

Impartiality and Ethical Formation*

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1. Interpersonal versus interior morality

The territory of morality covers two principal domains. The first, which occupies most of the attention of present-day philosophers, covers interpersonal relations – broadly, how we should treat our fellow human beings. The second, which was the main preoccupation of many of the great moral philosophers of the ancient and early-modern periods (and which in my view is too often neglected by present-day moral philosophers), is concerned with intra-personal ethical formation – with the individual's journey towards self-knowledge, self-development and harmonious living.¹ Of course the two domains are not unconnected: one might reasonably suppose that individuals whose inner moral life has been enriched by self-reflection, and who have made progress towards psychological maturity, will manifest this growth amongst other things in their attitudes and relations to others. Nonetheless, the two domains are genuinely distinct; and this is reflected in the kinds of philosophical treatment accorded to each. Investigation of our relations with our fellows rapidly involves us in a forum of public debate, covering notions such as those of mutual obligation, of fairness and justice, of social norms and codes. Inquiries into the nature of individual moral growth and enrichment tend instead to be concerned with the interior life, with the conditions for each person's psycho-ethical equilibrium,² the relationship between reason and the passions, and with the task of self-transformation – the progressive struggle to improve not just our patterns of outward conduct but our intellectual and emotional grasp of the ethical significance of our lives.

The broad contrast I am invoking here has an important bearing on the topic of impartiality and partiality in ethics. In asking about my relations with others, I am already raising a question that lays me open, at least in principle, to considerations about impartiality and fairness. For unless I try, absurdly, to deny that other people share a common humanity with me, my very addressing of the question of how I should behave towards them lays me open to a possible charge that in any given decision I may be giving unwarranted weight to

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¹ For example, self-knowledge was a primary goal of ancient Greek ethics, encapsulated in the famous motto found inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi (compare Socrates' remarks in Plato, *Apology* 19E_{ff}). For the goal of achieving a harmonious life, or in the Stoic Zeno's phrase a good 'flow of life' see A. Long and D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 63A and B.

² For the term 'psycho-ethical' and its implications, see J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4, §§6-8.

the interests of one human being – myself – as against another.³ To be sure, the potential charge may be easily rebuttable, for there may be all sorts of relevant reasons why the balance of interest tips in my favour rather than yours, or why some network of duties or obligations singles out me and mine rather than you and yours as the recipient of my justified special concern. But the bare possibility, at least, of a charge of unjustified weighting seems at least to be in the background whenever I seriously ask the question ‘How should I treat another?’ In contrast, asking the more general question ‘How should I live?’ does not automatically seem to open me to the possibility of such interrogation. Of course part of how I should live is how I should treat others, so there is a straightforward sense in which the first question entails the second, thereby exposing me to the implications of asking the second question. But there remain many aspects of the first question that do not automatically seem to expose me to challenge in this way. Suppose I ask: ‘How can I deepen my intellectual perceptions and emotional responses, so as to achieve a better insight into who I really am, and where my life should be going?’; ‘How am I to ensure that my deliberations are free from the emotional distortions and projections deriving from early childhood (or from other sources) which may make some goods seem more attractive, or some ills more fearful, than they in reality are?’; ‘How can I respond to the fact that the moral life is not exhausted by what I now value, given my present concerns, but embraces what I ought, if I mature morally, to come to value, even though I may now resist such a change?’ These are questions it seems appropriate for every morally serious human being to address, without there necessarily having to be any immediate issues hovering in the background about my status vis-à-vis that of others.

In religious accounts of how one should live, we often find stories of people being called to lives of contemplation, or self-purification, in seclusion from normal society, or even in complete isolation, as hermits. Religious vocations may include calls to inner transformation as well as to outward saintliness.⁴ The idea that God may call an individual,

³ Challenges about assigning unwarranted weight to my interests as against those of others may of course arise even when shared humanity does not apply – for example in my treatment of my pet animals; what will here be relevant is some other shared characteristic, e.g. sentience.

⁴ Some may object that invoking such examples moves outside the proper secular field of philosophical inquiry. But blanket exclusions of religious themes – like a recently published critique of some Pascalian arguments about the human condition, which rejected them out of hand on the grounds that they were ‘based on the [false] assumption that a historical “Fall” of man actually took place’ – are, it seems to me, misguided for two reasons: first because scriptural and religious ideas do not always have to be construed in a fundamentalist or crudely literalist way; but second, and more important, because such secular dismissals are curiously blind to what follows from their very assumption of the falsity of religious belief. For if (in Descartes’s phrase in the First Meditation) ‘we grant that everything said about God is a fiction’, it must follow that such fiction has been devised by humans consciously or unconsciously for some reason or reasons – and these may well include, for example, pointing to a deep human need, or capturing a vital moral insight. The hardliner who wishes to exclude all religious reference as irrelevant to moral philosophy is thus faced with a dilemma: either religion is true, in which case such reference may be highly relevant; or else it is false, in which case it is a human invention, whose potential moral content seems *prima facie* at least as worthy of examination as that of any other human construct (for example the moral insights found in poems or novels or plays). We thus often seem to me to do our students a serious disservice by solemnly insisting, for example, that they plough through Aristotle’s pompous pronouncements on ‘great-souledness’, while denying them the enormous moral riches of Scriptural writings of a similar status and antiquity, often for no discernibly better reason than that the former are taken to be respectably secular. For the quoted critique of Pascal, see J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 146; cited in J. L. Kvanvig. ‘Divine Hiddenness:

sometimes to the service of others, but sometimes to a path of inner reflection, meditation and self-examination – to the kinds of activity featured in some of the traditional programmes of ‘spiritual exercises’⁵ – can be interpreted in secular terms as one way of expressing an important fact about human nature. Not only, on the social level, is the record of our species marked by a long history of discord and violence, but also (and perhaps connectedly) on the individual level, each of us is born and grows up weak and vulnerable, with limited intelligence and often inadequate nurturing, beset by all manner of (often unacknowledged) inner turmoil and self-delusion, and with a tantalisingly short time at our disposal to ‘sort ourselves out’ and build the conditions for a mature and flourishing life. In such circumstances, quite apart from the need for the kinds of beneficial and equitable social norms variously advocated by modern moral and political theorists, there seems an equally pressing need for the kind of inner transformation sought by many of the ethicists of the past. The project of morality, if one may so call it, embraces the goal of self-understanding and self-improvement, as well as – and perhaps as an inescapable condition of – the goal of better relations with our fellows.

