

# The Ethics of Self-Concern\*

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## 1, *Introductory reflections*

*Was wirst du tun, Gott, wenn ich sterbe?*<sup>1</sup> Rilke's extraordinary question, on one reading deranged and megalomaniacal, captures at another level that sense which each individual has of the utter uniqueness of the self – the sense in which the self is, for this transient and frail consciousness that is 'mine', the centre about which the rest of the universe turns. Construed as a piece of epistemology, of course, this savours of an outmoded Cartesianism. We are accustomed nowadays to accepting that the story of a private privileged self is a myth: what we call 'individual' consciousness is parasitic, at the deepest level, on the existence of a social community of language users. In meditating on my own private world of thoughts and feelings, I am already deeply indebted to the external world of social (and other) structures which shape and determine my concepts. But the exploding of the Cartesian myth cannot entirely defuse that sense of the primacy of the subjective which the phenomenologists and the existentialists and the poets insist on.<sup>2</sup> I may owe my nature to the planet that spawned me, and my concepts to the society that nurtured me, but my 'specialness' somehow remains. I may not determine my own consciousness, or even have privileged access to it, but I am nonetheless its subject. If the information processing system that is my brain were to be irreversibly damaged or destroyed, then, from my own perspective, all sensation, emotion and cognition would be eradicated. The universe would, of course, go on, and others would continue to have feelings and thoughts. But the particular window on the universe that is 'me' – that unique and, for me, inexpressibly special focal point of conscious experience – would disappear forever.<sup>3</sup>

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\* This is a typescript the definitive version of which was published in *Ethics*, Vol. 101 (July 1991), pp. 798-817. Earlier drafts were presented at philosophy colloquia at the universities of Lancaster and Sheffield. I am grateful for criticisms raised on those occasions, especially those of Alan Holland and John Skorupski. I am also indebted to Willie Watts-Miller of Bristol University, whose paper 'Hume and the Limits of Justice' (typescript) alerted me to some of the complexities of Hume's account of benevolence and self-concern. Finally, I am grateful for the many stimulating comments and criticisms made by participants at the conference on *Impartiality and Ethical Theory* held at the Hollins Institute for Ethics and Public Policy, Hollins College, Virginia, June 1990.

**ADDENDUM:** There are a number of issues on which further reflection has led me to have reservations about some of the ideas expressed in this paper; see the **Postscript** at the end of the paper for details.

<sup>1</sup> ('What wilt Thou do, God, when I die?') First line of a poem by Rainer M. Rilke from *Das Stunden-Buch*, Erstes Buch (1899).

<sup>2</sup> Compare T. S. Eliot: 'We think of the key, each in his prison' (*The Waste Land* [1922]). Wittgensteinian arguments, while they have power to undermine the epistemological presuppositions of solipsism, cannot, it seems to me, defuse the sense of vertigo produced by my awareness of myself as the subject of conscious experience. The vertigo is captured dramatically in the work of the existentialists (see for example J.-P. Sartre, *La Nausée* [1938]) but does not easily find expression within the tradition of analytical philosophy. An exception is Thomas Nagel's wrestling with the metaphysical conundrum that 'I am a subject that can have a conception of the centreless universe in which TN is an insignificant speck, who might easily never have existed at all' (*The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 61). One may, however, admire Nagel's courage in tackling this conundrum without accepting his apparent conviction that what any objective conception of reality omits is the alleged fact that 'TN is me' (a fact analogous to the 'fact' that a 'particular time is the present' (p. 591). For reasons which I cannot go into here, I am far from persuaded that there are facts being stated here – that, as Nagel puts it, 'further content' is involved beyond what could be conveyed in objective language.

<sup>3</sup> Unless, of course, Descartes is right, and '*ce moi, c'est a dire l'âme par laquelle je suis ce que je suis*' (*Discourse on the Method* [*Discours de la méthode*, 1637], part 4) could survive corporeal death. But such ontological or substantival dualism has become increasingly unsustainable in the light of modern scientific

Are these reflections of any importance to ethics? What might be called the ‘standard’ view of religious teachers and many other moralists is that the idea of the specialness of self is an obstacle to ethical development. This notion has an ancient history,<sup>4</sup> but is still vigorously alive in the popular secular culture of our own time. The young baby, we are frequently told, is ‘utterly egotistical’: it thinks the universe revolves around its own desires and wants. Yet the child has ‘got to learn’ (how emphatically and with what relish adults say this, perhaps because they have not full learnt it themselves) that he or she is ‘nothing special’. He must learn that he is only one among many; that other children have equally valid claims on the time and attention of mother or father or teacher. And later on, he may be instructed in the importance of following and obeying the maxim Love Your Neighbour as Yourself:<sup>5</sup> not that the sense of special self-love should be expanded to embrace just a brother, or a close friend, but that any fellow citizen, or even fellow human, should be shown the same degree of concern that one feels for oneself. Those who fail to expand their concern outward in this way have, it is often suggested, stumbled at a crucial stage of their moral development; they are destined to become psychopaths, or at least sad cases of ‘arrested development’ – stuck in the autocentric world of the infant.

Of the many things that are wrong with this standard picture, three deserve particular mention. The first is that it presupposes what is often (though with dubious historical accuracy) called a ‘Hobbesian’ view of human nature – that humans are ‘naturally’ selfish, and that any altruistic inclinations have to be laboriously grafted on at a later stage.<sup>6</sup> This is an empirically sensitive issue (though observational evidence is seldom invoked to confirm or refute the so-called Hobbesian picture), and it would therefore be unwise to dogmatize about it. But it seems not unreasonable to suggest, with Hume, that while we are certainly not born saints, we are not born out-and-out sinners either. Self-interest (and I shall in this article both concede and insist on this) has an important place in any plausible account of human nature, but it does not occupy all the space. As Hume so nicely put it, ‘some particle of the dove’ is surely ‘kneaded into our frame along with the elements of the wolf and serpent’.<sup>7</sup>

The second problem with the standard view of the moral status of self-preference is that it is hypocritical. The standard moralist urges us to transcend our selfish nature and adopt the life of universal *agape*; yet few or none of the proponents of that life have every come remotely near to putting it into practice. Even a modicum of honest self-analysis is enough to reveal to virtually all of us<sup>8</sup> that we devote indefinitely more time and resources to our own plans and projects, to our own self-development and fulfilment, than we can even begin to conceive of devoting to the needs of humanity at large.<sup>9</sup> Again, that is not to suggest that we are wholly self-centred. But it is to face the fact that taking seriously the injunction to love one’s neighbour as oneself would be

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discoveries about the physical basis of consciousness. Nor am I persuaded by the still sometimes heard but on examination remarkably cavalier insistence that such dualism is at least ‘logically’ possible (see J. Cottingham, *The Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 120-21).

<sup>4</sup> See the fourth section of this article for the antecedents of this notion in Christian moral theology.

