional dispositions are entirely above reproach. It isn't as though we could plausibly hold that needy individuals who are salient to us are thereby objectively more deserving of aid, or that those who are out of sight thereby deserve to be neglected.³ This may be taken to suggest that the traditional conception of virtue requires modification, and that true benevolence may at times require us to override or redirect our natural sympathies. Or so I will argue in this paper. The challenge is to develop a conception of moral virtue that fits with a modern cosmopolitan moral outlook, without thereby valorizing the neglectful, callous character of Mrs. Jellyby.

1. Sentimentalism and its limits

Slote (2007) advocates a form of sentimental virtue ethics that grounds our obligations in considerations of whether our actions “reflect or exhibit or express an absence (or lack) of fully developed empathic concern for (or caring about) others.”⁴ A crucial fact about normal human empathy is that it is engaged “more deeply or forcefully” by “immediate” or salient needs than by “need known only by description.”⁵ As a result, on Slote's view we will often have stronger moral reasons to address local or immediate needs than we do to address needs that are geographically or temporally distant.

A theoretical concern with this approach is that our moral sentiments cannot be above criticism. We should not accept racism or sexism *even if* it turned out, empirically, that natural human empathy was more strongly and readily engaged by members of one's own race or gender. (Indeed, in-group biases are sadly far from being merely hypothetical.) Even if we grant the optimistic assumption that such biases are not endemic to human empathy, the mere *possibility* of such problematic natural biases suffices to establish that our natural moral sentiments are in principle open to moral challenge.

In addressing such concerns, Slote at one point wrote: “The ethics of empathy may here be hostage to future biological and psychological research, but I don't think that takes away from its *promise* as a way of understanding and justifying (a certain view of) morality.”⁶ On the contrary, if we *know* that there is a possible situation in which sentimentalism is *not* the correct moral theory, then we can

³ Unger (1996) similarly argues that many common intuitions about aid are heavily influenced by morally irrelevant considerations of “conspicuousness”. For a contrasting view, see Kamm (1999).

⁴ Slote (2007, p. 31).

⁵ Slote (2007, pp. 23–4). Though it's worth flagging that Slote depends upon the further, less obvious, assumption that this must remain true of *fully developed* human sympathy.

⁶ Slote (2007, p. 36). However, Slote tells me that he no longer considers sentimentalism to be contingent in this way.

ask ourselves what the *correct* moral theory in that situation would be. And once equipped with that correct possible moral theory—one that provides an independent justification for rejecting racist and sexist sentiments even when sentimentalism cannot—then we may wonder what we need sentimentalism for. What is stopping that counterfactually correct moral theory from also being the correct moral theory in the actual world?

Sentimentalism does seem to do well at capturing common moral intuitions, however. Consider a classic case where sentimentalism diverges from more “coldly” rationalistic approaches to ethics: Some miners are trapped in a mineshaft, and the cost of rescuing them would empty a budget that would otherwise be invested in safety mechanisms to prevent such calamities recurring in future. We are to suppose that we cannot both rescue the current miners and protect future ones, and that a greater number of future miners will die if we fail to invest in the safety mechanisms (they will not themselves be rescuable when future disasters strike). Slote notes that we “typically feel morally impelled to help the [present] miners rather than (at that point) expend an equivalent amount to install safety devices in the mines that will save a greater number of lives in the long run.”⁷ Endorsing this sentiment, he suggests that anyone with the opposite preference “shows a certain deficiency in empathy” and that as a result “we think of him or her as less compassionate and as acting less well than someone who would choose to save the presently trapped miners.”⁸

This seems to me to be a case where our natural moral sentiments lead us astray. Important though our sentiments may be, it seems deeply misguided and self-indulgent—a kind of moral fetishism—to elevate their moral importance above that of human lives or considerations of rational desirability. This verdict may be supported by appeal to the “veil of ignorance” heuristic.⁹ To ensure a fair and unbiased moral verdict, consider what would be rationally chosen by self-interested agents (who lack any potentially distorting moral assumptions) who are temporarily deprived of any knowledge of their own identities or locations in time, space, or society. When thinking of each person in society as an equally likely candidate for being “themselves”, and noting the greater number of future miner lives at stake in the decision than present ones, it seems that the prudent agent would be rationally compelled to prefer that we save the greater number, i.e. install the safety devices rather than rescue the presently trapped miners (assuming, again, that for some reason it is impossible to do both). This is the social policy that has the greatest expected value for agents, given that they do not know which individual they will turn out to be. So, given that preventative measures are (*ex hypothesi*) more effective than post hoc remedies, given a forced choice between the two options we—rationally and morally—must prefer the

⁷ Slote (2007, pp. 25–6).