2. *The quest for self-improvement*

Granted that the quest for self-improvement is a legitimate moral undertaking, I want to underline one aspect of it that seems to me inescapable. I have already suggested that embarking on this quest does not automatically raise impartialistic questions about the relative weightings of my interests as against those of others. But more than that, I want to argue that the quest is one that by its very nature requires me to adopt a perspective that in a sense (to be explained shortly) accords my own life a special importance, or centrality.

I have previously called this the ‘*autocentric*’ perspective; this is not to be confused with ‘egocentric’ in the sense of selfish, since the *content* of the insights I achieve and the goals I make my own, as a result of interior reflection on my life and its projects, may turn out to be quite altruistic in character.⁶ But even with this caveat, the label ‘autocentric’ now strikes me as potentially misleading, since it may have unfortunate ontological or epistemic connotations. Ontologically, it may be suggestive of the blasphemous or megalomaniac view that I am the true centre of the universe – that my life is indeed the main one that matters, or that my role in the drama of life is of prime significance.⁷ According to some psychologists, this is how infants start out; and the blind fury of the two year-old’s tantrums is the first phase in the hard process of coming to learn that each ego is simply one among many. Part of our ordinary moral education is to recognize that what is central from my perspective may be peripheral from another’s – a point nicely illustrated in Tom Stoppard’s drama *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, where two of Shakespeare’s faintly comic minor parts become the principals, and Hamlet a mere walk-on, with all sorts of complex resulting shifts in what occupies centre-stage.⁸

Moving to the epistemic dimension, the label ‘autocentric’ may be misleading in another way, by suggesting that I have specially privileged access to my own thoughts and

What Is the Problem?’, in D. Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 151.

⁵ See J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 1.

⁶ J. Cottingham, ‘The Ethics of Self-Concern’, *Ethics* 101 (July 1991), pp. 798-817; see esp. pp. 805, 813.

⁷ Compare Stephen Darwall: ‘we are prone to a kind of self-importance that involves, not just an inclination innocently to reckon values and reason from our own point of view, but to see our point of view as exclusively reason-giving, as the source of all reasons.’ ‘Responsibility within Relations’ present volume, p.00, below.

⁸ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1967).

concerns, but only indirect or derivative knowledge of those of others. Whether or not this is the case – one of the well-worn stamping grounds of philosophy – I leave aside; but even if it is, it is hard to see how of itself it could carry decisive moral significance. For what is directly known, or easier to know, is by no means always what is more important from an ethical point of view.

The centrality I wish to stress, in contrast to these ontic and epistemic varieties, is an ethical centrality, a centrality of responsibility. The perspective that is mine, the place that I occupy, is such that I have a unique and special control over, and responsibility for, the activities and resources that constitute what I am. To put it very crudely, I am in charge of my life in a way no one else can be. One might suppose that an appropriate way of referring to this responsibility-based idea, given that we have discarded the label ‘autocentric’, would be to talk of each of us having ‘*autonomic*’ perspective on our lives: each human being occupies a position such that they properly see their life as falling under their own autonomous control. But this alternative label also turns out to be far from ideal for my purposes, in part because the concept of autonomy is a radically ambiguous one. On one interpretation, the goal of autonomy may suggest the perfectly reasonable aim of making my life as a moral agent free from the tyranny either of irrational internal impulse or of unwarranted external control – an aim we should all share. But the goal of autonomy can also be interpreted in a much stronger way – in what may loosely be called the ‘Nietzschean’ or ‘existentialist’ way – as invoking the dangerous fantasy that I can somehow create or legislate my own values.⁹ The moral quest for self-development, in my view, is most emphatically not an operation of raw will, an exercise in laying down my own self-generated goals, but rather an exercise in *discernment*, in discovering what is objectively good, and then progressively orienting myself towards it. Avoiding talk of autonomy, then, I propose, in order to convey the idea I want of a ‘centrality of responsibility’, to make a Greek-based coinage, and speak of the *auto-tamieutic* perspective, where the etymology connotes something like ‘self-stewarding’.¹⁰

In being ‘thrown’ into the world, as Heidegger put it,¹¹ I find myself, whether I want to be or not, the possessor of certain gifts, or resources which only I am in a position to foster and utilize. Andrew, born with a gift for music, has musical opportunities which the tone-deaf Brian cannot pursue; whereas on the other hand he cannot implement Brian’s gift for painting, because he lacks it, and vice versa. The various talents are capacities and faculties that characteristically require the continuing efforts of the possessor in order to bear fruit.¹² Those efforts, moreover, must, if they are to have ethical value, be responsive to objective moral facts about the kinds of good the talents are fitted to promote: the possessor of a talent does not have absolute control to use it in any way he sees fit, but is in this sense more of a ‘steward’, working according to pre-determined conditions of appropriate use. By the same token, the possession of talents carries with it a responsibility that they should to be utilized fruitfully: this cannot be evaded by a denial of the gifts, or a wilful refusal to develop them. Talk of innate ‘gifts’, incidentally, need not be construed in an objectionably elitist way; for I

⁹ A view sometimes (in my view wrongly) seen as stemming from Kant’s notion of the rational will as ‘self-legislating’ (*selbstgesetzgebend*). For more the relatively benign Kantian notion of autonomy, and how it differs from the hubristic Nietzschean idea that values can be created or overturned by human fiat, see Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 3.