<sup>5</sup> The maxim is biblical: Matthew 19:19, echoing Leviticus 19:18. The parable of the good Samaritan, told in answer to the question, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ (Luke 10:29), clearly implies that the commandment extends to any fellow human: ‘neighbour’ is to be construed globally. In this respect, Marilyn Friedman’s comments in ‘The Practice of Partiality’, *Ethics*, Vol. 101 (July 1991) are off target. Compare J. Cottingham, ‘Ethics and Impartiality’, *Philosophical Studies*, 43 (1983), pp. 83 ff.

<sup>6</sup> A careful reading of Hobbes himself suggests that he is not in fact committed to the rank psychological egoism so often attributed to him; see *The Elements of Law, Natural and Political* [1640], pt 1, ch. 9, sectn 17; and T. Sorrell, *Hobbes* (London: Routledge, 1986), Ch. 7.

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751], ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), sectn 9, pt 1, p. 271.

<sup>8</sup> The qualification ‘virtually’ may seem untidy, but it has considerable importance as I shall argue in the final section of the paper.

<sup>9</sup> The impartialist may concede this but may insist that transcending the concerns of self is at least a ‘shining ideal’ at which we should aim; I have argued elsewhere that this response will not work; see Cottingham, ‘Ethics and Impartiality’.

incompatible with an enormous range of ordinary, intuitively quite legitimate, human pursuits, such as working at our education, pursuing a career, developing intimate relationships, founding a family, and much else besides.<sup>10</sup> The contrast between Aristotelian *philia* (friend-love, personal love) and Christian *agape* (neighbour-love, universal love) is instructive here. The *philos* in Aristotle's system is someone special; and this very fact puts fairly severe constraints on the nature of the relationship. A person can only have a limited number of *philoï*, since special affection for X demands a considerable assignment of time and resources to X, which in turn entails that there is less left over for Y. Christian *agape*, by contrast, being the love of X not *qua* friend, or spouse, or child but *qua* fellow creature, is a virtue which we are expected to display toward an indefinite number of people. But such impartial concern for all mankind must necessarily involve a loss of specialness. When Aristotle says that the friend is an *allos autos*, a second self, he uncovers something profoundly important about the nature of true friendship: that the friend ceases to be someone who is merely instrumentally good (because she amuses you, or cheers you up, or looks after you), and becomes someone who is valued for their own special sake, to whom you feel that same sense of intense special concern that you feel for yourself. The Christian injunction to love your neighbour, your fellow creature, as yourself seems to presuppose something impossible: that the sense of special concern which is the hallmark of genuine personal relationships could somehow retain its strength when indefinitely diluted to extend to all humans.<sup>11</sup>

The third difficulty about the standard doctrine of universal love follows from the second. If adherence to the pattern advocated in the standard model is either impossible or else so far beyond the bounds of the feasible as to belong in the 'ethics of fantasy',<sup>12</sup> then its coherence as an ethical ideal collapses. For if the proposed transcendence of special self-concern is, for most humans, not within the realm of practical possibility, then to continue to urge that is the goal we should aim at is to divorce ethics from reality. It is to make the subject matter of ethics relate to some wholly hypothetical ideal world, a world for non-humans, rather than to see its task as the constructing of a rational blueprint for how, in this world, human beings can best live.

If we return, then, to that intimate and peculiar sense of self-awareness and self-concern highlighted by Rilke, it may be seen that 'standard' moral teaching attempts to leave it behind, but at the heavy cost of ignoring or wishing away something which is ineradicable in all or most human beings. That being so, what seems urgently required in ethics is some kind of theoretical underpinning for the inescapable phenomenon of self-preference – a kind of 'anthropodicy' or 'autodicy' which will justify the ways of man to man, or self to self.<sup>13</sup> I take the principal

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<sup>10</sup> The incompatibility arises from the fact, acutely noted by Aristotle, that the development of special projects and relationships requires an investment of individual time and resources that are, necessarily, finite. There is for example a limit on the number of friendships a human being can develop (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 8, ch. 6, 1158a10).

<sup>11</sup> The Christian moralist might reply that Aristotle is right that genuine love presupposes concern for X for X's own sake but wrong in supposing that such love need be restricted and special. On this interpretation, the maxim 'Love Your Neighbour as Yourself' enjoins us not, *per impossibile*, to extend special concern (of the kind we feel for ourselves) to all mankind but, instead, simply to love all men for their own sakes and to reduce one's concern for oneself to the point where it is no more special than what one should feel for any fellow creature. Whichever interpretation is chosen, however, there seems no avoiding the conclusion that the life of universal *agape* is incompatible with that special concern for self which is essential to so much of our ordinary human existence.

<sup>12</sup> Compare J. Mackie (following C. D. Broad), *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 132.

<sup>13</sup> I coin these terms on analogy with theodicy, the project of justifying (in Milton's words) 'the ways of God to man' (*Paradise Lost* [1667], Bk 1). The justification involved in the project of 'autodicy' will necessarily invoke considerations designed to be generally compelling or persuasive, and it might be objected that any rational justification of self-preference is thus in a sense self-stultifying; for the very enterprise of justifying something will automatically require the transcending of particularity and the adoption of a more objective, less autocentric, perspective. I do not wish to deny that there is an element of universalizability inherent in the very idea of reason-giving. But this is not much more than a tautology: it depends on what 'justification' or 'reason-giving' means. It certainly does not follow that there can be no logically coherent justification of

requirements of any such ethical framework to be threefold. First, it must show how some degree of self-preference is at least morally permissible (for convenience, I shall take the term ‘self-preference’ to include preference for one’s own family and close friends as well as for oneself). Second, to do justice to the strong and widespread intuition that we not only may but ought to devote special resources to our own self-development and to that of our children and loved-ones, it must show how some degree of self-preference is morally desirable. And third, it must exhibit the ethical limits of self-preference; for, notwithstanding the compelling resonance of Rilke’s line, the universe does not revolve around my interests, and to act as if it did could lead to the most horrendous immorality. In the remainder of this article I shall examine how three familiar types of ethical theory – standard utilitarian, Kantian, and Humean – are equipped to cope with the moral status of self-preference. Then, having suggested that all three fall short in this area, I shall argue that the best hope for a satisfying anthropodicy lies in an Aristotelian direction.

