

# MINDING YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

## UNDERSTANDING INDIFFERENCE AS A VIRTUE

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### 1. Preliminaries

Some forms of human indifference are near universally associated with badness, viciousness, or wrong (Geras 1980; Vetlesen 1994; Slote 2007). Other forms of human indifference have historically been associated with the good, the virtuous, or the ethically indispensable (Long 1996; Aurelius 2004; Plutarch 1992). Are these contrasting associations a symptom of underlying ethical disagreement? Or are they mutually consistent or supporting? In this paper, I describe a framework for thinking about the ethics of indifference, according to which some familiar forms of indifference are genuinely good, virtuous, or ethically indispensable. I proceed by distinguishing four different kinds of virtuous indifference in their ‘pure’, or ‘ideal’, form. I refer to these kinds as ‘virtuous apathy’; ‘virtuous rejection’; ‘controlled indifference’; and ‘indifference as civility’, respectively. This distinction between kinds of virtuous indifference is made in light of the extent to which states of indifference can be either more or less dynamic, or more or less sensitive to the nature and state of their objects. I do not claim that these are the only forms that virtuous indifference can take. Nor do I claim that these kinds of indifference are easily distinguishable in practice. (Indeed, the

same subject could display more than one of them at the same time.) I focus on these four kinds of virtuous indifference because they each exemplify one particular aspect of human indifference that has previously been identified as ethically significant in studies of social behaviour, and/or the ethics thereof.

## **2. Virtuous apathy**

A state of indifference as I understand it here involves at least four variable aspects. I say that a *subject* (e.g. a person) is indifferent to some *object* (e.g. another person) when that subject displays some non-caring *orientation* (e.g. a lack of attention) to that object in a certain *context* (e.g. while standing next to them on a train). This definition is subject to a number of complications about how we should understand the notions of ‘subject’, ‘object’, ‘orientation’, and ‘context’; most of which I pass over in this paper. (I discuss these complications further in Lillehammer, forthcoming.) The core idea is that of a disinterested state or disposition on the part someone or something towards some aspect of reality, whether actual or possible. For example, there are many things we fail to care about for no other reason than that we simply take no interest in them. Among these are some things we consider to be lacking in a certain kind of ethical significance (I return to this case in the next section). Other things we take no interest in we may or may not consider ethically significant, yet we still fail to care about them. Consider, for example, the contents of an arbitrary message in the spam folder of your email account: potentially interesting for all that you know, but probably as far removed from your concerns as it could be without actually not existing. In a similar way, our physical and virtual

environment is full of objects of potential interest or concern towards which the attitude of any sane person will normally be one of indifference.

In certain circumstances, the manifestation of indifference amounts to a state of what I refer to as *virtuous apathy*. A subject displays virtuous apathy when they appropriately fail to either cultivate or sustain a caring orientation towards some feature of the world, where this failure does not express a negative judgement of the object on its subject's part, nor does it play any significant strategic or otherwise instrumental role in the pursuit of either their own ends, or the pursuit of the ends of any collective of which they are a part. In its purest form, virtuous apathy is indifference without an aim or purpose, and therefore basically non-dynamic. To the extent that neither its existence nor its place in the overall behaviour of its subject depends on the nature or condition of its object, a state of virtuous apathy is also comparatively insensitive to the nature and state of that object. Thus, my state of indifference towards the fiftieth message in my spam folder is not a response to the content of that message, nor does that message or its contents play any interesting strategic or otherwise instrumental function which that state might be thought to serve, either for me or for some collective of which I am a part. I'm simply not interested in the contents of message number fifty in my spam folder (which, at the time of writing, included an offer of something called 'digital intermediary film mastering services').

Virtuous apathy is a basically sensible orientation in circumstances where people find themselves with more than a minimal number of options of potential care or concern. It is

practically indispensable in any context where people are faced with a choice between a range of actual or potential goods so great that a significant survey of those goods would be practically impossible, counterproductive, or downright silly. One potential example of such a context is that of a customer confronting a vast range of (more or less) affordable consumer goods. Choices between multiple ranges of detergent, shapes of loaf, different T-shirt designs in various colours; computer gadgets; phone ‘apps’; ‘optional’ features for motorized vehicles; or ingeniously packaged financial products all present those of us who are lucky enough to be able to pay for them (and some of us who don’t) with a potentially endless number of opportunities to adopt some kind of interest in the choices on display, or alternatively to retain an attitude of non-dynamic and object insensitive indifference.