¹⁰ Greek ταμειευτικός (*tamieutikos*): ‘relating to a steward’.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), § 38.

¹² Of course we have innate gifts that seem to fall into our lap: some people can sing beautifully without effort; but such talents can bear fruit only if developed properly. A gifted singer who confines herself to aimlessly intoning snatches of banal popular songs, and can’t be bothered to train her voice to tackle more demanding and enriching music, is wasting her talents.

take the parable of the talents found in the New Testament to be saying *not* that a more gifted person is more valuable than a less, but rather that much is required of those to whom much is given.¹³ The man with five talents is, whether he wishes it or not, responsible for developing his resources properly – something only he can do. And the man with only one talent has no less a responsibility, one he cannot evade by complaining he has less than others, or by simply letting his talent atrophy or lie dormant.

The thesis, then, is that the moral quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement requires me to adopt an ‘auto-tamieutic’ perspective: one from which I acknowledge the special and unique responsibility I have for understanding and properly developing my moral character, and the unique set of abilities that have been given to me. I am in an important sense steward of my own personal resources.¹⁴ This means, in the first place, that I am responsible for developing my own moral character and talents in a way I cannot be for anyone else’s. (A parent is of course responsible for developing their children’s talents, but this is only, as it were, temporarily and on trust, against the day when they mature into full responsibility and self-stewardship.) In the second place, and crucially, the idea of self-stewardship means that I cannot and should not view the allocation of my time and energies in this respect as something that could be determined entirely from an impartial perspective, in accordance, say, with the demands of global welfare-maximization. For my duty of self-discovery and self-perfectioning carries with it, as it were, an *automatically implied pre-assignment of time and energies*: the goods in question are ones that are achievable only by me, and by my investments of time and energy. It is rather as if each of us is born with a key we cannot get rid of, and which can only turn a particular lock, accessible only to that one person: it makes no sense to ask if a given key could not better be used for some other purpose, since only the keyholder is in a position to use it, and the only purpose for which it is fitted is to open the particular lock to which only he or she has access.

3. Talents, Moral Character, and Resources

At this point, some critical probing is in order. First, it may be objected that I seem to be trying to mark out a certain privileged ethical zone reserved for the individual’s development of her own moral character and talents; yet any privilege (runs the objection) is just that – a special entitlement or exemption accorded to one particular individual or group, and as such it surely cannot escape being required to justify itself at the bar of impartial scrutiny. In this case, however, talk of ‘privilege’ or a ‘privileged zone’ is in some respects misleading. It is not as if the ‘auto-tamieutic’ agent is claiming treatment or entitlements that are somehow ‘special’, or require particular exemptions or favoured status when viewed from an impartial standpoint. It may be helpful here to consider a parallel with the famous Cartesian ‘Cogito’ argument. A point frequently stressed by Descartes is that the ‘validity’ of the Cogito does not apply, as it were, timelessly and externally, but is something that requires to be

¹³ A man travelling into a far country called three servants, and gave to the first five talents, to the second two, and to the third one. On return he called them to account, and found the first servant had used his five to make five more, and the second had used his two to make two more; but the servant who had received but one had ‘hidden his talent in the earth’. The first two are highly praised, but the third is censured and punished (see Matthew 25: 14-30).

¹⁴ The notion may strike some readers as inappropriate because of the association with a fiduciary relationship towards another. Yet that is, of course, exactly what is conveyed by the parable of the talents, which suggests that life is a gift, the use of which I am called to account for by God. Even from a secular perspective, however, we often talk of someone’s wasting their lives or failing to use their gifts properly. Whether such language is coherent if we are here, as it were, by accident, and our existence with the package of abilities we happen to possess is a chance process rather than a gift, is an interesting question which cannot be dealt with here.

‘activated’ by each individual thinker. You cannot just read off the conclusion from the outside, as if it were on a list of ‘blackboard’ propositions or theses being advanced (there is, after all, nothing certain or necessary about your existence – it could cease at any moment). Rather, says Descartes, the Cogito is something each of you has to ‘do’, by actually thinking and meditating along with the author; only then will you see that you cannot, so long as you are engaged in this process, cease to exist.¹⁵ In somewhat similar fashion, the good that is the development of this talent, or the deepening of this moral character, is something that cannot be realized except in the life of the individual that is me. So it is not as if I am claiming some privilege that allows me a special extra resource or consideration that is denied to others, or which might be dubious when viewed from a neutral position. I am the only vehicle for this good, its only potential implementer; if I do not realize it, it will eternally be lost.