## 2. *Utility, impartiality, and the concerns of self*

Utilitarianism, on its most straightforward interpretation, is not a theory that readily accommodates the individual’s sense of his or her own special worth. If the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the sole end of morality, then, as has often been observed, it does not seem to matter how that happiness is generated. Since one utility bucket, *qua* container of utility, is as good as another, then the fact that a given container is me, or closely connected with me, comes out, from the ethical point of view, as irrelevant. This is made quite explicit in the writings of classical utilitarians like Francis Hutcheson, who argues that the moral sense is best cultivated by detaching ourselves from the concerns of self and assuming the perspective of an impartial spectator.<sup>14</sup> The variations on this theme are well known. If it is a choice between rescuing the archbishop or the valet, then the fact that the valet happens to be my relative ought, from the moral point of view, to be ignored.<sup>15</sup> Consistently with this, we find the modern advocates of utilitarianism asserting quite baldly that self-interested reasons cannot count as moral reasons; furthermore, even ‘self-referential altruism’ (e.g., special preference for one’s own child) is, though psychologically understandable, of dubious moral status.<sup>16</sup> Such rigorous impartialism is wholly unpalatable except perhaps for a very few. It is, moreover, probably self-defeating. For it is far from clear that the cold and impersonal pursuit of global utility is in fact the optimum way for mankind to secure the highest possible level of happiness.

Yet to say this immediately allows the ‘indirect’ or ‘restricted’ utilitarian a foot in the door. If impartialism will not in fact deliver the goods (in the form of the greatest possible amount of happiness), then, argues the indirect utilitarian, there is no reason why utilitarianism should not license and even enjoin a considerable degree of self-preferential conduct. The widespread

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self-preference, or that self-preferential reasons for action are somehow derivable from, or reducible to, non-self-preferential ones. Rather along the lines of Nagel’s suggestion that subjective aspects of consciousness cannot be derived from an objective conception of science but remain independent ingredients of reality, so I would want to maintain that self-preferential reasons for action retain an ethical validity independent of the existence of impartially defined values (see, further, Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Ch. 9).

<sup>14</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry concerning Moral Good and Evil* [1725], Ch. 7, reprinted in D. D. Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), para. 314.

<sup>15</sup> ‘What magic is there in the pronoun ‘my’ that should justify us in overturning the decisions of impartial truth’ (William Godwin, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (3rd edn 1798), ed. I. Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), Bk 2, Ch. 2, p. 173). It is interesting to note that in the first (1793) edition of *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, the choice Godwin had posed was between saving either the archbishop or his chambermaid, who might be ‘my wife or mother’. It may be (as the editor of the Penguin edition hints) that Godwin’s later reluctance to bite the bullet and urge that one should abandon one’s wife to the flames reflects his gradual acceptance (fostered by the tender years of his marriage to Mary Wollstonecraft) that the province of human feeling should not entirely be subordinated to the cold kingdom of impartial justice.

<sup>16</sup> Compare P. Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 172.

adoption of the rule ‘let each look after her own’ (herself and her family) may in fact turn out to be the best strategy for maximizing global happiness. So (on this argument) utilitarians, except for those of the unregenerate ‘act’ variety, can accommodate a theory of legitimate self-preference.

The strategy has its attractions. But ultimately it distorts the motivational structure of self-preference and ends up justifying too little. What the rule utilitarian has to say, in effect, is that I am justified in giving preference to my own projects, or in working for the welfare of my own immediate family, only insofar as the general adoption of such behaviour can be shown to maximize global utility. Yet, first, this makes the permissibility of self-preference highly contingent and unstable. I am licensed to look after my own only so long as some kind of ‘hidden hand’ mechanism can be shown to operate whereby I am indirectly benefiting all; but when economic or social conditions change, I may find that my right to work for the special welfare of myself or my family is severely restricted. The rule utilitarian no doubt has a number of possible replies here,<sup>17</sup> some of which inevitably connect with the complex debate about whether utilitarianism, in any form, can generate a satisfactory theory of rights. But without becoming involved in the details of that debate, there is a more general point to be made against the rule utilitarian strategy. All ordinary humans, whatever their idealized professions about morality, show countless times each day that they share the fundamental intuition articulated over two hundred years ago by the moral philosopher Richard Price: ‘It is right and fit that a being should, when all ... circumstances on both sides are equal, prefer ... himself to another, reserve for example to himself a certain means of enjoyment he possesses rather than ... part with it to a stranger to whom it will not be ... more beneficial.’<sup>18</sup> There is, in our everyday lives, a subtle but crucial weighting we accord to our own interests. A resource which I legitimately control<sup>19</sup> – my leisure time, for example – may legitimately be devoted to my own recreation rather than that of my neighbour; and to justify this I need point no further than to the fact that my leisure time is my own. Of course, when there is some great utility or disutility at stake – where my neighbour’s house is burning down, for example – I ought certainly to put my own recreation second. But ‘when the circumstances are equal,’ as Price puts it, when the use of my resources can generate equal amounts of utility for myself and my neighbour, then it is simply ‘right and fit’ that I prefer myself.<sup>20</sup> The rule utilitarian cannot fully accommodate this basic intuition. That my resources are, *ceteris paribus*, assignable to me just because I am me is a truth which an aggregative system of ethics such as utility theory is compelled to deny, or to fudge. For the correct assignments of resources, for the utilitarian, are quite simply those which maximize, either directly or indirectly, total utility; and while it may be that the assignment or system of assignments which causally or consequentially meets this condition will be a self-oriented one, this will always be an open question, to be settled by various sorts of empirical inquiries into the best mechanisms or institutions for generating global utility. Utilitarianism, in short, cannot do justice to the sense that my life is intrinsically, not just instrumentally and derivatively, mine.

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<sup>17</sup> For a subtle exploration of some of the options here, see J. Skorupski, *Mill* (London: Routledge, 1989), Ch. 9, sectn 11. J. S. Mill himself, incidentally, is clear in his rejection of the unrestricted impartialism of such morality-intoxicated men as Auguste Comte, who requires us to ‘starve the whole of the desires which point to our personal satisfaction, by denying them all the gratification not strictly required by physical necessities’ (‘Auguste Comte and Positivism’ [1865], in J. S. Mill, *Collected Works*, ed. J. M. Robson (London: Routledge, 1965-86), Vol. 10, pp. 335-36, cited in Skorupski, p. 317).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals* [1758], Ch. 7, reprinted in Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists*, para. 734.

<sup>19</sup> The qualifier ‘legitimately’ needs to be inserted to rule out those cases where the control of resources stems from prior wrongdoing or from an inherently unjust system of economic distribution.

<sup>20</sup> To say this is to construe the legitimate ‘weighting’ in the weakest possible way; in fact the scope of one’s legitimate preferences for oneself surely extends to cases where the amount of utility that could be generated by the assignment of resources to one’s neighbour is appreciably greater – appreciably but not indefinitely; cf. R. M. Dworkin’s notion of a ‘threshold weight’ accorded to rights claims over the claims of general utility, in *Taking Rights Seriously* (London: Duckworth, 1977), p. 92.

