KEMANUSIAAN

KEMANUSIAAN 15 (2008), 41–48

The Moral Limits of Impartiality

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Abstract. Our moral perspective should not be limited to the impartial concern for all who share a common humanity with us. It should also include the value of partiality embedded in personal relationships of love and friendship. These personal relationships give shape and meaning to our lives, and they also provide us with a sense of identity. The values that underpin our common humanity are based on the universal features of all human beings, including those who are strangers to us. On the other hand, our special relationships are dependent upon features that distinguish our friends and loved ones from others. These relationships grow out of shared experiences and commitments, and are the products of specific times and places. A balanced moral life will not seek to place one set of values over the other, but will instead have two distinct spheres for both an impartial love of humanity, as well as for the partialities of our particular attachments and special relationships.

Keywords and phrases: Self-interest, Impartiality, Common humanity, Cosmopolitanism, Personal relationships

The common enemy of all ethical systems is the narrow and relentless pursuit of self-interest at the exclusion of everyone else. However, there is much disagreement about how this common enemy is to be defeated.

Those who consider themselves realists seek to build an ethical system on self-interest itself, although it is a self-interest that is open, enlightened, and meets the basic ethical requirement in that it applies to all agents in relevantly similar circumstances. Thus, universal egoism is sometimes regarded as the only ethical system that is compatible with genuine human motivation of self-interest. We see several versions of this. One version, associated with some economists and their vocal followers, maintains that the pursuit of self-interest will maximise the common good. Providence, the "invisible hand," or some other convenient mechanism will ensure the common good because there is a harmony of individual interests. This view is also endorsed by some supporters of business, who argue that greed is good, and that the true business of business is business. This view is also supported at the national level with a theory of international

relations, in which each sovereign country is justified in pursuing its self-interest exclusively.

Even though there is a place for enlightened self-interest at various levels of individual and social life, universal egoism is ultimately not a satisfactory system. The harmony of interests can occur occasionally, though often fleetingly and through unreliable good luck. Sometimes, instead of harmony, there is conflict of interest. Enlightened self-interest would require us to accommodate the interests of others who may wish us good or ill. Unless we are prepared to scratch their backs, they would not reciprocate. However, there are many others whose help and co-operation we do not need, whom we would not consider even if solely dictated by an enlightened self-interest. These others include future generations whom we can harm by polluting and exploiting the environment to maximise our benefit, but who cannot retaliate. We can cause them great harm by our self-interest, but they can only think ill of us after we have long passed. Even among our contemporaries, we can distinguish between the powerful, whose interests we must take into account, and the weak and vulnerable, whom we can easily ignore, if self-interest were our sole guide. Thus, some corrupt business supporters have tried to justify profit maximisation strategies that inflict grave harm on the weak and defenceless, often in distant lands.

Clearly, any sound ethical system must move beyond self-interest. Though there are many different options, I want to focus on two different approaches. The first is a theory known as comprehensive cosmopolitanism, which maintains that our ethical concerns must always be motivated by an impartial consideration for the interests of all. The second approach emphasizes personal relationships with particular individuals, such as loved ones and close friends. These relationships prompt a degree of partiality that is expressive of a desirable human life.

Many enlightened thinkers today seem to think that the comprehensive cosmopolitan approach is the natural direction for moral progress. They think that individuals begin by first acknowledging the moral claims of members of their families, and then their moral concerns expand outward to include friends, work associates, acquaintances, compatriots, and then all of humanity. Some moral reformers want to expand this moral circle even further to include all sentient animals. Moreover, there are some environmentalists who maintain that our moral concern must be extended to the natural environment, which should be understood not as an instrument for satisfying human interests, but as an entity worthy of moral concern in its own right.

However, I wish to focus here on the comprehensive cosmopolitan theory that stretches the moral circle to the whole of humanity, though not beyond that. The theory regards our common humanity as the sole basis of ethical concern, which

cuts across all personal and social divisions that are considered irrelevant and arbitrary from the moral point of view. Why, for example, should the pain felt by a total stranger carry less moral weight than the similar pain suffered by a loved one, a friend, or an associate? This perspective is most powerful when it is directed at those social and political structures that discriminate based on race, caste, or class, relegating some to a less than human status. For example, under a system of chattel slavery, slaves are treated as the property of their masters, just like houses and furniture. Therefore, a slave who runs away from his master is guilty of theft, as he has stolen an object, himself, that truly belongs to the master.

I have no objection to the comprehensive cosmopolitan theory when it is used to condemn such practices as slavery and racism. Partialities shown towards a favoured majority group without any special justification are simply immoral. However, the comprehensive cosmopolitan approach also rejects the partialities that ordinary people show in some contexts towards their loved ones and their friends. They want moral agents to be completely impartial in the similar interests of all people, and to display an impartial, universal benevolence. For example, in the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, the eighteenth-century political theorist, William Godwin, presents a moral dilemma between saving the life of the socially valuable Archbishop Fenelon, or his humble valet. Since saving the Archbishop would yield greater reward, the right choice for Godwin would be to save the Archbishop's life. For Godwin, that answer remains true even if it should turn out that the valet is no stranger to you, but your beloved father or brother. He declares, "Justice would have taught us to save the life of Fenelon at the expense of the other. What magic is there in the pronoun 'my,' that should justify us in over-turning the decisions of impartial truth?" (Monro 1972, 189).