A second possible worry about the position so far reached is that talk of each individual’s responsibility for developing their own ‘moral character and talents’ appears to lump together two heterogeneous categories whose ethical significance is rather different. With regard to character development – the goal of interior change and self-purification, aimed at for example by the kinds of spiritual exercise mentioned earlier – one may perhaps be inclined to grant it a certain moral aura that might partly insulate it from requirements stemming from the demands of global welfare and equity: as steward of my own moral life, I cannot ethically allow it to decay in the name of some impersonal and general goal. But the development of my talents on the other hand (intellectual, artistic, athletic and so on) seems less easy to insulate from the wider moral context. Bernard Williams, perhaps at this point over-influenced by Nietzsche, once suggested that Gauguin’s decision to ditch his family might retrospectively be justified if he turned out to be a great painter; but unless we want to go all the way down the Nietzschean road, there are surely some limits to how far the potential artistic genius can be justified in putting his own self-development above the needs of others.¹⁶

We are here up against what might be called the problem of *resources* – a problem that in fact arises irrespective of whether we are talking about the deepening of moral character or the developing of one’s own particular repertoire of skills and talents. It is an unavoidable fact that the pursuit of the relevant goods cannot be cost free: it requires, at the very minimum, much investment of time and energy (and indeed, as a pre-requisite for this, a secure infrastructure of more basic physical resources such as food and shelter and clothing). Unless we propose, like John the Baptist, to go off into the wilderness clothed with camel hair and living on locusts and wild honey (an option unfortunately no longer available on our now mostly wilderness-free planet),¹⁷ we cannot, even for the most isolated auto-tamieutic projects, ultimately avoid the question of how we propose to support them. And even the Baptist must have got his camel hair from somewhere.

The question of resources is allied to the question of time, or, more generally, *extent*. I ought to reflect on my life and develop my moral character and talents – but for how much of the time, or to what extent? In his *Tugendlehre*, or ‘Doctrine of Virtue’ (the second part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*), Immanuel Kant’s answer is, roughly, ‘it’s up to me’ (with the

¹⁵ René Descartes, *Meditations*, Second Meditation, AT VII 25-27: CSM II 17-18. Cf. Synopsis, AT VII 9: CSM II 8. ‘AT’ refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76), and ‘CSM’ to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁶ B. Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 2. For discussion of the moral implications of the Gauguin case, see J. Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 30.

¹⁷ Mark 1:6

proviso that I keep my nose clean in terms of the strict requirements of justice and rights: for example, I mustn't kill or steal or lie to obtain the required resources).¹⁸ What Kant calls the strict or 'narrow' obligations of the moral law (determined by the categorical imperative) give me rigid rules for action; but the wider obligations of what Kant calls 'ethics' leave, he says, a 'latitude for free choice'.¹⁹ Thus we do have a duty to cultivate our talents, and also a duty to 'cultivate morality in ourselves', but such duties, says Kant, are 'merely ethical, that is, duties of *wide* obligation':

No rational principle prescribes *how far* one should go in cultivating one's capacities (in enlarging or correcting one's capacity for understanding, i.e. in acquiring knowledge or skill). Then too, the different situations in which human beings may find themselves make a man's choice of the occupation for which he should cultivate his talents very much a matter for him to decide as he chooses.²⁰

At first sight, this appears to sidestep some important questions. The choice of whether to develop my career in a philosophical direction, rather than, say, as a hospital orderly, may indeed be up to me; but the pursuit of philosophy entails my expending considerable energy in areas which may enrich my own life, but which make a marginal contribution to the lives of most others (many of whom are in urgent need and would benefit from just that time and attention lavished on philosophical research) – not to mention my drawing on the hardly luxurious but nonetheless comparatively comfortable infrastructure that supports a modern Western academic lifestyle. In approaching this sort of problem, Kant again seems to invoke the idea of *latitude*:

It is impossible to assign determinate limits to the extent [to which I ought to sacrifice a part of my welfare to that of others]. How far it should extend depends, in large part, on what each person's true needs are in view of his sensibilities, and it must be left to each to decide this for himself. For, a maxim of promoting others' happiness at the sacrifice of one's own happiness, one's true needs, would conflict with itself if it were made a universal law. Hence this duty is only a *wide* one: the duty has in it a latitude for doing more or less, and no specific limits can be assigned to what should be done.²¹

The phrase 'left to decide for himself' may appear to make the extent to which one should divest oneself of surplus resources within the arbitrary power of an individual to settle at whim – a procedure that might seem too capricious to carry any normative weight. Note, however, that a freedom to decide a question of extent, or degree, does not imply a completely unfettered discretion. As Kant earlier puts it, 'a wide duty is not to be taken as permission to make exceptions to the maxim of actions, but only as permission to limit one's maxim of duty by another (for example, love of one's neighbour in general by love of one's

¹⁸ Bernard Gert makes the interesting and important point that these [Kantian] prohibitions are such that it is possible to follow them with complete impartiality: 'If I do not do the prohibited kind of action, I am not violating the rule with regard to any moral agent, so I am acting impartially with respect to these moral rules with respect to a group large enough to include all moral agents.' 'Impartiality and Morality', typescript.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* [*Metaphysic der Sitten*, 1797], *Doctrine of Virtue* [*Tugendlehre*], Introduction, §vii (Ak 6: 390). Transl. in M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.153. 'Ak' = *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, Akademie edition Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900–).

²⁰ *Doctrine of Virtue*, Introduction, §viii (Gregor, p. 155; Ak 6:392).

²¹ *Doctrine of Virtue*, Introduction, § viii (Gregor, p. 156: Ak 6:393).

parents).²² The duty of beneficence remains a genuine and binding duty, which I cannot evade in my life, even if it may legitimately be subject to limits in any specific instance.²³

In order properly to unravel the Kantian take on these matters, we have to recognize the two poles that according to Kant determine the privileged sphere of my own self-development. He insists on the one hand, that a maxim of complete self-sacrifice could not be a rational, that is consistent, universal maxim; but on the other hand, that the duty of beneficence, though not of unrestricted scope, is a genuine, rationally binding duty. To take the second first, Kant argues that beneficence, doing good to others, must be a duty, because, ‘since our self-love cannot be separated from our need to be loved (helped in case of need) by others as well, we therefore make ourselves an end for others; and the only way this maxim can be binding is through ... our will to make others our ends as well’.²⁴ This is a line well known from other parts of Kant’s moral philosophy, and needs little comment or justification. Essentially, it is a variant of the truism, no man is an island. Human vulnerability and interdependence is such that I cannot honestly deny my potential need to call on the assistance of others; and in the light of that, I cannot rationally isolate myself from a potential call for me to respond to their needs. Yet to set against this, Kant also insists on the other pole of his argument, namely that a rule of total sacrifice of one’s own needs would be rationally self-defeating: the maxim ‘promote others’ happiness at the cost of sacrificing one’s own true needs’ would ‘conflict with itself’.