⁸ Slote (2007, p. 27).

⁹ Harsanyi (1953); cf. Rawls (1971).

former.¹⁰ In sum: When lives and emotions come into conflict, we must prioritize others' lives as being more important.

We should reject Slote's sentimentalism as insufficiently critical of our given moral emotions. Nonetheless, I think it important to bear in mind the insights to be gained from Slote's work, especially regarding the connection between natural moral sentiments and common *intuitions* about what it takes to be a good person. When impartial beneficence prescribes actions or policies that promote the greatest good at the cost of proximate needs that more easily engage our natural empathy, there is a risk that such prescriptions may appear callous or lacking in compassion. Advocates of impartial beneficence may thus find cause to reflect carefully on how their prescriptions relate to virtues of character, especially compassion.

2. Benevolence and abstract sympathy

Benevolence, or generalized well-wishing, is the virtue most naturally associated with impartial beneficence. The benevolent agent wants things to go as well as possible for people (and other sentient beings) overall, whoever and wherever they may be. Stable possession of benevolent desires is surely a genuine virtue: Not only is such a character trait of significant instrumental value in tending to produce good (value-promoting) actions, it also instantiates a kind of *intrinsic* appropriateness in that it reflects the agent's *orientation towards the good*.¹¹

This conception of benevolence finds voice within Bertrand Russell's account of abstract sympathy as the most fully developed form of sympathy:

There is a purely physical sympathy: a very young child will cry because a brother or sister is crying. This, I suppose, affords the basis for the further developments. The two enlargements that are needed are: first, to feel sympathy even when the sufferer is not an object of special affection; secondly, to feel it when the suffering is merely known to be occurring, not sensibly present. The second of these enlargements depends largely upon intelligence. It may only go so far as sympathy with suffering which is portrayed vividly and touchingly, as in a good novel; it may, on the other hand, go so far as to enable a man to be moved emotionally by statistics. This capacity for abstract sympathy is as rare as it is important.¹²

The possibility of such abstract sympathy undermines the charge that it is necessarily "callous" to maximize net welfare at the cost of more proximate interests. On the contrary, such impartially benevolent preferences may instead reveal a deeper wellspring of emotional concern for others than is found in the merely

¹⁰ But cf. N. Daniels (2015); See also Mogensen (Chapter 15, this volume).

¹¹ Hurka (2001). ¹² Russell (1926/2003, p. 48).

ordinarily (concretely) sympathetic. Indeed, we should surely expect that the compassion of the ideally virtuous agent would extend more broadly than our own flawed and imperfect compassion manages to do. Insofar as moral perfection is thought to involve a kind of universal love, it is very natural to conceive of the ideally virtuous agent as one who would feel the moral-emotional pull of others' needs just as strongly even when they are distant from the agent herself. And it would certainly not be callous or lacking in compassion when such an ideally virtuous agent acted upon her expansive sense of compassion to protect a greater number of people despite their lack of proximity (just as there is nothing callous about saving the nearby many over the nearby few).

Of course, we are not ideally virtuous agents. Even many of us who are moved by moral reasons to prefer saving the greater number may nonetheless find that this verdict conflicts with our strongest sympathetic impulses (which remain tethered to more proximate, salient needs). This raises interesting questions about how to evaluate our characters when we choose to save the distant many over the nearby few. Is this a virtuous choice, since it is done for good moral reasons and in recognition that this is what the ideally virtuous agent would do? Or is it disreputably callous, as we are in fact overriding our strongest sympathetic impulses, and letting harm come to those we see most vividly, merely for the sake of some "greater good" that we do not fully (i.e. emotionally) comprehend? To answer this question, consider the following character trait:

Abstract benevolence: The disposition to allow abstract, globally-oriented moral reasons to override or redirect one's natural inclination to prioritize the most salient needs one faces, when this is necessary to address more objectively pressing needs.

I propose that abstract benevolence is a neglected virtue, specific to imperfect agents like ourselves, that serves to moderate the biasing effect of ordinary sympathy. It helps us to better meet the impartial demands of an appropriately cosmopolitan moral code, whilst recognizing the centrality of locally oriented moral emotions like sympathy to our moral lives.