The practical significance of virtuous apathy is hardly lost on businesses and their representatives, for whom a lack of interest in what they buy or sell has been described as ‘the invisible competitor of the human mind’, to be broken down and defeated by brave ‘Sales Samurai’ (Heller 2004). Excessive familiarity with existing products; ‘false satisfaction’ with competitor products; failure to notice additional needs; the unique benefits of the product on offer; and simple ‘complacency’ present constant challenges to salespeople in their efforts to make potential customers part with their money. To overcome this challenge, a successful salesperson will seek to probe the existing habits, strategies and goals of the prospective customer, and then map out a plan ‘to resolve areas of customers’ hidden frustrations by uncovering previously unidentified needs’ (Heller 2004).

Every potential customer has genuine needs and frustrations. Proactive marketing can genuinely identify those needs, overcome those frustrations, and enhance the quality of goods and services for those who seek them. Yet not all customer indifference is based on mere ‘perception’, ‘complacency’, or ignorance of ‘previously unidentified needs’. (Just ask an experienced salesperson when they find themselves at the receiving end of someone else’s pitch.) Vast amount of marketing has very little to do with our needs, whether actually felt or previously unidentified. Much of it is explicitly aimed to create new ‘needs’, where previously there were none. Furthermore, the number and range of different consumer goods on offer in many commercial encounters far exceed the point where the value of having a choice has any interesting relation to the number of choices available. A tendency on someone’s part to ignore the marketing of online advertisers, luxury manufacturers, high street retailers, or pushy sales representatives could therefore be a perfectly sensible orientation, in spite of the potential for lost opportunities or satisfaction it inevitably involves (Fisher 2011). A display of comparably non-dynamic and object insensitive indifference to potentially valuable options can therefore in principle amount to a good or virtuous orientation.

### **3. Virtuous rejection**

Giving in to persistent pressure to make a purchasing decision is not only a potential waste of time. It is also a well-known cause of irrational (and potentially ruinous) behaviour. A selective form of indifference to various kinds of commercial pressures can

be economically prudent, or even essential, for the protection of financial health and personal sanity. To pretend that things are otherwise is a thinly disguised bluff. To believe that things are otherwise is to be the potential victim of commercial slavery. For these and other reasons, a state of virtuous apathy will have both dynamic and object sensitive analogues. Thus, we may sometimes decide not to care about something because we judge it to be of no significance, or otherwise unworthy of concern. The virtuous manifestation of a lack of concern that involves this kind of negative judgement I refer to as *virtuous rejection*. A subject displays a state of virtuous rejection when they appropriately fail to either cultivate or sustain a caring orientation towards some feature of the world, where this failure involves a legitimate denial of some ethically significant status to that feature. A state of virtuous rejection could therefore play a strategic, or otherwise instrumental, role in the pursuit of the ends of its subject, or in the pursuit of the ends of some collective of which the subject is a part. Where it does, the state of virtuous rejection will be substantially dynamic. For example, it could be vital to the successful performance of a certain task that other, potentially competing, tasks are either explicitly or implicitly ruled out as not worth pursuing. To this extent, virtuous rejection is always sensitive to the nature and condition of its object, at least in the sense that its object is actually regarded as unworthy of concern in that context. Yet the object of virtuous rejection itself (i.e. that feature of the world to which someone is indifferent) does not have to play a significant role in the successful pursuit of its subject's ends, or in the pursuit of the ends of some collective of which that subject is a part. First, a state of virtuous rejection does not have to play any interesting strategic, or otherwise instrumental, role at all. Second, a state of virtuous rejection that does play some strategic,

or otherwise instrumental, role will often do so regardless of the nature and state of its object. Thus, if my task of writing up one half of a conference paper on my computer depends on judging it irrelevant that doing so clashes with a pub quiz, my indifference to the pub quiz can play a strategic role in finishing the paper in a way that the pub quiz itself does not. Things would be different if I decided not to make it my business where exactly you choose to write up your half of the paper in order to give you the freedom to find the place that seems best to you. In this case, both my indifference to where you decide to write up your half of the paper, and your choice of where to do so, could play a significant role in ensuring that we jointly get the paper written up in time. I return to the ethical significance of this kind of multiply object sensitive indifference in the section on ‘indifference as civility’ below.

