

Virtue Ethics, Kantian Ethics, and the “One Thought Too Many” Objection

Marcia Baron

I.

Claims by proponents of virtue ethics that virtue “ethics is a rival to deontological and utilitarian approaches, as interestingly and challengingly different from either as they are from each other,”¹ have met with some skepticism. Kantians (and others) have wondered whether virtue ethics and Kantian ethics are as deeply opposed as some virtue ethicists claim, and if not, whether it might be possible to have a Kantian virtue ethics.² Such reflections were helpful in advancing the debate at a time when virtue ethicists did not provide a very clear picture of just what virtue ethics was, and often presented it primarily in terms of its opposition to Kantian ethics³ and sometimes also to utilitarianism (or, more broadly, consequentialism). The challenges spurred virtue ethicists on to clarify and refine their conception of virtue ethics. In addition, the bar was raised for discussions of Kantian ethics, for as Kantians (myself among them) pointed out various ways in which Kantian ethics seemed to be compatible with virtue ethics⁴ (seemed, because we couldn’t tell

1 Rosalind Hursthouse, 1999, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 2.

2 The same issue can be raised concerning utilitarianism, but my focus here will be on Kantian ethics.

3 They sometimes spoke instead of “deontological ethics” or “deontology”, apparently intending this to be equivalent to or to include Kantian ethics. I think “deontology” a rather unhelpful, because potentially misleading, term, so I’ll stick to the term “Kantian ethics.”

4 I did so primarily in my contribution to *Three Methods of Ethics* (Marcia Baron/Philip Pettit/Michael Slote (eds.), 1997, *Three Methods of Ethics: A Debate*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers) and in a comment I presented on Rosalind Hursthouse’s invited paper, “Applying Virtue Ethics,” at the 1989 Pacific division meeting of the American Philosophical Association. I also explored the issue of just how virtue ethics and Kantian ethics differ in some earlier work (Marcia

exactly what virtue ethics was supposed to be), we corrected some misconceptions about Kantian ethics implicit in the characterizations of virtue ethics.

For some time the problem of ascertaining just what virtue ethics is supposed to be persisted, complicated by the diversity of views. To the extent that it was possible to discern what each proponent of virtue ethics took virtue ethics to be, the proponents seemed to have rather different ideas, though they were united in holding that virtue ethics was opposed to Kantian ethics, and was a viable alternative to the usual options.⁵ An added complication was that others voiced similar criticisms of Kantian ethics and utilitarianism (or contemporary moral theory, or “Enlightenment morality”) without using the label “virtue ethics.” Should they too be considered virtue ethicists?

The possibility that virtue ethics and Kantian ethics are compatible was well worth exploring as long as contemporary virtue ethics remained very hard to pin down. An appropriate response was to lay out the various conceptions of virtue ethics and consider, on each conception, just what the possible variations are. We could then ask, with respect to each conception, whether a Kantian version is possible. If so, we could then conclude that Kantian ethics and virtue ethics were compatible after all, on at least one understanding of virtue ethics.

I believe that there is less value now in exploring that possibility. Thanks especially to the work of Christine Swanton, there is now considerably more clarity about virtue ethics, and therefore far less reason

Baron, 1985a, “The Ethics of Duty / Ethics of Virtue Debate and Its Relevance to Educational Theory”, in: *Educational Theory*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 135–149), and laid out some ways of thinking about virtue ethics in Marcia Baron, 1985b, “Varieties of Ethics of Virtue”, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 47–53.

- 5 Some who place an emphasis on virtue and character (myself included) see such an emphasis as compatible with utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, or both. Partly because of this divide between those who think they are compatible and those who think they are not, it has more recently become common to understand “virtue ethics” more narrowly, so that it does not encompass just any approach that takes virtue and character very seriously, or even every approach that puts its emphasis on virtue or character (or virtue and character). Julia Driver, for instance, clarifies that her project is not (a form of) virtue ethics: “Virtue ethics is the project of basing ethics on virtue evaluation. I reject this approach. This is an essay in virtue theory, since what I am trying to do is give an account of what virtues are” (Julia Driver, 1996, “The Virtues and Human Nature”, in: Roger Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 111–129, note 1).

for Kantians to try to figure out just what virtue ethics is (and what it might be). Of course that might seem only to make the exploration of a possible Kantian virtue ethics easier, not to render it unnecessary or less worthwhile. But as I’ll explain shortly, virtue ethics (as articulated by Swanton) and Kant’s ethics seem pretty clearly incompatible; and this is no surprise, since the characterization of virtue ethics was crafted to rule out Kant’s ethics.