Why should this be? Mere universalizability (‘Could it be willed as a universal maxim?’) does not satisfactorily explain it;²⁵ but there is an alternative Kantian explanation available. Kant once famously said that it would be better that human beings should no longer walk the earth than that justice should be allowed to perish.²⁶ For very different reasons, but in somewhat analogous manner, the Kantian thought in this present case is that there would be no point left to human life if human beings did not exercise their unique capacity to set themselves goals and projects, and to pursue them without fear of their being subject to wholesale dissolution in the name of some impersonal good. It is, in Kant’s words, a ‘duty in itself’ to cultivate those capacities by which the animal is ‘first raised into the human being.’ Embarking on chosen goals and projects in this way is the essence of our very humanity.²⁷ This, to put it in somewhat solemn language, is the source of the dignity common to all human vocations, which, from this point of view, are all equal. They differ according to individual circumstance; but none should be wasted, because all are valuable.²⁸

²² *Doctrine of Virtue*, Introduction, §vii (Gregor, p. 153: Ak 6:390).

²³ Brad Hooker, though coming from very different theoretical territory from Kant, makes a similar point about the duties of beneficence requiring to be discharged *over a lifetime* (as opposed to on any given occasion). *Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Ch. 8.

²⁴ *Doctrine of Virtue*, Introduction §viii, 2 (Gregor p. 156: Ak 6:393).

²⁵ As has often been observed, to ask ‘*What if everyone did x?*’ cannot be a satisfactory test for the morality of an action of type x, since it would rule out, for example, shopping or going to the bank on a Tuesday (which, if everyone did it, would cause chaos). The test therefore has to be modified to be something like ‘*What if everyone was prepared to x under appropriate circumstances and taking into account the likely behaviour patterns of others?*’; but in that case there seems nothing contradictory or absurd about adopting a maxim of sacrificing oneself when appropriate circumstances demand it.

²⁶ *Metaphysics of Morals, Doctrine of Right [Rechtslehre]*, Part II, §49E.

²⁷ ‘The capacity to set oneself an end ... is what characterises humanity (as distinguished from animality).’ *Doctrine of Virtue*, Introduction §viii, 1. (Gregor 154: Ak 6:392).

²⁸ Substitute ‘Christian’ for ‘human’, and the last two sentences in the above paragraph are an almost exact quotation from a discussion of the idea of vocation by Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II) in *Rise, Let Us Be On our Way! [Wstancie, Chodźmy!]*, 2004] (London: Cape, 2004), p.37. For the requirement that ‘nothing be wasted’, cf. John 6:12. Kant himself of course did not use the language of vocation, preferring to preserve a highly secular and rationalistic tone here as in so much (though

We may thus draw from Kant's discussion a broad framework for addressing the 'problem of the extent' – the limits of an individual's legitimate use of time and resources on self-development. On the one hand the individual does not have *carte blanche*: she may not insulate herself from the duty of beneficence. But on the other hand her very humanity places her within an inalienable zone of latitude which must allow space for rational choices relating to individual character formation and self-improvement.

4. *Self-development or self-creation?*

To sum up so far: I have sketched the notion of an 'auto-tamieutic perspective' from which each of us can discern a set of personal goals that are ethically immune to wholesale dissolution in the name of some externally defined goal; and I have suggested, partly following Kant, that the possibility of being able to take up such a perspective is inherent to my status as a human being. But an important caveat now needs to be entered about the interpretation of the framework so far invoked.

I have already underlined the dangers of the ideal of autonomy, if this is taken to mean that humans have the power somehow to create value in their lives, or to determine the validity of projects simply by an exercise of will. The normative status of an 'auto-tamieutic' zone ultimately makes sense only against a background of objective value, that is to say the existence of a good or goods which are logically independent of my actual preferences and choices. Thus, forms of 'preference utilitarianism' which make the good dependent on what people want, or forms of Kantianism which make the good simply a function of what can without inconsistency be chosen as a goal, are both, in my view, ethically unstable; what they lack is the anchor of a substantive theory of the good – a substantive account of the kinds of things human beings must, whether they like it or not, be directed towards if they are to achieve fulfilment.

Our unique human ability to set ourselves projects and goals is of no value in itself if those projects and goals are bad. And the development by each of us of our unique individual set of talents is of no value unless they are *bona fide* talents, that is to say, genuine gifts whose development and exercise is, independently of what we might contingently happen to want for this or that purpose, genuinely productive of human good.

At this point someone might object to the whole concept of stewardship, presupposed here and throughout this paper, on the grounds that it tacitly presupposes or logically requires a religious worldview – involving the idea (roughly) that our 'talents' are divinely bestowed gifts which we are responsible to a higher power for developing properly. I do myself happen to hold that a theistic framework provides an appropriate, perhaps *the* appropriate, metaphysical framework for an objectivist view of moral values and a substantive theory of the good.²⁹ But even if one were to concede the falsity of the religious framework, thereby judging it to be merely a human fiction, this would not automatically evacuate the value and significance from the ethical concepts involved in such a framework.³⁰ The concept of stewardship may still carry a series of important moral insights which can readily be acknowledged even from a thoroughgoing secular perspective. To spell them out: (i) a person's talents are abilities that are naturally fitted for the production of some good (as someone with an ear for music is better able to make beautiful sounds than her tone-deaf

not all) of his moral philosophy. Nevertheless, his conception of self-development and commitment to rationally chosen goals as part of our human birthright seems to me far from wholly discontinuous with the long tradition of religious thought which centres around the concepts of gift and vocation.