There is a familiar sense in which some things are said to be ‘a matter of indifference’, and therefore not important enough to care about, at least if considered in themselves. This could be because they are thought not to be important at all, or because they are thought to be less important than any of the other things it does make sense to care about in a given context. Thus, various people have at some time or other been advised not to care about having a glamorous career; common perceptions of social status; idle gossip; material wealth; the time of their death; posthumous fame; and many other things the nature of which is to effectively be beyond our control. Much of this advice is potentially sensible and well intentioned. Yet it is hardly self-interpreting. There are several coherent, but non-equivalent, interpretations of the claim that something is ‘a matter of indifference’

in a certain context. Some of these interpretations have direct implications for understanding indifference as a virtue. Here I shall mention two.

First, the claim that something is a matter of indifference could be a claim that it is without any kind of value whatsoever. Few actual claims that something is a matter of indifference probably take this form. Thus, even though it might be sensible advice to cultivate an attitude of indifference towards fame and celebrity, for example, this does not imply that it would be bad to have it. Nor does it entail that by getting it you would thereby be enjoying something to which you are not entitled. The claim that things of this kind are a matter of indifference is more likely to be based on the thought that you would be better off by not worrying about it. For example, vast material wealth obviously has genuine attractions for a lot of intelligent people. Yet you could be better off ignoring it if you know that you will never have it, or if you know that you would waste it in a tasteless or regrettable way if you did. The claim that these things are a matter of indifference could also be based on the thought that it would be rationally inappropriate to care about them in a certain context. Thus, the fact that you could easily fritter away your entire salary on gambling without giving it a second thought could be said to be a matter of indifference if you are already up to your neck in gambling debts. To make this claim is not thereby to deny the excitement promised by a week in the nearest casino or another night of online poker. Alternatively, the claim that these things are a matter of indifference could embody the estimation that you would be more admirable for not being concerned with them. Thus, the fact that there is plenty of scope for instant gratification could be said to be a matter of indifference if your excessive indulgence in it



means that you have already reached a point where you are about to throw your life away. Once more, to make this claim is not to deny that there is something to be said in favour of instant gratification and the thrill of ‘going for broke’.

Second, the claim that something is a matter of indifference could be a claim that it is without any distinctively ethical value. Many claims that something is a matter of indifference clearly take this form. Once more, there are several coherent, but non-equivalent, interpretations of the claim that something is ‘a matter of indifference’ in this way. Here I shall mention four. First, a claim that something is ethically indifferent could mean that the object in question is ethically indifferent *necessarily*, in the sense that it would make no ethical difference in any possible situation. Thus, it is sometimes argued that impossible events or states of affairs have no genuine ethical significance (as opposed to thoughts about impossible events and states of affairs, which possibly do). Second, this claim could mean that the object in question is ethically different *contingently*, in which case it actually makes no ethical difference, although it would do so in some different possible situation (even if not a very likely one). Given all the things that people are capable of being interested in, a lot of things that have actually been said to be ethically indifferent probably fall into this category. Thus, even the number of grains of sand on the moon might conceivably become an issue of ethical significance if you knew someone who cared about it enough. Third, the claim that an object of indifference is without any ethical significance could mean that it is ethically indifferent *intrinsically*, in the sense that it is not ethically significant if considered purely on its own (or in virtue of its intrinsic properties). Yet from the fact that something is intrinsically

indifferent it does not follow that it is indifferent all things considered. It could still be ethically significant *extrinsically* because of its relation to other features of the context, such as an interest, a need, or (as some would have it) Providence (Aurelius 2004, 83-4; 109). Thus, I may consider the number of grains of sand on the moon to be a matter of intrinsic indifference with respect to whether or not I write these words. Yet if someone powerful enough were to make the future of my loved one depend on it, the number of grains of sand on the moon would no longer be a matter of ethical indifference. The strongest way of interpreting the claim that an object of indifference is without ethical significance is as saying that it is indifferent in every possible way, in which case there would be no respect, intrinsic or extrinsic, in which it either is, or could be, of ethical significance. It is hard to think of any interesting examples of something that people have historically tended to care about that is truly indifferent in this way. Of course, there are many things that people either have, or could have, cared about that could never be ethically choice-worthy (in some cases necessarily so). Yet the reason why such things fail to be choice-worthy is normally not because they are genuinely indifferent in this, or any other, way. The lack of choice-worthiness of such things is normally a function of their negative ethical significance (their badness, or the viciousness or impermissibility involved in their pursuit); not their being ethically insignificant.