### 3. *Feeling and reason: the limits of Kantian rationality and Humean sentiment*

In one important respect, the Kantian approach to morality looks highly promising for those who wish, as I do, to stress the importance of the ‘autocentric’ perspective in ethics – the sense in which ethics has to be constructed *from the inside outward*, building on the powerful intuition that my life is my own, and that the way I should live it is in a crucial sense (though of course with many important constraints and caveats) up to me to decide. At this meta-level (before any substantive normative questions are addressed),<sup>21</sup> the Kantian insists on a recognition of the importance of autonomy, the self-legislating power of the rational will to act in accordance with the demands of practical rationality.<sup>22</sup> But that considerable merit of the Kantian approach having been granted, it is not easy to see how Kantians can satisfyingly move forward to construct a plausible model of how far this initially autocentric perspective is to be reflected in the realm of substantive moral principles; still less is it clear how a decision procedure can be generated for determining the ethically proper limits of self-concern.

In a celebrated argument, Immanuel Kant uses the device of the categorical imperative to rule out a life of self-interest. Since I know I may need the assistance of others when I am in distress, I cannot rationally will the maxim ‘let each pursue only his own advantage’.<sup>23</sup> It would be tiresome to rehearse the well-known debates over the status of this argument, except to underscore one classic and telling line of criticism: the resolute Thrasymachean, if he is sufficiently robust, may have good hopes of reaching the top without appealing to the altruism of anyone; and if he is enough of a gambler he may, quite rationally, be prepared to take the risk of suffering the consequences should he be proved wrong. Nothing in logic rules out such a strategy as flawed. To plug this gap in Kantian ethics, the modern contractarian claps on the veil of ignorance.<sup>24</sup> If, when conducting my Kantian deliberations, I do not know who I am going to be in actual society, then I have to face the possibility that I may be one of the weak whom Thrasymachus and his like scorn to help. But again, under certain conditions, the rational gambler may properly (properly as far as reason goes) decide that the risk is worth taking. Out of the large number of possible sets of arrangements for the conduct of human affairs, some people, the risk takers, may prefer a Darwinistic melee where the rewards for the *Übermenschen* are rich, and the weak go to the wall. Others, the cautious, the ‘maximisers,’ may want the greatest possible amount of legislated altruism – a battery of caring (the Thrasymachean would say ‘coddling’) services whereby citizens look after their neighbours with the same standards of concern that they would accord to themselves or their loved ones. But no amount of universalizing will generate a decision procedure for deciding which of these extremes, or which of the many intermediate options, is the most rational. In short, pure Kantian reason can provide no convincing conclusions one way or the other regarding the moral status of self-preference.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Discussions of ‘impartialism’ in ethics clearly need to be more careful than has often been the case in recent discussions (including my own previous work) about the precise level at which an impartial perspective is being defended (or attacked). For an illuminating account of some of the distinctions that need to be made here, see Marcia Baron, ‘Impartiality and Friendship,’ *Ethics*, Vol. 101 (July 1991).

<sup>22</sup> For an elegant exposition of Kantian autonomy, see Barbara Herman, ‘Agency, Attachment, and Difference,’ *Ethics*, Vol. 101 (July 1991), esp. the discussion of how this notion is related to human autonomy.

<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785], trans. H. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 91.

<sup>24</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), Ch. 3, sectn 24.

<sup>25</sup> This is but one way of highlighting a general structural problem which the deontologist faces in aspiring to provide moral imperatives which will command the assent of all rational persons. The natural way to fulfil this aspiration is to start from a thin theory of the good, where we are invited to abstract from all particular circumstances relating to our own personal involvements and preferences. Yet now there is a dilemma: if the abstraction is fully and successfully performed, we are left with a wholly depersonalized reason, which cannot logically decide between a vast set of possible rules for society, ranging from the most

In the very different ethics of David Hume, it is of course sentiment, not reason, that is the mainspring of morals. It is not that it is irrational for me to forswear all charitableness or benevolence; rather it is a denial of the natural feelings and impulses which I find within me. Can anyone who ‘wears a human heart’ be entirely indifferent to the interests of his fellow creatures: ‘Would any man, who is walking along, tread as willingly on another’s gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement?’<sup>26</sup> Yet the trouble with Hume’s appeals to sentiment is that they do not seem enough to generate a proper theory of obligation. Benevolent impulses, even when bolstered by the ‘approbation of mankind’ do not explain why some courses of action are more incumbent on me than others to which I may be impelled by opposite, often more powerful, motives. With commendable realism Hume frankly recognizes a ‘natural’ appetite of self-love.<sup>27</sup> Yet if my feelings of self-concern are as strong or stronger than my altruistic impulses, then, although Hume may scorn to enter into that ‘vulgar dispute concerning the degrees of benevolence and self-love which prevail in human nature’,<sup>28</sup> the net effect is to leave the moral status of self-preference versus altruism very much hanging in the air.

Hume’s theory of justice is, no doubt, designed to tidy up some of this. Given the existence of selfish impulses, given furthermore that general benevolent impulses are, for most of us, weak, and our generosity confined, it makes sense, if we wish to live practicably in a society with human beings of similarly limited sympathies, to establish the artificial but mutually advantageous conventions of justice. Here we do have the basis for obligation; self-interest itself teaches us the ‘infinite advantages’ that flow from an ordered society, which in turn depends on an established system of enforceable rights and duties.<sup>29</sup> This line of argument is but one strand in that great tradition which we now call the liberal theory of justice, and it is far beyond the purpose of this article to examine or criticize that tradition. What is important for the present context is that although liberal theory characteristically starts from the idea of individual self-interest in order to generate the obligations of justice,<sup>30</sup> once these obligations are in place they do not allow for, or indeed have anything to do with, the specialness of the individual. Since obligation is construed as an artificial device for counter-acting the effects of self-concern and limited sympathy, the specialness of myself and my own falls outside the sphere of obligation; and hence its moral status, by the end of the liberal story, is left obscure.

There is an interesting parallel here with the fate of the ‘great virtue of charity’ within the liberal tradition. In liberal theory, as has been pointed out in a highly perceptive recent study, charity is ‘marginalized’: not derivable from the set of duties generated by the institutions of justice and rights, it becomes a kind of optional extra. It has the status of the supererogatory; and what this means, when the imposing label is peeled away, is that charity falls within the scope of selective or even capricious philanthropy.<sup>31</sup> Yet if charity drops into limbo, falling as it were on the far side of

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blatantly self-regarding to the most ideally altruistic. If on the other hand the abstraction process is imperfectly performed, so that the Kantian or Rawlsian cogitator is allowed to retain some of his values or preferences, then the project becomes circular: the ‘objective’ deliverances of reason will turn out to be no more than a disguise for whatever prephilosophical intuitions about the good life the deontologist was committed to in the first place.

<sup>26</sup> Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, sectn 5, pt 2, p. 226.

<sup>27</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739-40], ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d edn, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), Bk 3, pt ii, sectn 1, p. 480. Compare *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, sectn 3, pt i, p. 188.

<sup>28</sup> *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, sectn 9, p. 270.

<sup>29</sup> Compare *Treatise*, Bk 3, pt ii, sectn 2.