What is wrong with comprehensive cosmopolitanism is its unlimited adoption of the impartial perspective. We are required to set aside all our particular attachments and personal relationships in order to view the interests of all from the perspective of an impartial spectator, unencumbered by partialities to specific individuals. From that perspective, it is irrelevant that someone is my mother or father, or a beloved spouse or child. There are, of course, contexts in which such an impartial perspective is not only perfectly appropriate, but also required. For example, if I were a public official dispensing public funds to needy persons, then I should distribute based on the greatest need, and treat any special relationships I might have with others as irrelevant. If I feel I cannot do this, I should resign. Sometimes there are also institutional arrangements governing the performance of duties by public officials that prohibit them from acting in situations where there may be a possible conflict of interests. Certainly, public officials who favour their friends and loved ones are rightly condemned and

punished for corruption. However, it is a different matter when I act, not as a public official, but as a private individual, deciding whom to help with my own legitimately acquired resources or my spare time. Here, the opposition to comprehensive cosmopolitanism is widespread across many different cultures, both in the West and in the East. Whether it is "my" family or "my" community, many people who are otherwise very different believe there is, some magic in the pronoun "my" that Godwin so forcefully repudiates.

The magic can be traced to various sources, and I shall mention two of them. First, personal relationships give shape and meaning to our lives. Without them, we are adrift without much motivation, and little keeps us going. We find a dramatic illustration of this in the life of the nineteenth-century philosopher, John Stuart Mill. At an early age, Mill was given a very intensive education by his father, James Mill, in part to prepare him to be the torchbearer of social and political reform. These reforms were later underpinned by the doctrine of utilitarianism, which judges actions as right or wrong by whether they maximize happiness, giving equal weight to the similar happiness or suffering of all persons. Mill acquired a vast body of knowledge at a very early age. He worked and studied hard while other children of his age played and enjoyed friendships. In childhood, his advanced knowledge made him much more learned than many adults. At the age of 15, he read Bentham, the founding father of utilitarianism, and a close friend of his father. This had an immediate impact on how he viewed the world and his own life. As he subsequently described it in his *Autobiography* "…I had what might truly be called an object in life; to be a reformer of the world. My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object" (Mill 1981, 137). Nevertheless, five years later, in one thoughtful moment, Mill asked himself whether he would be happy if all the reforms he wanted were realised. The answer was, unfortunately, "No!" With this realization, "…the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to be found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be excitement in the means? I had nothing left to live for" (Mill 1981, 138). This sent Mill into a state of depression. When he finally recovered, he cultivated his feelings through the reading of poetry, which his erudite education had neglected.

There is no doubt that many factors contributed to Mill's mental breakdown, including sheer overwork. However, a likely significant reason was the absence of the social activities in which children normally participate that lead them to form particular attachments and personal relationships. Matters were made worse for Mill by his father's dominance in his childhood and a mother whom he did not even mention in his *Autobiography*, presumably because he did not think that she played a role in his rapid, precocious, all-engrossing intellectual development. He had many siblings but his relationship with them was like a teacher with his

students. Being the eldest child, his father entrusted to him the education of his siblings, and he was responsible for their progress. Therefore, it was the impersonal doctrine of utilitarianism, and the causes it dictated, that gave meaning and structure to his early life. However, this could not be sustained. Some deeper personal relationship was also needed; without it, his life simply fell apart. Later, after his recovery from depression, he formed a deep personal attachment to Harriet Taylor, whom he married after the death of her husband.

Isaiah Berlin puts a gloss on this point about the human need for specific attachments by extending such attachments to include culture. According to Berlin, cosmopolitanism is empty: "People can't develop unless they belong to a culture … where men and women are not products of a culture, where they don't have kith and kin and feel closer to some people than to others, where there is no native language – that would lead to a tremendous desiccation of everything that is human" (Gardels 1996, 96). For Berlin, belonging to a culture is important for human flourishing.

Apart from giving shape and meaning to our lives, our special relationships and attachments are also crucial for our sense of identity (i.e., our conception of who we are). We often define ourselves in terms of the roles we play, as well as the culture, society, or groups of which we are members. These are sources of powerful motivations, partly because the motivations they generate are not completely detached from those of self-interest. Yet, these cannot be simply equated with self-interest. Others with whom we are identified through special relationships and attachments give us a sense of having wider interests. Nevertheless, our identification with others is not so seamless that there is no possibility of conflict, and there is the occasional need for some sacrifice. There are times when a person has to give up her individual well-being for the sake of the well-being of a loved one. Even when she does this willingly and without hesitation, there remains an understanding of some loss of her own welfare. For example, a woman who gave up her career in order to look after her children or her elderly parents may feel the loss. Nevertheless, in spite of the incompleteness of the identification, our relationships and attachments to others generate powerful emotions and motivations for action. For example, we will be partial in our personal dealings with our loved ones. This is what being in such a loving relationship involves, and to require us to be impartial to all in every situation is to ask us to give up the relationship. Of course, it does not follow from this that any attachment to others and any form of personal relationship is morally acceptable. We can still distinguish between desirable and undesirable forms of identification by the nature of the social forms of life and associations that embody or express each such identification respectively. Some of these, such as racism, involve unwarranted prejudices and hostility to certain groups of people. It is better that these forms be removed, along with the various discriminations.