According to one historically influential claim, often associated with the ancient Stoics, much human vice and misery derives from the fact that we tend to treat as highly significant things that are in fact indifferent in one or more of these aforementioned ways. (There no universal agreement among classical scholars about which, if any, of these

ways the Stoics had in mind (Long 1996; Inwood 2005).) On this view, to care about things that do not matter is a basic obstacle to virtue and happiness. In particular, it is a mistake to concern oneself with things that are, in various ways, beyond our control. A Stoic ethics of indifference would therefore impose considerable limits on what human beings should and should not care about in their daily lives. Yet when properly understood, a Stoic call to indifference would not amount to a license to practice a life of apathy, or a blanket rejection of the ethical challenges faced by normal people during the course of a lifetime. What a minimally plausible Stoic ethics of indifference would prescribe is (in part) the cultivation of states of virtuous apathy and virtuous rejection. On these terms, a truly virtuous person would pursue the goods that the world has to offer insofar as it is within his or her power to do so, and otherwise detach him or herself from the pursuit of such ‘goods’ when it is not. The practical challenge raised by a Stoic ethics of indifference thus understood (and by no means a trivial one) is to consistently engage in the pursuit of virtue and happiness without being unduly affected by unavoidable necessity and the various kinds of good and bad ‘luck’ that fate throws in our direction.

As the preceding paragraphs bring out, Stoic indifference has an obvious affirmative flipside. If something does not matter in a given situation, that is probably because there is something else that does. If it is advisable for you to be indifferent to one thing in a given context, this is probably because it is not advisable for you to be indifferent to another. To be genuinely virtuous, on this view, is to responsibly pursue what really matters insofar as it is within your power to do so; and not let your life be blighted by things you can’t do anything about. Even if the ancient Stoics were wrong to think that

you would thereby be ‘happy’, there could still be something to be said for the claim that you could thereby be virtuous, or good (c.f. Kant 1981).

#### **4. Controlled indifference**

Sometimes people fail to care about one thing precisely because they care about something else, the pursuit of which makes a concern for the first thing inappropriate. The virtuous manifestation of this kind of strategic or otherwise instrumental orientation I refer to as *controlled indifference*. A subject displays controlled indifference when they appropriately fail to either cultivate or sustain a caring orientation towards some feature of the world, and where this failure plays a strategic or otherwise instrumental role in the pursuit of their ends, or in the pursuit of the ends of some collective of which they are a part. To this extent, controlled indifference is indifference with an aim or purpose, and therefore essentially dynamic. Some states of controlled indifference are also object sensitive to the extent that their existence is regulated by the proportionality between the estimated value of their object and what the subject cares about. Yet the object of controlled indifference itself need not play any significant role in the pursuit of the end to which the state of controlled indifference is a means. Thus, if you ignore the hateful songs of the opposing fans in order to make sure that you place your penalty in the top right hand corner, your indifference to their songs could be a means to scoring a goal in a way that the hateful songs themselves are not. Whether or not the opposing fans actually sing their hateful songs need make no difference to whether or not you achieve your end, even though your ignoring their hateful songs crucially does.

Controlled indifference plays a central part in the effective performance of many day-to-day activities, such as the aforementioned example of scoring a winning goal on behalf of a sports team; keeping your eye on the road while riding a bicycle; looking out for your loved one as they cross a crowded street; carrying out the mundane duties of a community member; pursuing a demanding ethical or religious ideal; or just staying out of trouble. More controversially, some forms of selective indifference displayed by representatives of governments, public institutions and private corporations can be virtuous in this way; provided they are appropriately sensitive to context and take place against a background of otherwise acceptable social arrangements.

There is more than one potential aspect of controlled indifference that can contribute to its ethical status as good, virtuous, or ethically indispensable in the context of a well-functioning institution. Here I shall mention three. The first relates to the potentially beneficial consequences of enforcing public administrative norms that serve to bracket religious or ethical differences the selective endorsement of which by public institutions would otherwise be a cause of discrimination, oppression, resentment, or unrest (du Gay 2000, 31ff). Even if each party to some ethical or religious disagreement would prefer to have their own views accepted by (or even imposed on) everyone else, they might also prefer a stable state of 'Live and Let Live' to an unstable condition of strife and conflict about issues on which they may never come to a mutually acceptable agreement. In order to accept this claim, we do not have to think that this will always be the case for every issue on which people disagree. What we do have to think is that there are social norms

that would serve most (and sometimes all) the members of a given social group reasonably well, in spite of the fact that different members of the group have incompatible ultimate ends or ethical convictions.