3. Overridden or redirected sympathy?

If we accept abstract benevolence as a modern-day virtue, we must address the question of how to resolve the tension it creates with the traditional virtue of sympathy. For although my above account specifies that globally oriented moral concerns should win out over more limited, merely locally oriented ones, it leaves open how this is to be achieved. One possibility is that the full force of one's felt sympathy remains unchanged, and optimal action is instead secured by buttressing one's motivational strength of will for acting contrarily to this felt

emotion. This would be for abstract benevolence to involve *overriding* one's ordinary sympathy. Alternatively, one could conceive of this new virtue as involving the *redirection* of one's sympathetic impulses towards the promotion of the greater good, leaving no residual tension between one's moral emotions and motivations at all.

This theoretical choice will determine the answer to a simple yet vexing question: How should we feel about passing by the local soup kitchen or homeless shelter, en route to donate to a more cost-effective developing-world charity? Should our ordinary sympathy still be activated, but simply overridden by the recognition that distant others are in even greater need, thus leaving us feeling *torn*? Or should our sympathetic impulses be *wholeheartedly* redirected toward the greatest needs?¹³

Wholehearted redirection may be more pleasant for the agent themselves, but I take that to be the wrong sort of reason for identifying something as a virtue. (We are not asking what character traits are most instrumentally beneficial, but rather which have the kind of intrinsic appropriateness that renders them fit to be considered virtues.) Some theorists, drawn to the idea of a *unity of the virtues*, may think it important to avoid internal tension or conflicting moral emotions or impulses within the virtuous agent.¹⁴ But I see no good reason to deny that virtuous agents may feel conflicted. After all, if virtues consist in a kind of orientation toward the good, and goods can conflict (as well we know), then it stands to reason that virtuous motivations may likewise conflict. Indeed, a single virtue—such as generosity—may simultaneously pull us in conflicting directions.

So, absent some further argument of which I am unaware, the case for redirection seems weak. By contrast, I think there are compelling reasons to favour the conception of abstract benevolence as merely *motivationally overriding* our sympathetic impulses, which persist in their emotional force nonetheless. For the resulting emotional conflict better reflects the moral facts on the ground, where there are genuinely conflicting interests at stake.

It is fitting to have distinct intrinsic desires for each intrinsic good, and so—as I've argued elsewhere—the separateness of persons calls on us to separately value (desire) each person's wellbeing.¹⁵ As a result, if forced to choose just one of two innocent lives to save, you should feel *ambivalent* rather than *indifferent* about the

¹³ While I raise this question within the non-ideal context of an agent who needs abstract benevolence to make up for their biased sympathy, it's worth flagging that similar questions arise even in the ideal case of the agent capable of fully-fledged sympathy for the distant many. Should they still feel sympathy for the nearby few (just overridden this time by their greater sympathy for the many, rather than by their rational appreciation of the reasons to prioritize the many)? I think the answer to this question will also be "yes", for the same reasons as discussed below.

¹⁴ Though the more plausible view in this vicinity is just that one cannot possess a subset of virtues (to their fullest or most ideal extent) in isolation from other virtues: to be even partly ideally virtuous requires a practical intelligence that entails all the virtues. This is compatible with external circumstances forcing "painful choices" upon the agent. See Annas (2011, ch. 5–6).

¹⁵ Chappell (2015).

choice, as you should have separate (equally strong) desires pulling you in opposite directions. More generally, when facing trade-offs between the interests of different people, you should feel at least somewhat torn, even if it's clear which option does the most good (and hence is most worth choosing). The lesser interest is merely *outweighed*, not *cancelled*. So it is appropriate for the normative force of the lesser interest to continue to exert some emotional and motivational pressure on a moral agent (even if it is, as it should be, ultimately outweighed by greater forces pulling in the other direction). This in turn helps to explain the intuitive appropriateness of *pro tanto* regret: the thwarted lesser interest creates a “moral remainder” that leaves the virtuous agent feeling less than fully satisfied by their choice, despite recognizing that it would have been even worse to favour the lesser interest at the cost of the greater.

This is all in striking contrast to cases where the trade-off is between two merely instrumental goods (to the same final end). Offered a choice between two £20 bills, it would be bizarre to feel torn or ambivalent about the decision. It is a matter of indifference, because the bills do not matter in themselves, but are mere financial instruments—a purpose served equally well by either bill. In short: money is fungible.