Swanton distinguishes between virtue ethics as a genus and specific conceptions of virtue ethics, each of which is a species of the genus. There is thus an array of species of the genus virtue ethics, among them Neo-Aristotelianism and Swanton’s pluralistic virtue ethics. With this in mind, we can make sense of there being a variety of types of virtue ethics and have no reason to ask which of the various proponents speaks for virtue ethics – provided, that is, that we can see them as linked together by being species of the same genus. What is the genus, of which Neo-Aristotelianism and Swanton’s pluralistic virtue ethics are species? Swanton puts forward the following as a way of characterizing virtue ethics as a genus: “In virtue ethics, the notion of virtue is central in the sense that conceptions of rightness, conceptions of the good life, conceptions of ‘the moral point of view’ and the appropriate demandingness of morality, cannot be understood without a conception of relevant virtues.”⁶

Swanton’s approach is very helpful in that it permits the variation among virtue ethicists that has been evident in the contemporary virtue ethics literature, while at the same time providing an understanding of virtue ethics that unites them. It also leaves room for the development of new species of virtue ethics, or for arguing that a theory not generally seen to be compatible with virtue ethics (the genus) in fact is compatible with it (and perhaps even lends itself nicely to being developed as a version of virtue ethics, i.e., as another species of virtue ethics). Without taking Swanton’s characterization of the genus to have canonical status, I think her approach (including the distinction between the genus and the

6 Christine Swanton, 2003, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 5. Swanton presents this characterization cautiously, prefacing it as follows: “Virtue ethics’ resists precise definition, and rightly so. For as I mentioned, it is frequently observed that virtue ethics in its modern development is still in its infancy. It should not therefore be shackled by preconceived ideas about its progeniture and nature.”

species) the best way, at present, to understand virtue ethics, and in this paper I understand virtue ethics accordingly.

Another respect in which her characterization is helpful is that while fairly generously ecumenical, it is not a catch-all. It does not include under the heading of “virtue ethics” each and every approach that emphasizes character and virtue. That one offers an account of the virtues, or finds it fruitful to capture a lot of what in twentieth century ethics has been (purportedly) captured by talk of particular actions (or states of affairs) by focusing instead on character and qualities of character, is not enough to make one a virtue ethicist. I follow Swanton in using the term “virtue ethics” in a way that marks virtue ethicists off from those who place a considerable emphasis on virtue or offer an account (or theory) of virtue or the virtues, but are not committed to viewing virtue ethics as a distinct kind of normative theory (or, if one prefers not to use the term ‘theory’ here, approach). I do not take “virtue ethicist” to encompass everyone who thinks that virtue and character are neglected in many discussions of ethics and need to be given a more prominent place in ethics and ethical theory. Virtue ethicists put forward virtue ethics (whether as a theory or in an anti-theoretic way) as a rival to utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, and have sought to characterize it in a way that sealed that conclusion.

Keeping in mind the genus as Swanton characterizes it, I think it is safe to say that it would be an unwarranted stretch to view Kant’s ethics as a species of virtue ethics. Not that it would be impossible to force it into that mold; we might argue that while Kant’s conception of rightness can be understood without a conception of such virtues as gratitude [*MM* 6: 455–456]⁷ and modesty (“willing restriction of one’s self-love in view of the self-love of others” [*MM* 6: 462]), it cannot be understood without a conception of the virtue of conscientiousness, or the virtue of being committed to perfect oneself. Or we might classify the good will as a virtue, and thereby ensure the conclusion that a conception of rightness cannot be understood, on Kant’s ethics, without a conception of the relevant virtues (or at least a relevant virtue). The problem with such claims is not that they are false, but that they are forced. Kant does not present the good will as a virtue, and although it is less of a stretch to speak of the virtue of conscientiousness or the virtue of being committed

7 Page numbers refer to the Academy edition. The translations of Kant’s used in this essay are those of Mary J. Gregor, in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

to perfect oneself, he does not present them in quite that way. Nor, more importantly, is it clear that a conception of rightness is impossible without a conception of conscientiousness or being committed to perfect oneself.