A second potentially desirable aspect of controlled indifference in the context of a well-functioning institution relates to the value of fairness in the differential treatment of arbitrary clients when making their claims on, or receiving benefits from, a public institution and its agents (du Gay 2000, 57ff). The controlled indifference of a government bureaucrat towards a given aspect of their clients' situation should not be confused with the total absence of concern either for the client in question or for the general public the bureaucrat is paid to serve. Instead, it is their consistent and public display of a lack of concern about specific features of their clients and their situation (e.g. their class, wealth, gender, ethnicity or religious denomination), jointly regarded as irrelevant in the context for the purposes of responsible and fair execution of one's duty, that would constitute their controlled, and therefore virtuous, indifference. If an 'ethics office' embodies an ethics of indifference, it embodies an ethics of controlled indifference that is expressive of a contextually sensitive conception of fairness and equality. The basic point about this kind of 'depersonalization' is not that every politically controversial aspect of clients and their situation is a good candidate for indifference in every conceivable situation. We do not have to say, for example, that the only defensible way for contemporary higher education institutions to address a structural injustice such as gender discrimination is to cultivate an attitude of blind indifference to issues of gender in every institutional context. Thus, a deliberate policy of affirmative

action, say, could potentially receive its ultimate justification from the fact that someone's gender is an intrinsically irrelevant factor with respect to the ability to perform a particular task. The basic point is that suitably structured public institutions can responsibly treat some ethically relevant aspects of their clients with controlled indifference in one institutional context, even if it would be irresponsible, or even wrong, to treat those aspects with the same kind of indifference in another.

A third potentially desirable feature of controlled indifference in the context of a well-functioning institution relates to the so-called 'art of separation', whereby people who occupy different social roles may cultivate the ability to distinguish between different 'spheres of life' and the proper place of different ethically relevant considerations in some spheres of life as opposed to others (du Gay 2000). For example, a responsible government bureaucrat will sometimes need to distinguish the 'public' from the 'private' so as to carry out the duty of his or her office without being vulnerable to expectations of friendly favours or the persistent pleading of 'moral absolutisms' (du Gay 2000, 76). Yet a virtuous state of controlled indifference resulting from the successful cultivation of the 'art of separation' would obviously not involve indiscriminate indifference to all the ethically significant effects that might flow from practicing it, or to the symbolic significance of displaying it in one context rather than another. A human individual who is truly describable as a 'government official' may also be truly describable as a 'private citizen'; a 'family member'; or 'just another person'. To successfully practice 'the art of separation' does not entail the wholesale renunciation of every remaining aspect of one's ethical sensibility. A responsible bureaucrat will be selectively indifferent to some

aspects of their clients in certain specific ways, and in certain specific (and themselves ethically constrained) circumstances. Outside these circumstances, the virtuous practice of the art of separation may ethically require the revival of concerns that in a different context would be ethically inappropriate. For example, there is the crucial moment of decision when a corporate client comes to be thought of as another human being in urgent need of personal attention. In this case, the ethics of ‘work’ is appropriately entangled with the ethics of ‘private life’. In a similar way, there is the moment of decision when a corporate litigator leaves the office for the day and goes home to his or her children to plan the weekend. In this case, the ethics of ‘work’ might be appropriately excluded from the ethics of ‘private life’. The virtues of office associated with paradigmatic forms of modern bureaucracy are not only consistent with, but can actually be enhanced by, the successful cultivation of controlled indifference.

## **5. Indifference as civility**

Sometimes people fail to care about something precisely in order to mark their difference or separation from that thing. Moreover, sometimes when people mark their difference or separation from something by not caring about it, the state of that thing is itself something on which the success of their project depends. The virtuous manifestation of a lack of concern that involves this kind of orientation I refer to as *indifference as civility*. A subject displays indifference as civility when they appropriately fail to display a caring orientation to some feature of the world; where this failure plays a strategic or otherwise instrumental role in the pursuit of their own ends, or the ends of some collective of which



they are a part; and where the object excluded from concern itself plays a significant role in the pursuit of those ends. In this sense, indifference as civility is indifference with an aim or purpose, and therefore essentially dynamic. Thus, if you leave the vacuum cleaning to me in order to focus exclusively on ironing, one reason for doing so could be that by letting me worry about the vacuum cleaning you will faster complete the ironing task in the course of a housekeeping routine that both of us would like to be over as quickly as possible. In cases like this, both the actions performed by the other person and your lack of concern with those actions are important to the proper function of your lack of concern in a way they would not be if you were simply so preoccupied with your own activities that you forgot about everything else. The fact that the other person knows that you know that they will do their bit, and that you are happy to leave them to it, can be an important factor in making sure that this other person will deliver his or her part of the bargain. To this extent, indifference as civility is object sensitive in a way that goes beyond simply being aware of, or being regulated by, the nature and condition of its object. For in this case, the state of that object itself plays an essential role in the strategic, or otherwise instrumental, function the state of indifference serves.