<sup>30</sup> Though it should be stressed that Hume is insistent that the ‘original’ condition of mankind is not governed wholly by self-interest (cf. above, note 7). Hume also dissociates himself from the Hobbesian notion that the obligations of civil society are founded on an actual or implied contract (see *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, app. 3, pp. 306 ff.).

<sup>31</sup> See Onora O’Neill, ‘The Great Maxims of Justice and Charity,’ in *Enlightenment, Rights and Revolution*, ed. N. MacCormick and Z. Bankowski (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989), pp. 279 ff.

that structure of duties that constitutes the liberal theory of justice, self-preference suffers a similar fate, falling as it were on the near side. Indeed, its eventual fate turns out to be far worse than that of general benevolence or charity. For though the latter falls outside the scope of the conventions of justice, it at least attains the status of the morally praiseworthy; in Hume's theory, for example, it is, by a characteristic process, transformed from a mere sentiment to a legitimate object of moral approbation. Yet the very rules of moral language operate in such a way as to disqualify any self-preferential feelings from similar entitlement to moral approval: 'Each particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others; and 'tis impossible we should ever converse together on any reasonable terms were each of us to consider characters and persons only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order therefore to prevent those continual contradictions, and arrive at a more stable judgement of things, we fix on some steady and general points of view.'<sup>32</sup> In other words, the raw sentiments generated by our own particular perspective need 'correction' as Hume puts it, before they can form the basis for that 'stable judgement of things' that is the hallmark of genuine moral approval.<sup>33</sup> The same theme is taken up later by Adam Smith: the rules of morality are formed only once we have systematically corrected for the distortions of perspective, and the delusions of self-love.<sup>34</sup> The upshot is that not only does self-preference get ousted from the theory of justice; it also risks dropping out of the sphere of morality altogether.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. *The Christian tradition versus Aristotle*

In the failure of the eighteenth-century moralists to provide a satisfying 'autodicy', the underlying influence of Christian teaching is all-important. Orthodox Christian doctrine did, to be sure, allow for three species of duty, *erga Deum, vicinum, et seipsum*,<sup>36</sup> but the last, duty to self, is very much at the bottom of the list, below duty to God and neighbour. And among many philosophical writers on ethics, this order of priority tends, consciously or unconsciously, to be taken for granted, so that we find the self progressively fading away from what is conceived to be the truly moral perspective. Nowhere is this fading more apparent than in the writings of Samuel Clarke at the start of the eighteenth century. He begins by acknowledging the 'natural self love which every one has in the first place for himself'; then comes 'natural affection' for children, posterity, near relations, and intimate friends. But these particularized sentiments are, in Clarke's vision of the moral life, progressively left behind as we move outward 'to towns, to cities, to nations', until we reach the 'agreeing community of all mankind'. The truly moral man thinks himself 'born to promote the public good and welfare of all his fellow creatures', and finally, 'to comprehend all in one word (which is the top and perfection of duty) . . . to love all others as himself.'<sup>37</sup>

In reaching this ultimate command of Jesus, which replaces 'all the law and the prophets', the Christian moralist aspires, in effect, to adopt the perspective of God himself. In this

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<sup>32</sup> *Treatise*, Bk 3, pt iii, sectn 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Treatise*, p. 582.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], pt 3, ch. 1, in Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists*, para. 816.

<sup>35</sup> Hume is perhaps not entirely consistent in his remarks on self-preference. In a much quoted footnote in sectn 5, pt 2 of the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, he notes that it is 'wisely ordained by nature that private connections should commonly prevail over universal views and considerations; otherwise our affections and actions would be dissipated for want of a proper limited object' (*Enquiry*, p. 229, emphasis added). Yet even here he goes straight on to talk of the need for correcting the natural sentiments: 'But still we know, here as in all the senses, to *correct* these inequalities by reflection, and retain a general standard of vice and virtue' (p. 229, emphasis added). For a careful account of some of the tensions in this part of Hume's moral theory, see S. D. Hudson, *Human Character and Morality* (Boston: Routledge, 1986), Ch. 8, pp. 88 ff. and 95 ff. For Hume's (somewhat ambiguous) attitude to the moral status of partiality toward one's family, see esp. *Treatise*, pp. 488 ff. and 518-19.

<sup>36</sup> Towards God, one's neighbour and oneself. Compare J. Locke, *De lege naturae* [c. 1660], in Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists*, para. 194.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse of Natural Religion* [1706], in Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists*, para. 244.



perfectionist vision ('Be ye therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect')<sup>38</sup> any clinging to the remnants of self-love, however understandable and 'natural,' represents a kind of failure – a falling away from the highest duty of mankind. It is now time to observe what a vast difference it makes to ethics when we move back to a pre-Christian perspective, and replace the uncompromising command of Jesus, *esesthe teleioi*, 'Be ye perfect', with the more down-to-earth slogan of the Aristotelians, *mēden agan*, 'Nothing to excess.'<sup>39</sup> The Aristotelian doctrine of the mean has not found a great deal of favour with modern critics. It has seemed to many to share something of the blandness of Descartes's much vaunted but in the end curiously trite 'rules of method,' telling us not much more than that if one keeps to a sensible path one will not go far astray.<sup>40</sup> But if we leave aside the vexed question of whether the theory of the mean is of any cash value as a guide to action, there remains one central claim which it does make about the nature of ethical excellence – a claim which sets it wholly apart from the later Christian tradition. In Christian ethics, as we have just noted, human virtue is characteristically seen as a struggle to aspire to a divine pattern of perfection. What this entails about the redeemability or otherwise of human nature is of course a topic that has generated centuries of theological debate. But that aside, it has one unmistakable logical implication about the nature of virtue: it can be expressed as a rectilinear function. For any given type of virtuous conduct, or any given laudable emotion, the greater the amount of such conduct that can be exhibited, and the greater the amount of such emotion that can be felt, the better. In short, the following graph is operative (Fig. 1), where the vertical axis represents degree of goodness, and the horizontal axis the amount of some laudable emotion (e.g., benevolence) that is felt, or the amount of good conduct (e.g., generous behaviour) that is exhibited.

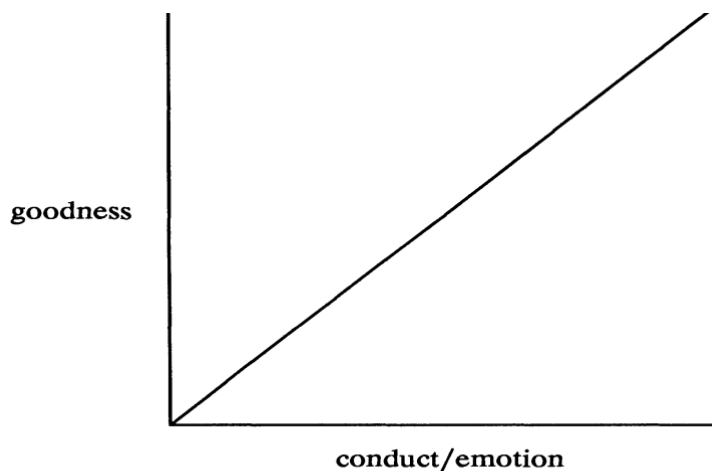


FIG. 1

This rectilinear model largely explains the tortuous moves of the moralists in the Christian tradition with respect to self-love. Some were tempted to recognize its moral status as *prima facie*

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 5:48.