²⁹ At the very least one may plausibly regard a theistic metaphysics and an objectivist ethics as 'mutually supportive', to borrow the notion developed (albeit in connection with a distinctly unorthodox form of theism) by Tim Mulgan ('How should impartialists think about God', typescript).

³⁰ See footnote 3, above.

counterpart); (ii) they are not entirely of the individual's own making (they involve a good measure of what is often called 'moral luck'); and (iii) their use is not wholly within the autonomous power of the possessor to develop or abrogate at will. The last point may perhaps seem questionable from a secular viewpoint: to call me a steward suggests I am responsible to a higher authority; but if there is no such authority, is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? I take the parable of the talents to provide an answer to this which the secularist cannot in good faith dismiss. The servant who simply buried his one talent in the ground was indeed blameworthy – for laziness, for timidity, or simply for wasting a precious resource. Irrespective of whether one sees the gifts of nature as divinely bestowed or as the result of a genetic and environmental lottery, I see no way round these intuitions. The commonly heard phrase 'It's my life' is true and important if taken to mean that I have an inalienable responsibility for how I develop and direct it; but if said with the appropriating voice of the petulant ego "It's mine and I can do what I wanna" (that is, I may legitimately use it any way I want), it is just false.

Alexander Nehamas, in his recent book *The Art of Living*, talks about the need to 'establish a mode of life that is appropriate for [each particular individual] and not necessarily for anyone else'.³¹ Invoking the ancient Socratic ideal of 'care of the self', he argues that each of us should be on a quest to find that unique mode of living that expresses who we truly are. In itself this is fine: there is a great multiplicity and diversity in the human character, and each of us has to search to realize the special pattern of self-development that arises from our distinctive blend of talents and opportunities. But as it featured in Socrates' talk of 'care of the self', this ideal had a deeply moral dimension (Socrates' 'inner voice' is the voice of courage, of determination, of integrity); yet in Nehamas it becomes the far more open-ended claim that 'everyone's life [can] become a work of art'³² – an idea that seems (like the Nietzschean model that inspired it) to risk exalting originality and autonomous will at the expense of all else.

'Care of the self' is thus a highly ambiguous notion. In one sense it invokes self-examination and self-improvement: in the tradition inherited from Augustine, this is the essentially humble or confessional project of uncovering the depths of one's true nature (a nature one did not create), so as to purge what is defective and develop a truly fulfilled and abundant human life, oriented towards the good. In quite another sense, the sense that comes to dominate Nehamas's approach, it becomes the project of 'self-creation', an ideal that starts to look increasingly arrogant and anarchic: it requires its exponent, as Nehamas puts it, to 'dislodge what was in place as the good and the true in order to find a place for himself, for his *own* truth and goodness'.³³ The idea of self-stewarding which I have been exploring in this paper is radically at odds with this morally suspect and philosophically problematic vision.³⁴ What self-stewarding presupposes instead is something that is found in many

³¹ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 105.

³² Nehamas, *Art of Living*, p. 177.

³³ Nehamas, *Art of Living*, p. 183 (emphasis supplied).

³⁴ Morally suspect because it led Nietzsche to argue (terrifyingly) that the exalted superman should steel himself against the 'weak' impulses of compassion towards the vulnerable; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil [Jenseits von Gut und Böse]*, 1886], §37. Philosophically problematic since I cannot make something valuable by choosing or willing it (as if I could make cardboard nutritious by deciding to eat it); indeed, this idea precisely puts the cart before the horse, since in reality my choices or acts of will can be worthwhile only in so far as their objects already have independent value. I am of course aware that these summary comments broach enormously complex issues and would require extended argumentation in order to be properly supported.

traditional religiously oriented philosophers, but which is also increasingly found in recent secular work on ethics³⁵ a firmly objectivist conception of the good for humankind.

5. *Individual motivation and wider concern*

Even if self-discovery and self-formation are related to an objective structure of human goods, we are still left with the problem of striking a balance between self-concern and wider concern: how much weight should I give to those self-developmental goods which loom so large from the perspective of my own particular self-responsibility, as against the goods of others, which from a more impartial perspective may seem to cry out for more urgent attention. At its crudest, how much should ‘care for self’ subtract from my response to others in distress? The Kantian ideas discussed earlier give us a useful ethical framework for situating the problem, but do not in the end offer any normative procedure for tackling it.³⁶

I doubt if ultimately there can be any simple philosophical template for resolving this.³⁷ The Western moral tradition is remarkably unhelpful in this area.³⁸ Aristotelian ethics, full of insights into the structure of individual virtue, simply fails to acknowledge an impartial perspective from which one might advert to the wider needs of humanity as a whole: Aristotle’s good life is the good life within the closed circle of membership of the city state. The nearest he gets to glimpsing a more impartialist perspective is in his use of the striking phrase *allos autos* (‘another self’) when discussing the status of a friend – though of course here he is still confining himself to the strictly limited sphere of private affection.³⁹ In somewhat similar vein, the Hebrew Bible, in Leviticus,⁴⁰ introduces the ethically resonant requirement to love one’s neighbour *as oneself* – though the term ‘neighbour’ still carries its

³⁵ See for example, R. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and (from another direction) P. Bloomfield, *Moral Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁶ Running through this whole question, moreover there is a certain problematic slippage between what might be shown about ‘us’ as human beings, and what might be thought to apply to me personally. For example, it might be true that *our* lives as human beings reach their most valuable form if, on the one hand, we set ourselves personal goals and projects, and on the other, we extend our concern to others. But how does that block either (a) the hyper-altruistic thought that I should sacrifice the value of *my* life to realize value in the lives of others, or (b) the hyper-egoistic thought that I should benefit myself most by not realizing that value? I owe these questions to an anonymous Oxford University Press reader. I explore one approach to answering (a) in ‘The Ethics of Self-Concern’; an approach to tackling (b) is outlined in the remainder of the present paper, though I would not claim that it does more than indicate a possible strategy for a response.