States of indifference as civility are essential to a wide range of so-called 'protective practices' displayed by individuals and groups in various contexts where their social existence is enhanced or protected by the avoidance of certain forms of personal contact or intimacy (Goffman 1959, 223ff). The effects of such practices have sometimes been associated with distinctively modern, 'cosmopolitan', or otherwise anonymizing life forms; such as life in the 'modern metropolis', or big urban spaces (Simmel 1997, 179;

Tonkiss 2003, 22). It has also been associated with the dynamics of competitive environments like those produced by contemporary capitalism. In either of these contexts, the dynamic and object sensitive indifference in question is often accompanied by attitudes of 'slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion, which will break into hatred and fight at the moment of closer contact'; and therefore with attitudes and behaviours that by default have a negative ethical significance (Simmel 1997, 179). Yet it would be wrong to think that all instantiations of this kind of dynamic and object sensitive indifference are either essentially 'modern', or necessarily problematic. In particular, it would be very surprising if these practices had no interesting analogues in more rural and 'pre-modern' conditions where the social division of labour can equally impose significant constraints on what it makes sense for people to care about while avoiding the risk of discord, dysfunction, or violence and atrocity. In other words, it would not be surprising if the practice of indifference as civility could be shown to have an ethically beneficial, or mutually moderating, influence also in the context of 'pre-modern', rural, or 'pre-capitalist' societies; as well as in a wide range of comparatively 'domestic' human interactions.

There are at least two obvious ways in which a state of indifference as civility can manifest a virtuous, good, or ethically indispensable orientation. The most obvious of these derives from the potential benefits of tolerant practices that are socially productive (Bailey 1996, 167-8). Precisely because people are sometimes able to leave at least some of their differences to one side in order to concentrate on socially more productive (or essential) activities, they are also sometimes able to concentrate their efforts on a

business they actually have in common, namely the business of living as well together as their circumstances allow. However indirectly, by letting other people get on with whatever they are into (even where that is something of which one might in principle disapprove), both oneself or one's own group may stand to benefit from the socially productive potential that a mutual display of indifference as civility can protect and enhance.

An equally important (and obviously related) way in which a state of indifference as civility can manifest a virtuous, good or indispensable orientation concerns the consequential dangers of insisting on strictly applying the details of one's own beliefs or practices to every instance of social difference in conditions of personal, economic, ethical or religious diversity and competition (Bailey 1996, 168). For example, a refusal to make any compromise on the details of one's own ethical or religious beliefs in conditions of potential disturbance or conflict can be a sign of short-sighted narrow-mindedness, and have ethically catastrophic consequences as result. In its place, some ethically, religiously, or otherwise diverse social groups may be fortunately enough to find themselves in circumstances where a delicate equilibrium of mutual accommodation can be sustained as a result of the different groups involved each maintaining a contextually sensitive 'pact' of selectively mutual indifference.

The successful display of indifference as civility among ethically or religiously diverse social groups is possible against the background of two (highly contingent) assumptions. First, there might be an ethically acceptable place for a 'pact' of mutual indifference

between different social groups because the various injustices that some members of those groups will inevitably experience actually fall short of the massively destabilizing events that have actually been experienced by the members of other similarly placed social groups in a wide range of historical circumstances. Thus, the virtue of indifference as civility does not have its natural home in conditions of tyrannical oppression or brutal exploitation. Second, any 'invisible hand' that may have been at work in turning a 'pact' of mutual indifference into a bulwark against inter-group violence and atrocity would also have to be, even if not impressively benign, then at least sufficiently beneficial to sustain a politically, ethnically and religiously diverse social world in conditions of relative peace and prosperity. This is a piece of historical fortune that does not extend to all ethnically or religiously diverse communities that may teeter on the edge of violence or catastrophe. The extent to which it does will obviously depend on the direction from which the threat of violence and catastrophe comes, the power relations involved, and a wide range of natural and historical factors that may in principle extend far beyond anything the members of the relevant community are able either to control or understand. Thus, some of the most compelling examples of indifference as civility can arguably be found in circumstances where it is the moral zealotry of third parties and the potentially destructive dynamics of externally imposed identity politics that present the most significant obstacles to peaceful coexistence (as opposed e.g. to the physical need of the persons involved, or their oppression by others). These features of the context in which a virtue of indifference as civility might be displayed can obviously not be assumed to apply without modification in all historical circumstances. Nor can it be assumed that they are features of their social environment that participants themselves are able to

effectively cultivate. To this extent, at least some forms of indifference as civility belong to an important, if comparatively ill-understood, category of social virtues the display of which is often inadvertent.