<sup>39</sup> In fact the maxim was familiar well before Aristotle's time; it was inscribed in the temple at Delphi and is quoted by Plato in *Protagoras* 343b.

<sup>40</sup> Compare Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, part 2. Aristotle's doctrine of ethical excellence as a 'disposition lying on a mean' is presented in *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk 2. For criticisms of the emptiness of the doctrine as a guide to action, see J. Barnes, ed., *Aristotle's Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 24 ff.

good.<sup>41</sup> But there was also a deeply embedded awareness that Christ had commanded us to aim for a life of perfect benevolence. And once this is plotted out on the linear model, there seems no escaping the conclusion that the best person is one who is maximally altruistic, and who (as Jesus himself did) gives up everything for his fellow man. The greater the element of self-concern, the closer we move to the bottom left-hand position on the line; there is, in effect, no space for morally legitimate impulses or acts of self-preference.

In the Aristotelian model, things are wholly different:

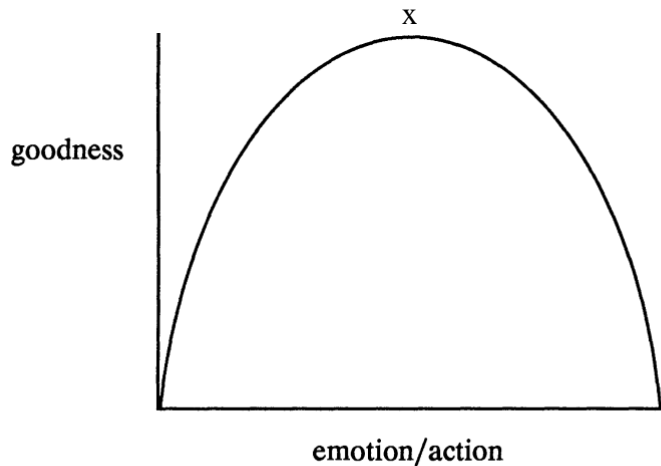


FIG. 2

For any praiseworthy type of conduct or emotion there will be not one vice but two, the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency. So in the graph generated by the doctrine of the mean (Fig. 2), again, the vertical axis represents degree of goodness or praiseworthiness, and the horizontal axis represents the amount of a given emotion that is felt, or the extent to which a given type of action is performed. Here the high point *x* represents the right amount of feeling or action that is characteristic of the person of the highest virtue. What this implies about benevolence and generosity contrasts strongly with the Christian view: for although stinginess will be condemned as bad (falling on the bottom left-hand portion of the curve), overgenerosity will equally fall low down on the goodness scale – this time on the bottom right-hand end of the curve. In the Aristotelian perspective, to sell all you have and give to the poor<sup>42</sup> is not to earn extra points on the virtue scale, it is to go ‘over the top’ of the curve and slide down to the vice of excess. The Christian saint who gives up all for others is, to the Aristotelian way of thinking, lacking in that balanced sense of moderate self-esteem that is necessary for a fulfilled human life.<sup>43</sup> Correspondingly, *philautia*, or self-love, appears in the Aristotelian scheme of things as a perfectly proper and praiseworthy emotion, to be condemned only if it slides into the excessive

<sup>41</sup> Compare Price, *Review of the Principal Questions*: ‘It is too absurd to be maintained by any one, that no relation which an action may have to our own happiness or misery, can (supposing other beings unconcerned) have any influence in determining, whether it is or is not to be done, or make it appear to rational and calm reflection otherwise than morally indifferent’ (in Raphael (ed.), *British Moralists*, para. 734).

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 19:21.

<sup>43</sup> Critics of Aristotle may object that it is absurd to deny that a heroic act of self-sacrifice (e.g., giving up one’s life to save comrades in battle) may be praiseworthy. So it may often be; but Aristotle need not deny this. It is important to realize that the Aristotelian schema is not a calculus for determining the rightness of particular actions; rather, it relates to the permanent dispositions of character (to act and feel in certain ways) that constitute virtue (generate a worthwhile life).

desire to have more than one's fair share or, equally important, if it is so deficient that it allows the agent to be a doormat for the vice of others.<sup>44</sup>

The profound difference of outlook that is apparent when we compare the Aristotelian and Christian accounts of virtue extends way beyond the analysis of particular virtues and vices, and even beyond the striking general gulf that separates a perfectionist from a moderationist ethic. In the Aristotelian conception, the entire structural framework of ethics is significantly different from what it is taken to be in the bulk of subsequent moral philosophy. This is obscured, to begin with, by a number of apparent points of contact. For Aristotle, ethics is about the good, or the good for man, or the 'supreme good,'<sup>45</sup> and we also find what appear to be references to the role of rules or principles of conduct in ethics. All these expressions suggest not differences from but similarities with the later ethical writers, both in the deontological and the utilitarian traditions. But Aristotle's starting point for ethics is in fact radically different from what we find in either of these later traditions. First, there is no suggestion of a deontological perspective in Aristotle, notwithstanding the grossly misleading translation of the phrase *orthos logos*, in Aristotle's definition of virtue, as 'the right rule.'<sup>46</sup> For there is never any thought that virtue can be achieved by submitting one's will to the dictates of some binding imperative of reason or eternal law of duty. Ethics, for Aristotle, never gives us eternal verities but only empirically sensitive generalizations, true 'for the most part.'<sup>47</sup> And though 'sound reason' (*orthos logos*) plays a role here, it is used not to establish binding rules of conduct but to work out the appropriate amounts of feeling and action that are characteristic of the habits of behaviour which make for a fulfilled life.

But if Aristotle is no deontologist, he is equally no utilitarian. Again, the translators have helped to mislead here; for if *eudaimonia* is rendered as 'happiness', it is natural to suppose that the Aristotelian conception of the aim of ethics is not radically different from that of the utilitarians. But in fact there is never the slightest suggestion in Aristotle that *eudaimonia* is something to be maximized across a population or something subject to trade-off between individuals. Rather, *eudaimonia*, human fulfilment, is taken from the outset to be a notion which can only be applied to each complete individual human life;<sup>48</sup> moreover, the working out of the activities that generate or constitute such fulfilment is taken to be a task which falls within the autonomous control of each individual human being.<sup>49</sup> From the very outset, in Aristotelian ethics, there is thus a respect for the autocentric perspective which is lost both in the attempt to generate ethics from the deliverances of depersonalized reason and in the utilitarian project of generating ethics by way of an aggregative calculus. As we have seen, the deontologist, in order to avoid the charge of simply legislating his personal intuitions, is drawn to reason about the good life in austere abstraction from the particularity of self-reflexive concerns; and the utilitarian is equally drawn toward an impersonal viewpoint on the world, where partiality and self-reflexive commitment is allowed for, if at all, only in a secondary and derivative way. But from the Aristotelian perspective, the very first question of ethics – How should one live in order to achieve *eudaimonia*? – is framed in a way

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<sup>44</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 9, Ch. 8, 1168b; Bk 4, Ch. 9, 1136b19.