In thinking about whether it is valuable to try to merge Kantian ethics and virtue ethics, we should keep in mind that the category “virtue ethics” is one that has been developed quite recently, and for purposes that reflect current issues in contemporary ethics rather than for purposes that Kant had, or that relate helpfully to Kant’s aims. Moreover, as noted, the focus has been on developing a conception of virtue ethics that allows it to be an alternative to – and incompatible with – both utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. This is particularly evident in the work of Michael Slote and Rosalind Hursthouse, and also informs Swanton’s *Virtue Ethics*.⁸

But could we fight this trend – this trend of understanding virtue ethics as an alternative to, and at odds with Kantian ethics (and utilitarianism)? It might be possible. We could develop an account of various Kantian virtues (not necessarily enumerated by Kant), formulating them in such a way as to ensure that they meet Swanton’s criterion. What I doubt is that this would be worthwhile, rather than simply combative. It would make sense only if we think that virtue ethics, as characterized by Swanton, would provide a shape for Kantian ethics that enhances it, and I see no reason to think that it would. In addition, I see no reason to resist the direction that Slote, Hursthouse and Swanton (among others) favor. If they think it valuable to develop various species of virtue ethics that take as their starting point that virtue ethics is a rival to Kantian ethics, I see no need to challenge them and to claim that in fact it is not really a rival to Kantian ethics, or that it need not be.⁹

8 See Hursthouse, 1999; Michael Slote, 1992, *From Morality to Virtue*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Michael Slote, 1997, “Virtue Ethics”, in: Baron/Pettit/Slote, 1997; Michael Slote, 2001, *Morals from Motives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Swanton, 2003.

9 At a time when the claims to distinctness rested on rather vague assertions, and on a seemingly distorted picture of Kantian ethics, it was important to so challenge it, partly to bring out neglected aspects – and the untapped, or under-tapped, potential of Kant’s ethics. The debate has advanced, thanks in part to rejoinders by Kantians who point out that Kant’s ethics does not involve a “big rule” from which all else is deduced; that it is not about rules and actions to the exclusion of virtue and character; that it is not merely about what to do, not about how to be, etc. For one of many works so depicting Kant’s ethics, see Julius

More worthwhile, I think, is to examine the roots of the dissatisfaction that has given rise to contemporary virtue ethics. At least, that is what I find more worthwhile: to address the objections put forward by virtue ethicists (or those loosely in their camp) against Kantian ethics, objections that have not gone away. Contemporary virtue ethics was nourished, perhaps even founded on, dissatisfaction with Kantian ethics. Current conceptions of what virtue ethics is do not reflect that dissatisfaction so much as they reflect a wish to offer virtue ethics as a rival to both Kantian ethics and utilitarianism¹⁰; nonetheless, for some of the leading virtue ethics proponents – in particular, Hursthouse and Slote – the supposed inadequacy of those theories remains a primary reason for developing virtue ethics.

In the remainder of this essay I turn my attention to assessing one very prominent objection to Kantian ethics, the objection that it, along with utilitarianism, places too much value on impartiality. I think it is safe to say that this objection is a major source of the dissatisfaction that gave rise to interest in virtue ethics and is widely held to be a problem besetting Kantian ethics; however, I address it not only for that reason, but also because I find it philosophically intriguing (and because I have already discussed at length elsewhere another objection to Kantian ethics, also philosophically fascinating, that provided some of the momentum for contemporary virtue ethics, the objection that it overemphasizes duty).¹¹ I'll give particular attention to a distillation of that criticism that is frequently appealed (or at least gestured) to, yet has not been articulated very fully: the “one thought too many” objection.

Moravcsik, 1981, “On What We Aim at and How We Live”, in: David Depew (ed.), *The Greeks and the Good Life*, Indianapolis: Hackett University Press, pp. 198–235. For corrections of this picture, see (among others) Marcia Baron, 1995, *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Barbara Herman, 1993, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Onora O'Neill, 1989, *Constructions of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Allen Wood, 1999, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

10 Indeed Swanton's particular version of virtue ethics not only is not hostile to Kant's ethics but draws from Kant, as well as from a number of other thinkers. It opposes Kant's ethics primarily in being emphatically pluralistic.

11 In Baron, 1995, and more recently in Marcia Baron, 2002a, “Acting from Duty”, in: Allen Wood (ed. and trans.), *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 92–110.

II.

I’ll focus initially on the broad claim that impartialist ethics – to use a label often used by critics who favor a (usually neo-Aristotelian) virtue ethics approach – cannot leave room for love and friendship.¹² My hope is to gain a better understanding of the objections (concentrating on them as objections to Kantian ethics) and to determine whether there is a real disagreement between impartialists and their critics, or whether the critics are simply confused or mistaken about Kantian ethics and its implications for love and friendship. I’ll also try to defend Kantian ethics against the objections.