## **6. The limits of virtuous indifference**

Indifference as civility and other forms of role-specific absence of concern make ethical sense, when they do, mainly in the context of mutually convenient, cooperative, or otherwise non-destructive social relationships. To cultivation of virtuous indifference to an ethically significant other would normally involve not wanting them to come to harm. Yet not wanting someone else's harm is frequently insufficient to prevent the existence of harmful, violent, destructive, or otherwise ethically unacceptable behaviour on the part of others (Morton 2009, 130). A policy of 'minding one's own business' and letting other people mind theirs has the obvious downside of leaving some of the people affected by that policy vulnerable to the predatory behaviour of ethically unscrupulous others. It also has the downside of leaving some of the people affected by that policy vulnerable to natural disasters and other forms of emergency that is not the responsibility of anyone. It follows that there are conditions in which any 'pact' of mutual indifference would be incompatible with even the most minimal degree of human decency.

In one of the few works of contemporary philosophy to address this issue at any length, Norman Geras argues that the adoption of a policy of mutual indifference would amount

to the complete renunciation of a duty to care in favour of a duty to ‘choose certain doom’ (Geras 1998, 80). Geras approaches the ethics of indifference by constructing an imaginary social contract of mutual absence of concern (inspired by the social contract theories of Locke, Rousseau and Kant), deliberately designed to bring out the ethical perversity of adopting it. In describing what this kind of ‘social contract’ would involve, Geras writes:

If you do not come to the aid of others who are under grave assault, in acute danger, or crying need, you cannot reasonably expect others to come to your aid in similar emergency; you cannot consider them so obligated to you. Other people, equally, unmoved by the emergencies of others, cannot reasonably expect to be helped in deep trouble themselves, or consider others to be obligated to them. (Geras 1998, 28-9)

To accept a contract of mutual indifference would be to accept a set of principles for the regulation of social behaviour according to which no-one would come to the aid of someone if they are assaulted by others, beset by disaster, or otherwise trapped in desperate need. In light of our universal vulnerability to the actions of others (as well as the actions of institutions or other social forces, and various ‘natural’ events), the universal acceptance of such a contract would imply the universal endorsement of a paradigmatically bad, vicious, or impermissible personal and collective orientation.

According to Geras, the state of affairs that is modelled in his contract of mutual indifference ‘is close enough to the actual state of affairs in the world as to portray accurately the relations generally prevailing between most people in it’ (Geras 1998, 28-9). I shall not attempt to do justice here to Geras’s interpretation of our actual historical situation. Instead, I shall briefly comment on two aspects of Geras’s thought experiment and the conclusions he draws from it, insofar as these conclusions affect the claim that some forms of indifference can be virtuous, good or even ethically indispensable.

The contract of mutual indifference is meant to perform at least two theoretical roles. The first is to provide an accurate, if somehow idealized, description of the actual behaviour displayed by real actors in the historical past and present. The second is to support the claim that in withholding assistance to others who need it we are implicitly endorsing a principle according to which we ourselves give up any claim to be assisted if we find ourselves in comparable conditions of need. Indeed, to act on a policy of mutual indifference is to accept that our own vulnerability *ought* to go unheeded in this way. With respect to the first point, it might be helpful to interpret Geras’s account in light of the discussion of indifference as civility and other forms of ‘protective practices’ in the previous section of this paper. With respect to the second point, the claims made by Geras about the wider implications of his thought experiment are subject to a number of qualifications. Here I shall mention three.

As the various examples of object sensitive indifference discussed in previous sections of this paper show, there is reason to be careful about attributing an implicit commitment to

a universal principle of mutual indifference to individuals and groups who act so as to pursue a multitude of partial, role-specific, or otherwise socially discriminating projects by displaying some indifferent orientation to ethically significant others in a particular context. First, and most obviously, a selectively targeted attitude of object sensitive indifference could be the expression of a legitimate view that its object is genuinely unworthy of certain kind of concern. For example, it is widely held that there are things one person could do another (such as behaving in a way that fails to show them even the most minimal degree of respect) that could reasonably be judged to make that person undeserving of a range of concerns to which we would otherwise think they are automatically entitled. Less controversially, there are aspects of other people's activities that might reasonably be considered too counterproductive, too 'private', or simply too trivial to seriously consider making an object of mutual or public concern.