<sup>45</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, Ch. 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 2, Ch. 6, 1107a1: virtue is a 'state of character concerned with choice, lying on a mean (relative to us), determined by right reason.' The Oxford translation by Sir David Ross [1925] renders *orthos logos* as 'a rational principle', which could mislead the reader into supposing that some kind of rule is meant (London: World's Classics, 1963), p. 39 and p. 4, note 1 (where the rendering 'right rule' is preferred).

<sup>47</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, Ch. 3, 1094b20.

<sup>48</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, Ch. 7, 1098a18.

<sup>49</sup> The phrase 'each individual human being' is in fact somewhat generous to Aristotle, since he apparently acquiesced in a system of economic and social arrangements that effectively denied to many individuals (women, slaves) the chance to become fully and autonomously human. For further discussion of the role of autonomy in the Aristotelian system, see J. Cottingham, 'The Philosophical Status of Natural Rights,' *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 41/2 (1991), p. 47.

which does justice to that unique sense of the specialness of self which is deeply rooted in each of us.

### 5. *Some clarifications and conclusions*

Talk of the specialness of self, or of an autocentric perspective, may seem to some to be just a polite way of talking about egoism. Indeed, some commentators have made just this charge against Aristotelian ethics, apparently regarding Aristotle as some kind of ‘individual utilitarian’ for whom the *summum bonum* is not ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’ but ‘the greatest happiness of me’.<sup>50</sup> But this is a crude distortion. It is true that some of the Aristotelian virtues relate solely to my own personal flourishing; but there are many which are integrally bound up with my relation to others and with their well-being. Aristotle devotes nearly two whole books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the virtue of *philia* – personal love or friendship; and it is impossible to read these chapters without realizing that for Aristotle the ethically good person is very far from self-absorbed. To point out that the autocentric perspective is not necessarily a rankly egotistical one is at least a start toward establishing its ethical credentials. But the task of ‘autodicy’ which I set out to address at the start still largely remains to be tackled. Granted that the Aristotelian perspective ‘does justice’ to the sense of specialness of ourselves and our loved ones, does it justify it? Does it show that this feeling of specialness is ethically permissible? Does it show that it is ethically desirable? And does it exhibit the ethical limits of self-preference?

The Aristotelian perspective on virtue makes our task, in one sense, an easier one. If to live virtuously is to live *kata physin*, in accordance with our nature, and if the biological nature of our species makes us predisposed to have an intense concern for the welfare of ourselves and our near-ones, then there is a sense in which the task of autodicy is already partially discharged. If human fulfilment must lie in the ordered pursuit of those activities which make us characteristically human, then it seems that we do not so much need to justify our special concern for our individual lives and those of our friends and loved ones as to point out the absurdity of any recipe for human fulfilment which tries to ignore these characteristically human concerns.

The justification just sketched is, of course, rather too swift. To begin with, ‘human nature’ is in some respects a problematic notion and cannot be conceived as something unalterably fixed by the laws of biology. Though there may be good evolutionary evidence for the survival value of behaviour characterized by a special concern for self and immediate kin, the ‘nature’ of mankind, as even the ‘selfish gene’ theorists concede, is to some degree plastic and responsive to sociocultural pressures.<sup>51</sup> So appeal to our biological nature will not satisfy the Christian moralist, or the secular impartialist, who will urge that, whatever our evolutionary past, we ought to struggle to transcend it, to abandon autocentrism and adopt a more detached and universal perspective.

A first part of the answer to the impartialist challenge must be that even though our biological predispositions may be modifiable, and hence cannot finally settle the question of how we should live, they at least provide an obvious starting point for any attempt at an answer. Rather as J. L. Austin said of ordinary ways of speaking, they ought to have the first word, if not the last; the assumptions built into ordinary language may perhaps need revising or abandoning, but the onus is on the reviser to show why this should be so.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the ethicists of self-preference can reasonably claim that the onus is not on them to justify our autocentric perspective but on the revisionists who wish us to abandon it. For the autocentric perspective, as indeed most impartialists readily concede, is the one which each of us, in the ordinary course of life, starts from. As beings with a particular biological inheritance, placed on a particular corner of the planet in a particular social setting, human beings just do ordinarily and characteristically have an immediate and intense

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<sup>50</sup> Several such interpretations are discussed and criticized in W. R. F. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), pp. 325 ff.

<sup>51</sup> Compare R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (London: Granada, 1978), ch. 11.

<sup>52</sup> J. L. Austin, ‘A Plea for Excuses,’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 7 (1956-57), reprinted in V. C. Chappell, ed., *Ordinary Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), p. 49.

special interest in the welfare of themselves and their near ones. Now perhaps our characteristically human, particularized perspective on life is flawed; but it is certainly not self-evidently so (as impartialists too often seem to assume); if it is flawed, if we ought to abandon it, then it is up to the impartialist to show why. Godwin's famous challenge – 'What magic is there in the pronoun 'my' [to overturn] the decisions of impartial truth?'<sup>53</sup> may aptly be turned on its head: 'What magic is there in the artificial constraints of impartiality to overturn our natural human sentiments and predispositions?'

The second point to be made in answer to the impartialist is that, while admittedly our natural inclinations and propensities are not enough in themselves to settle the crucial normative questions of ethics, they at least generate certain important constraints or costs which will affect the viability of any blueprint for human flourishing.<sup>54</sup> What empirical evidence we have suggests that transcending the ties of partiality is an enormously difficult process, even for those who are equipped seriously to attempt it. The Buddhist monk requires a lifetime of meditation before he can begin to free himself from the bonds of selfhood; the Christian aspirant to saintliness requires a lifetime of prayer and mortification before he can seriously aim to follow the example of Christ.<sup>55</sup> In short, if ethics is sensitive, as it surely must be, to facts about what most people are capable of, the ethics of impartiality is, *prima facie*, in deep trouble.