Let’s begin by looking at the following version of the criticism: Impartialist ethics does not allow us to take the fact that someone is my good friend, or my child, or my sibling as a reason for doing something for that person that I would not generally do for most others. With respect to Kantian ethics, the claim is quite clearly false. (Whether it is false as a criticism of consequentialism is a question that I will not take up here, though I will offer a few remarks on consequentialism in Section IV.) It is perfectly legitimate, on a Kantian view, for me to buy a present for my child that I would not buy for other children, and for me to take the fact that it is my child as a reason for doing so. This is evident from the latitude in Kant’s imperfect duties – duties to promote the obligatory ends of others’ happiness, and (though of far less relevance to our topic)

12 The claim that Kantian ethics and utilitarianism place too much value on impartiality encompasses more than this objection. Other objections that come under this heading are that the emphasis, or value, placed on impartiality is incompatible with a healthy self-preference or (relatedly) with taking one’s own projects seriously or (relatedly) with integrity (though it is very hard to see how this could be a problem for Kantian impartialism) or with resentment (and other moral emotions that have as their objects wrong done to oneself, or misconduct towards oneself, by others). On the objection regarding personal projects and integrity, see the work of Bernard Williams, especially Bernard Williams, 1981a, “Persons, Character, and Morality”, in: Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–19; and Bernard Williams, 1981b, “Moral Luck”, in: Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 20–39; on resentment, see William E. Young, 1998, “Resentment and Impartiality”, in: *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 36, pp. 103–130.

one's own perfection – and in the fact that he recognizes that we have special duties to particular others.¹³ Why would anyone think otherwise?

It might be thought that because Kant's ethics enjoins us to respect people as rational beings, we are to like and love them simply as rational beings. Perhaps because everyone is entitled to respect – the stupid along with the brilliant, those who do not utilize their rational faculties very well along with those who do – it is thought that everyone is equally entitled to our affection. Of course that is not Kant's view. We are not enjoined to love or like everyone equally, nor to dole out such resources as material assistance as if we did love everyone equally. The imperfect duty to promote others' happiness does not require (or even encourage) that I promote others' happiness equally, or that I choose which persons to aid impartially, without regard to the fact that some of the people I could aid are close friends or relatives, while others are mere acquaintances, and still others whom I could aid are strangers to me.¹⁴

But there is more to say about the criticism, and we can explore it more fully while at the same time addressing a closely related objection. The related objection is that mere subjective preference is not given its due in Kantian ethics. That I like someone – even if she is not a relative or a close friend – seems to be a perfectly decent reason for doing something for her that I would not do for just anyone.

13 The special duties he recognizes are duties to friends; one surmises that if he had a section in the *Tugendlehre* on familial relationships, as he does on friendship, he would recognize special duties to family, as well. (He does speak of duties of parents towards their children at [MM 6: 281] and limited duties of children to their parents, but not of duties of siblings, grandchildren, etc.) It is worth bearing in mind here that, as Allen Wood explains, Kant's *Metaphysik der Sitten* “does not attempt to cover all the ethical duties that we have. This is because Kant confines the ‘metaphysics’ of morals only to those duties that are generated by applying the principle of morality to human nature in general. But many of our duties, as Kant recognizes, arise from the special circumstances of others, or our relations to them, and especially from the contingent social institutions defining these relations” (Allen Wood, 2008, “Duties to Oneself, Duties of Respect to Others”, forthcoming in: Thomas E. Hill Jr. (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to Kant's Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell).

14 Relevant sections of Kant's works include MM 6: 388–394 and 450–454. For discussion, see Marcia Baron/Melissa Seymour, 2008, “Beneficence and Other Duties of Love in the Metaphysics of Morals”, forthcoming in: Hill, 2008; Barbara Herman, 2002, “The Scope of Moral Requirement”, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 227–256; and Thomas E. Hill Jr., 2002, *Human Welfare and Moral Worth: Kantian Perspectives*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, chs. 4 and 7.

I'll speak to both objections at once – the objection that ties of family and friendship are short-changed, and the objection that mere subjective preference is not given its due – but generally frame my points in terms of subjective preference, since the case might seem easier when it is friendship and family ties that are at stake. There are two questions that we need to ask. First, is the point about subjective preference correct? I.e., is the fact that I like someone a perfectly decent reason for doing something for him or her that I would not do for just anyone? And second, to the extent that it is correct, does it pose a problem for Kantian ethics?

My response to the first question is that with some qualifications, it is correct. The first qualification is that it depends on what it is that I am doing. But when there is a problem – when the fact that I like someone is not a perfectly decent reason for doing something for her that I would not do for just anyone – it is not because liking someone is not an adequate reason for doing something for that person. The problem, rather, is with a failure to do something I should do for others. The problem can emerge in either of the following two forms.