Second, if you omit to show a certain kind of concern for someone in one particular context, this does not mean that you must thereby will such an absence of concern as a universal law for all possible, or even likely, circumstances. In particular, an attitude of object sensitive indifference can play an instrumental, or even constitutive, role within an institution the general principles of which are themselves universalizable. This is one of the standard arguments for the cultivation of dynamic and object sensitive indifference in competitive practices such as sport, business, the legal profession, or academic philosophy; where the practice in question is widely agreed to be both ethically permissible and well served by rules of engagement the individual application of which are demonstrably not in the interest of everyone concerned. A state of indifference is an



orientation displayed by a given subject, to a given object, in a certain way, in a certain context. The fact that the same attitude would be ethically unacceptable outside that context does not show that it is not virtuous, good, or even indispensable within the context in which it is actually displayed.

Third, and more controversially, one way of being selectively indifferent is to free-ride on a certain kind of concern shown by others. In many cases, this kind of free riding is undeniably bad, vicious, or impermissible. Yet much indifferent free riding takes place on the very condition that its universalization is not a realistic possibility. In such circumstances, the likely absence of the benefits gained by opportunistic indifference would lead its subject to adopt a more interested attitude instead. So would the realization that the benefits gained by free riding are purchased at a cost to others that is prohibitive, serious, or otherwise ethically problematic. It follows that a selectively indifferent orientation cannot be assumed to carry with it an implicit commitment to its own universalization, even in the absence of a social context in which the indifference in question is beneficial overall. In fact, however, some forms of selective free riding are potentially beneficial overall, if only indirectly. Thus, you might naturally feel ethically ambivalent towards some of the emotionally distant souls who benefit from your own public spiritedness, but who rarely show any sign of gratitude or similar public spiritedness themselves. Yet for all you know, some of these people spend much of their 'spare time' regaining the psychological strength they need in order to return to a deeply unpleasant job on which your own comfortable existence depends. Alternatively, for all you know the neighbour who never joins in your frequent and laudable community

initiatives could be worn down by caring full-time for a sick relative the rest of you have never met, or have never even heard of. In these, and similar, cases the familiar kind of censure that is often handed out to indifferent ‘free-riders’ could be ethically inappropriate, or even cruel. For these, and similar, reasons, it is not at all obvious that all forms of selectively indifferent free riding are vicious, bad, or impermissible. Much will depend on who is free riding on whom, why they are doing so, and what the consequences are for themselves and others.

Some of the preceding remarks may be thought to suggest a problematically ‘consequentialist’ conception of the ethics of indifference. Yet maintaining that certain forms of indifference can be good, virtuous, or ethically indispensable does not require the endorsement of a purely ‘consequentialist’ view of ethical thought, as opposed to a ‘deontological’ view on which the basic criterion of ethical permissibility is the universalisability of ethical principles. On the contrary, at least some non-trivial forms of indifference to others can be shown to be virtuous, good, or ethically indispensable also on ‘deontological’ terms (because the underlying norms of the practices in which they are embodied are themselves universalisable). Nor does adopting a dynamic and object sensitive attitude of mutual indifference in a given situation imply the endorsement of a universal policy of ‘certain doom’. Instead, it might consist in a mutually beneficial policy of selective non-concern, focused on a specific range of ethically significant aspects of a given context, and potentially adopted on the basis of genuine insights about the ethical features of that context. This is not to disagree with the claim that a universal and unrestricted contract of mutual indifference would be ethically repugnant. Nor is it to

deny that thinking about the contract of mutual indifference can serve as a poignant reminder of some of the causes of personal and collective catastrophe actually faced by millions of real, historical, actors (Lillehammer 2014). A refusal to enter a contract of mutual indifference is consistent with the recognition that there are facts about all of us that we, as well as others who could make it their business to be interested in them, are better advised not to be concerned about (Plutarch 1992, 109). Indeed, our good relations with others will often depend on some (or even all) of us ignoring them completely, and this being the general expectation among everyone concerned.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

The many norms of professionalism, prudence, propriety, tact and etiquette that occupy the disputed region between ‘ethics proper’ and ‘mere’ social convention often function to regulate the many different and sophisticated ways in which human beings have historically considered themselves entitled, or otherwise well-advised, to be selectively indifferent to ethically significant aspects of their social world. Understanding the nature and rationale of these norms is an essential prerequisite to gaining an adequate understanding the ethics of indifference. Their ubiquitous presence in many, if not all, forms of intelligent social life shows that there is a basically sensible view, embodied in our ethical tradition, that some non-trivial forms of human indifference can be good, virtuous, or ethically indispensable.

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