Impartialists may be inclined to dispute this. How, they may ask, could the status of a moral ideal be affected by an empirical survey of how difficult most people find it to adopt that ideal? Given the fact that the life of self-denying universal *agapē* is at least possible (there have been saints), and given the further fact that such lives are universally admired and praised as representing the summit of virtue, are we not obliged to concede, after all, the superior moral status of impartialism? At this stage of the argument, I suggest, a kind of compromise may be possible. We are so used to the adversarial mode of argument in philosophy, to seeing the subject as a battleground between implacable protagonists (the sceptic and the antisceptic, the realist and the antirealist), that we are perhaps disinclined to accept that, in ethics at least, there may be room for limited coexistence between rival theories. Yet if we take seriously Aristotle's observation that ethics relates to what is true 'for the most part',<sup>56</sup> we shall be more ready to accept the possibility of more than one viable blueprint for human flourishing.<sup>57</sup> To vindicate the autocentric perspective, then, it is not necessary to disparage sainthood or deny its existence. It is enough to point out that, for most people, for most of the time, the autocentric perspective is so deeply ingrained that it is all but impossible to transcend. The permissibility of self-preference follows from its virtual inescapability for the 'mass of mankind', and this thesis is in no way weakened by the ability of a few to rise beyond the special concerns of self. On the contrary, it is the impartialist who is in difficulty here: for if what is possible only for a tiny few is trumpeted as a programme that all should follow, this is a blatant violation of the maxim that ought implies can.

Moving from the permissibility to the moral desirability of self-preference, we need look no further than the Aristotelian accounts of *philia* and *philautia*. If special concern for ourselves and our loved ones constitutes (again, for most people) one of the basic ingredients of a fulfilled human life, then what more could be required to show that such concern should be incorporated into our

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<sup>53</sup> See note 15 above.

<sup>54</sup> M. Midgely, *Beast and Man* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978), pp. 192 ff. The central planks in Midgely's platform now seem to me to be essentially sound, notwithstanding the criticisms I raised in my 'Neonaturalism and Its Pitfalls', *Philosophy* 58 (1983), pp. 455 ff.

<sup>55</sup> For further problems with such idealized blueprints for living, see J. Cottingham, 'Partiality, Favouritism and Morality', *Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1986), pp. 357 ff.

<sup>56</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1194b20.

<sup>57</sup> As indeed Aristotle himself did. In addition to his dominant conception of the good life as the ordinary human life of *phronesis* or practical wisdom, he also acknowledges, and insists on, the value of a more austere platonian conception of fulfilment – the life of *theoria* or intellectual contemplation (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 10).

blueprint for living? The good for mankind is the virtuous pursuit of those activities and goals that are characteristically human.

The qualification ‘virtuous’ in the last sentence brings us to our final and most difficult issue: the ethical limits of self-preference. It is characteristically human to adopt a perspective in which ourselves and our loved ones are special; but we cannot say that the exercise of such self-preference is virtuous unless it is kept within rationally moderated bounds. Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean acknowledges this but provides very little in the way of practical guidance as to how much is the ‘right’ amount of the relevant emotion or action. Is it right to devote my spare time to a game of tennis when the time and energy could be used in visiting the sick? Is it right for me to buy a special birthday present for my child when other people’s children, somewhere on the planet, are starving?

Since there is no straightforward answer to these questions (and those who claim there is a straightforward answer, namely, a plain negative, invariably show by their actual behaviour that they are either insincere or else have not thought through the full implications of what they are saying),<sup>58</sup> I shall conclude by advancing what may seem a paradox: those who acknowledge the acceptability of self-preference are better placed than their impartialist opponents to achieve a stable and coherent view of our duty to look out for the general well-being of others. The now unfashionable idea of the ‘tithe’ – devoting a set proportion of one’s income to charitable and impartially benevolent concerns – illustrates the point nicely. The Aristotelian who has achieved the goal of a fulfilled and satisfying life for himself and his near-ones is well placed to exercise the altruistic virtues of impartial generosity and benevolence: it is the mark of Aristotle’s magnanimous citizen to devote a decent proportion of his surplus wealth to the good of those to whom he has no special ties.<sup>59</sup> The impartialist, by contrast, is condemned to a life of permanent schizophrenia. Theoretically, ideally (he will constantly insist), we ought not to be preferring ourselves and our loved ones at all. The opera tickets, the video recorder, the toys for one’s children, the family holiday, the sabbatical leave, the philosophy textbooks – all these priorities will be exhibited as ethically tainted in a world where the resources could be spent on less autocentric projects. Yet short of going the whole hog, of reducing self-preferential activity to the ideal zero of total sainthood, the impartialist will be forced into a neurotic and perceptual self-castigation. The gap between professed morality and action can never be closed; the repetition of ‘I do feel guilty about this but ...’ becomes progressively more empty – a ritual formula that reveals the ultimate instability of an ‘ideal’ ethic which its proponents show themselves, by their everyday conduct, to be forever incapable of implementing. Rejecting a self-oriented conception of morality may lead to heroic sainthood for a tiny few; for the majority it entails a life either of hypocrisy or of neurotic self-flagellation. To base our ethics on a realistic anthropodicy, a sane acknowledgment of the autocentric perspective that is deeply rooted in the makeup of the overwhelming majority of human beings, may, in the end, enable us to achieve a more practical and balanced view of the extent to which we can, and should, promote the welfare of mankind at large.

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<sup>58</sup> See further, Cottingham, ‘Ethics and Impartiality’, pp. 88 ff.

<sup>59</sup> For the virtue of *megalopsychia* or magnanimity, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 4, ch. 3, esp. 1124b14 ff. What counts as surplus wealth is of course a delicate and difficult issue. The vice of *pleonexia*, of grabbing and keeping more than one’s fair share, cannot ultimately be defined without reference to criteria determining what is just in the acquisition of holdings, and what is sufficient (but not excessive) for the development of a worthwhile life. One does not have to accept the impartialist premises of utilitarian writers like Singer and Glover in order to appreciate the ethical force of their challenge to conventionally accepted ideas of how much surplus wealth may decently be retained by the world’s wealthier nations (see Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Ch. 8; and J. Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), Ch. 7).

### **POSTSCRIPT**

It has been a salutary but in some ways uncomfortable experience for me to re-read this paper over 20 years after its publication. While I would still accord fundamental importance to what I in the paper called (not entirely happily) the ‘autocentric’ perspective, I would now want to construe this in terms of each individual’s fundamental responsibility for his or her moral self-development, or what Socrates called the ‘care of the soul’ (Plato, *Apology* [c. 390 BC], 25). And I would now want to make it clear that this project has to be understood as a far more a teleologically and normatively oriented one than appeared in the paper; that is, each of us is required not just to secure the flourishing of the self as it is now constituted, but to learn from our mistakes and grow into the better self that we are meant to be. A later paper, ‘Impartiality and Ethical Formation’, in B. Feltham and J. Cottingham (eds), *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships and the Wider World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 65-83) makes some of the necessary points consequent on this shift of outlook. Among what now seem to me several other missteps in the paper is its unfavourable contrasting of the Christian with the Aristotelian perspective on altruism, which I would now diagnose as arising from a mistaken assimilation of the Christian ethic to the impersonal and impartialist ethic of (some types of) consequentialism. I subsequently attempted to address this shortcoming in ‘The Self, The Good Life and the Transcendent’, in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds), [\*The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham\*](#) (London: Palgrave, 2008). pp. 228-271.