³⁷ That suggested by Liam Murphy, that the duties of benevolence are limited by the extent of non-compliance with those duties among the population at large, is aptly criticized by Michael Ridge as too lenient (since it implies, counter-intuitively, that we have no duty to pick up at least some of the slack caused by others’ ignoring their duties). See L. Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and M. Ridge, ‘Fairness and Non-Compliance’, present volume, Ch. 9, below.

³⁸ Whether the Eastern tradition is any more helpful is a moot point. The Buddha found it necessary to withdraw from human society in to achieve personal enlightenment – though we are told that he subsequently went back into the world, out of compassion for his fellow humans still trapped in the world of illusion. However, the relevant ‘illusion’, on the Buddhist view, turns out to be the belief that any individual selves exist, so what is ultimately involved in the Buddhist vision is not so much a balance between individual and wider good as a denial of ultimate significance to *any* individual life. This might be thought of as impartialism, or rather impersonalism, carried to the extreme; though it seems to carry a heavy cost – that of enjoining us to let go of the very projects of commitment and rational self-development that are (as in Kant’s vision) our human birthright.

³⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* [c. 325 BC], Bk IX, Ch. 8.

⁴⁰ Leviticus 19:18.

literal meaning, and does not extend outside the tribal community. Later, in the Hellenistic period, Stoic ethics contains hints of a widening concern, with the idea of moral principles as ‘laws of human nature, transcending all accidents of birth and local identities.’⁴¹ The precise import of this idea is, however, disputed among scholars of Stoicism, and it is probably only later, in early Christian thought, that we see a decisive shift to a genuinely universalist perspective. Jesus of Nazareth construes the term ‘neighbour’ in a very wide sense – the parable of the Good Samaritan, produced in answer to the question ‘Who is my neighbour?’ seems to make a neighbour anyone in need of assistance.⁴² Despite this significant shift, however, the problem of balance between self-concern and wider concern is left in the end unresolved in Christianity: the actual teachings and actions of Christ continue to reflect a special concern for his own (compare the stories about his weeping for Lazarus, or the particular relationship with the ‘beloved’ disciple), while at the same time advocating a wider and more universal vision (as in the command to ‘leave your father and mother’ in order to follow the gospel).⁴³

The old question of balance thus recurs, and maybe it is wrong to search for a philosophical formula or algorithm that could provide a neat solution. What can perhaps be done instead is to see how, on the level of motivation or ethical formation, the individual might be led to widen his perspective from that of self-stewarding to something broader. One way of doing this might be by arguing that, despite initial appearances, partialistic concerns and wider concerns turn out to be susceptible of *integration* – that is, that they relate to interconnected rather than to conflicting goals.⁴⁴ By way of a coda to this paper, I shall offer a very brief sketch of such an argument. Just as Aristotle observed that the good of bridle-making cannot be disentangled from the good of horsemanship,⁴⁵ so, in somewhat analogous manner, I shall suggest that the realization by each human being of his or her individual goals cannot be conceived in isolation from the realization by others of their goals.

Suppose someone asks: ‘given that I am happy developing my own character and talents, and working for the good of those immediately close to me, what reason have I for

⁴¹ A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), §67 (discussing the supposed ‘internationalism’ of Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, and citing sources from Plutarch and Cicero, but with reservations as to how far these ideas can be traced back to Zeno himself).

⁴² Matthew 22: 37-40;

⁴³ For Jesus’ special love for Lazarus see John 11: 35-36; for the ‘beloved disciple’, see e.g. John 19: 26. For the injunction to forsake one’s family for the sake of the gospel see Matthew 19:20; Luke 14:26.

⁴⁴ In an earlier attempt to explore this idea I suggested that self-fulfilment and working for the fulfilment of others were contingently interlinked, by relying in Humean-style on empirical facts about human character formation. Although there are no general guarantees, so ran the argument, the typical psychological profile of at least very many human beings is such that successful engagement in meaningful projects of personal involvement will progressively tend to lead them to feel the importance of making sure as many others as possible have the means to do the same. (J. Cottingham, ‘The Ethical Credentials of Partiality’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XCVIII (1997-8), pp. 1-21.) Perhaps such a contingent claim may broadly be true; plausible variants of it are to be found in many of the psychology-oriented ethicists of the early-modern period, for example Pierre Nicole, *De la charité et de l’amour propre* [1675] (excerpted in J. B. Schneewind (ed.), *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Vol. II, pp. 370ff.). But I now think that a proper account of the relationship between self-concern and wider concern needs to be underpinned by much heavier materials – by a teleological thesis about human nature and its goals, and a metaphysical thesis about the objectivity (and perhaps even the essential unity) of goodness

⁴⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I, Ch. 1.

adopting a more impartial perspective, and devoting more of my resources to the wider world?’ To reply, ‘you just ought to, because they need your help’ (or, in the favoured modern jargon, ‘the fact that they need your help gives you *reason* to help them’), may end up seeming more like browbeating than answering the question. For the questioner still wants to know why that so-called ‘external’ reason gives them an incentive to offer their assistance.