In similar fashion, one's interest in some financial investment may be wholly redirected (without remainder or regret) if a better investment opportunity comes along. But I trust that most readers will share my sense that it would be a mistake for us to regard individual people and their interests as wholly fungible in the way that money is. Don't get me wrong: difficult decisions must be made when interests conflict, and they must be made judiciously (carefully weighing the interests at stake and opting for the option that is best on net, rather than ignoring such details and merely flipping a coin). My point is just that an accurate understanding of the moral landscape requires us to acknowledge that these decisions *are* difficult—even when the math involved is not—because those whose interests have been overridden still deserve our sympathy.

We thus find that moral agents should feel torn about passing by the local soup kitchen or homeless shelter even when they do so in order to do more good elsewhere.¹⁶ Doing the most good is the right decision, but when trade-offs are involved it should not be an entirely comfortable decision. We may not be in a position to adequately help everyone, but we can at least show them the respect of recognizing the “moral remainder” that their loss has injected into the situation. To fail to do so would arguably constitute a lack of adequate respect for their

¹⁶ Though I don't mean to suggest that the degree of *pro tanto* regrettable is what explains the *weight* of the felt conflict. For example, it will naturally feel more difficult to override especially salient needs than it would be to make a similarly regrettable trade-off where none of the competing needs were so salient (e.g. between competing global charities). As cognitively limited agents, we cannot always regret every regrettable thing; our emotional responses are instead heavily influenced by factors such as salience. See Chappell & Yetter-Chappell (2015).

value as separate persons, and so would reveal a flaw of moral character, even if the agent's actions were impeccably value-promoting.

4. Beneficence and special obligations

One may doubt whether the sketched solution is adequate to the problem we began with. Suppose that Mrs. Jellyby felt terribly about neglecting her children—is that enough to get her off the hook, morally speaking? If not, we must think that the problem with Mrs. Jellyby is not anything so subtle (or abstract) as merely neglecting the separateness of persons. Her problem, we are apt to think, is that she is neglecting *her children*, to whom she owes a special responsibility of care. In other words: it's not *philanthropy* she's doing wrong, we're apt to think, but rather *parenthood*.

Because of this, the case of Mrs. Jellyby turns out not to be such a good analogy to the trade-offs prescribed by impartial beneficence (whose advocates do not, after all, generally recommend that people neglect their own families). Here it is worth repeating the point that one need not be a utilitarian to embrace impartial beneficence. The latter norm remains neutral on the most controversial aspects of utilitarianism—its rejection of special obligations, moral options, and moral side constraints—and merely directs us to maximize the good insofar as this violates no prior moral duties. It applies most straightforwardly when choosing between strangers to whom we have no special obligations; more complicated cases require supplementation by one's broader moral commitments.¹⁷ (Might we have a special duty of care to others—even strangers—in our local communities, or to whom we stand in the relation of co-citizen? I am dubious of such extended partiality, but suppose for sake of argument that I am wrong about this. This still does not challenge the impartiality of beneficence. It merely presents one more special obligation that must be satisfied before we can turn our attention to the demands of beneficence proper.)

So, defenders of special obligations will not regard the moves made in the previous section sufficient to justify neglecting one's loved ones for the greater good. But that's fine, because this paper does not seek to defend such actions. The relevant question is instead whether there is something wrong (or unvirtuous) about an impartial approach specifically to *philanthropy*: after satisfying all applicable special obligations, is it necessarily callous or unduly neglectful for us to pass over the interests of strangers close to home in seeking out the most cost-effective global philanthropic opportunities? Here I think the response sketched in the previous

¹⁷ One possible basis for such special obligations—Slote's sentimentalism—was rejected earlier in the paper. But other possible bases remain. For example, I take the arguments of this paper to be compatible with the sort of "objective" (non-sentimentalist) view of partiality found in Parfit (2011, ch. 6).

section is successful. That is, while it might be problematically callous to feel unmoved by the interests of salient others in need, there is nothing wrong or uncompassionate about exemplifying the virtue of abstract benevolence in a way that overrides (rather than cancels) the motivational force of one's local sympathy. Here the agent is fully moved by the needs of those nearby. They are just moved all the more strongly by the greater needs of others, no matter that those others are far away.¹⁸

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