What about those special relationships and attachments that are desirable? The cosmopolitan might acknowledge their importance to our sense of identity, meaning, and purpose, while at the same time seeking to extend and enlarge their scope. This presupposes that we can embrace the demands of a universal love of humanity and the requirements of impartiality, while leaving in tack the core of the rest of our lives. However, it is clear that, on one hand, there are radically different bases for universal love; while, on the other hand, there are the partial love and attachments that define and structure much of our daily lives. The love of humanity is based on the generic features shared by all human beings, whereas what attracts us to particular persons and what generate special relationships are features that distinguish them from others. Many relationships grow out of shared experiences and commitments, which are the products of specific times and places. People are also drawn together by specific elements of character and personality at moments in their lives when they are still unengaged in the relevant respects, and therefore receptive to one another.

The impartial love of humanity does not require us to like particular, displeasing characteristics of individuals. It is not their singularity that generates impartial love. Consider this example. On a very hot day, you managed to squeeze into a very crowded bus in Johore Bahru to return to Singapore where there is standing room only. You are jostled on all sides by a sea of humanity. If you turn a bit too much to the right, you will plant a kiss on the heavily powdered face of an excited and loudly talking woman. If you turn a bit too much to the left, you will be under the sweaty, smelly, hairy armpit of a brooding, silent young man. Unless you are rather saintly, it is unlikely that you will form a special relationship with either of them. Yet, you can quite easily include them in your impartial love of humanity because they still have the universal features that entitle them to certain basic rights, which we are all obliged to protect and respect. If you are a public official whose duty is to dispense public funds to needy persons, you should have no difficulty in directing funds to them if they are the neediest, rather than to less needy persons.

Properly understood, universal, impartial love for humanity is not an extension of or a replacement for partial loves. Impartiality and partiality have their proper, separate place in our moral lives. Once we recognize a common humanity, we have a basis for equality of concern and respect, which is the essence of universal and impartial love of humanity. We should be concerned about the welfare of all persons because they are all capable of suffering and have certain basic needs. They also have desires to lead their lives in accordance with their own values and commitments that we should respect if they do not harm others. A certain degree of non-interference, as well as some positive help, is required for people to survive and flourish to a minimal degree. For example, we need food, shelter and some opportunities, and if others can help in these respects with little cost to

themselves, we rightly require them to help. We should not kill, maim, or torture those we do not love, or even those we intensely dislike. We can call these the demands of minimal justice, which, unlike other moral obligations, do not rest on reciprocity, voluntary commitments, or special relationships. In this respect, they are like the requirement not to be cruel to animals, which, as Bentham rightly pointed out, is based simply on the fact that animals can suffer (Bentham 1996, 283).

It is also part of minimal justice that we should tolerate differences between people based on their different conceptions of what they consider to be worthwhile human lives. For example, people hold different religious views relating to the nature of the world and our place in it. Mutual toleration would allow each person to lead his or her own life in accordance with his or her own fundamental values. Toleration does not require the acceptance or endorsement of other people's beliefs and practices. This is clearly impossible when rival beliefs and practices are mutually incompatible. However, mutual toleration acknowledges the right of others to pursue their own conception of what is good in their own lives, without imposing it on unwilling others. Therefore, the social unity built on mutual toleration generates a flourishing diversity in ways of life. This diversity increases when we focus on the moral commitments of special relationships and attachments, in which human beings interact with one another in richness of individual experiences. These relationships and attachments have important places in our lives that cannot be replaced by considerations of minimal justice. There has to be a balance in our ethical lives between the requirements of impartiality and those of partial loves.

It has been suggested that strong personal relationships might even enable us to better meet some of the demands of impartial justice. Thus, Isaiah Berlin quotes the remark of Herder's: "The savage who loves himself, his wife and his child, and his tribe, can find room in his hut for a stranger: the saturated heart of the idle cosmopolitan is a home for no one …" (Berlin 1965, 41). On the other hand, the balance seems to be tilted too much in the direction of personal relationships, as the novelist, E. M. Forster, famously remarked, "If I have to choose between betraying my friend or my country, I hope that I should have the guts to betraying my country" (Forster 1951, 78). This is dangerous because betraying one's country would also involve the betrayal of many people, including the possibility of other friends and loved ones. Moreover, Forster's cult of personal relationships ignores the fact that personal relationships can only flourish in a stable social and political environment, the protection and maintenance of which is a vital element of impartial justice. Our morality must cater to the fullness of our human lives in all its individual and communal richness and diversity. We do not live by our common humanity alone, but neither should we ignore it.

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