I argued earlier that choices have normative status only if they are directed towards the good; and that the good cannot be a free-floating notion, but must be tied to something like the fulfilment of our nature as human beings. For the individualist, for example the (Gauguin-style) lone artist, who when reminded of the needs of others asks ‘Why should all this concern me?’, a small but significant point of leverage has now appeared. For such an individual is working to develop his talents not presumably as a random piece of compulsive behaviour, but because he seeks the fulfilment of his creative nature.⁴⁶ The ‘duty of genius’, the development of talents, is taken by him to be good for just this reason. But now, having gone this far along a teleological route, he cannot easily restrict his purview to that of his own individual fulfilment. For he is not some abstract Cartesian ego, but a *human being*; and human beings are not pre-social entities but are (as Aquinas insists, following Aristotle)⁴⁷ intrinsically social beings. The fostering and development of his own resources therefore has to involve him, whether he likes it or not, in close interaction with immediate others. But once that is acknowledged, it will no longer be possible to think of the good as compartmentalised into individual packages of fulfilment: the cooperation of others, and indeed their potential approbation or disapprobation, is automatically involved in any such interactions. Thus the good at which the artist aims includes the expression of insights that can be recognised and appreciated by others. There is a reciprocal network here: the desired recognition and appreciation, are integrally linked to the pursuit of the good aimed at by the artist; and the desired responses are the responses of others embarked on similar teleological paths, themselves striving to fulfil the human nature shared by all.

The argument here rests, essentially, on the nature of human goods, which, because of the kind of species we are, and because of the types of good that fulfil our nature, require not just the manipulation or use of others, nor even just their willing co-operation in providing the circumstances we need for our own pursuits, but their *involvement as responsive and developed human agents*. The musician by the nature of her activities requires responsive and artistically sensitive listeners – so the good she pursues cannot be isolated from their good. To summarise then: the development of our personal resources involves us in the pursuit of the good; the good so pursued is part of the necessarily linked good of an essentially social species; hence the more zealously we pursue the good, and the better we come to understand it, the more our self-concern will necessarily be implicated in a wider concern for other humans.

But could not one draw a line, and include for consideration only those within a closed circle of like-minded cognoscenti, leaving the world at large to go hang?⁴⁸ Whether

⁴⁶ I do not of course mean that the creativity is necessarily something self-absorbed or introverted; in most cases, the artist’s characteristic focus and concentration in seeking the fulfilment of his creative nature is on his art rather than on himself.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Politics* [325 BC], Bk. I, Ch. 2; Aquinas, *De regimine principum* [1265-7], Bk I, Ch. 1.

⁴⁸ Yet did not Aristotle, for instance, fulfil his human nature, even though he failed to extend the kind of respect he accorded to his fellow citizens to, for example, his slaves? (I owe this objection to one of OUP’s anonymous assessors for this volume.) This is a less extreme example of the imaginary case I have discussed elsewhere of the Nazi concentration camp guard, who (we are invited to suppose) goes home each evening to enjoy a fulfilling life with his friends and family. My response is, in very crude summary, that the compartmentalization and blunting of sensibilities involved in such blinkered modes of living is, in the end, incompatible with the full flowering of the subject’s humanity. See

such partialism is psycho-ethically viable seems to me to depend partly on the stage of development which the human race has reached. If we are considering Aristotle, who knew nothing of the conditions in central Africa, and could have done virtually nothing about them even had he known, there is little sense (given that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’) of talking about either his duty or his motivation to respond to the relevant human needs. But for us today, who have both the knowledge and the means to help, it *does* make sense: the wider our power and knowledge extends, the greater the scope of our responsibility.⁴⁹ What is more, in the pursuit of our activities we are, via the global economy, every day implicated in literally hundreds of planet-wide networks of mutual exchange and dependency. There is no going back, no removing this knowledge from our minds. To shut ourselves off from the wider good of others, of *any* others on the planet, would thus involve a wilful blunting of our sensibilities and responsiveness – the very sensibilities and responsiveness that our own personal creative projects, since we are human beings, inescapably require.

Though the schema offered here does I think offer the beginnings of a motivational link between self-concern and wider concern, it evidently remains resistible, in the sense that there is nothing that compels any given person to internalize it. Indeed, given the extent of human selfishness and other weakness, any hope that it could be widely and deeply internalised might seem either naively optimistic, or to rest more on faith than on reason – and perhaps it does. But if so, it is a faith that has had numerous secular incarnations, in concepts such as ‘the human family’ or ‘the brotherhood of man’, which command widespread admiration irrespective of religious belief or its absence. What these notions point towards, I take it, is the fact that our very nature as human beings cannot, in the end, find proper fulfilment unless the care and respect we learn close to home is extended throughout the human community. Learning how to steward our own individual resources is one of the first and most indispensable parts of the ethical formation of a human being; truly recognizing and responding to the need for each one of our fellow humans to do likewise is its inescapable corollary.

further J. Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), Ch. 1, final three sections, and (for the question of whether Don Giovanni’s selfish life was fulfilling) section 3 of Cottingham, ‘Demandingness, Moral Development and Moral Philosophy’, forthcoming in T. Chappell (ed.), *The Problem of Moral Demandingness* (London: Palgrave, 2009).

⁴⁹ Compare the following: ‘Thus, far from thinking that works produced by man’s own talent and energy are in opposition to God’s power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator, Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God’s grace and the flowering of His own mysterious design. For the greater man’s power becomes, the farther his individual and community responsibility extends. Hence it is clear that men are not deterred by the Christian message from building up the world, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows, but that they are rather more stringently bound to do these very things.’ *Gaudium et spes*, Second Vatican Council Document [1965], §34.