First, the problem might reside in my *not* doing that same thing for *just anyone*. It is permissible for me to invite people to dinner at my home because I like them, and not to invite people over if I do not like them. To offer desperately needed help only to those I like would, however, be far more questionable. The explanation here is pretty straightforward: people, qua people, have a legitimate claim to desperately needed aid, but not to dinner invitations. If the situation is one where aid is desperately needed and not hard or risky for me to provide – e.g., I need only to dial (in the US) 911 – I should aid no matter how little I like the person. The situation is different if the aid is more of a burden to provide and less badly needed (e.g., an acquaintance wants me to baby-sit so that he can go to a movie) because there it is not morally incumbent on me to aid.

Second, the problem might reside in my doing something for someone that precludes my doing something (either the same sort of thing, or something different) for someone to whom I owe a special obligation. The mere fact that I am fond of someone is not a perfectly good reason for bequeathing to him my entire estate if my family has continually provided me with vital support, both emotional and financial, throughout my life. (Let's suppose too that some members of my family are now in considerable financial need, while the friend of whom I am fond is not.) The problem here is not exactly that subjective preference is not by itself much of a reason to favor someone, but rather

that it does not (objectively, and subjectively should not) trump, or even rise to the same level as, reasons for acting in ways incompatible with leaving him my entire estate.¹⁵

There is an additional qualification (a tacit proviso, in effect) that also should be mentioned. That it is my friend is a legitimate reason for doing *X* for her (even though I would not do *X* for just anyone) – unless it is impermissible to do *X* in the first place. More perspicuously, if an action is immoral, the fact that I am doing it for my friend does not alter its moral status. As William Godwin put it, “What magic is there in the pronoun ‘my’ to overturn the decisions of everlasting truth?”¹⁶ The fact that someone is my good friend, or my child, or my sibling does not render an immoral action – e.g., aiding him in the commission of a crime – legitimate.

I turn now to the other question, the question about Kant’s ethics. Does anything I have said point up a shortcoming in Kant’s ethics? Is he unable to accommodate any of the points I have made? Not that I can see. Aiding others falls, in Kantian ethics, under the heading of an imperfect duty, and imperfect duties allow a fair amount of latitude. Although it is hard to say just how much latitude the duty to promote others’ happiness allows, we can say this: implicit in Kant’s discussion is an expectation that we use good judgment in deciding whom and how to aid, yet there is no prohibition on subjective preference entering in a situation where no duties to particular others are thereby neglected.¹⁷

15 I thank Justin Brown for this point.

16 William Godwin, 1926, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. by Raymond A. Preston, New York: Knopf, vol. 1, p. 42. Whether Godwin can allow any moral relevance to the fact that this is my sister, etc. is not clear, as I explain in Marcia Baron, 1991, “Impartiality and Friendship”, in: *Ethics*, vol. 101, no. 4, pp. 836–857. For discussion of Godwin’s infamous example and the morals he draws from it, see, in addition to Baron, 1991, Brian Barry, 1995, *Justice as Impartiality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Susan Mendus, 2002, *Impartiality in Moral and Political Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

17 Perhaps we should add here: provided that in favoring someone simply because one likes him more one does not neglect to aid someone who desperately, urgently needs one’s aid, and whom one can easily and safely aid. E.g., one should not put arriving on time to see a dear friend (or anyone else, for that matter) ahead of stopping to phone for emergency assistance for the person lying unconscious on the sidewalk (with no one else on the scene). I say “Perhaps” because it is really hard to know exactly what to add. Kant certainly does not specify any such requirement, but presumably one could not embrace as an end others’ happiness and yet regard it as not worth the bother to phone for emergency assistance (or not an adequate reason for being a few minutes late to

Neither subjective preference nor personal ties license one to ignore the needs of others altogether¹⁸ or to ignore duties of gratitude, but this does not render impermissible giving preference in other circumstances to those I like and love.¹⁹

In sum, Kantian ethics has no quarrel with the view that the fact that someone is my good friend, or my child, or simply a person I like is a legitimate reason for doing something for that person that I would not do for just anyone, provided that it is understood that neither subjective preference nor personal ties license me to ignore the needs of others altogether, neglect urgent, grave needs, or ignore other duties, such as duties of gratitude.

III.

Partiality – whether due to mere subjective preference or to ties of family or friendship – is permissible within moral bounds. It is fine to act for the reason that this person is my friend, my brother, even my favorite student; but the fact that this person is my friend, etc., does not render an immoral action permissible, and that I am helping my friend does not alter the fact that the needs of others also make a moral claim on me.

Favorite student? Can an impartialist regard as permissible having a favorite student? I don't see why not. Sometimes it is supposed that partiality is permissible except with respect to those to whom one stands in a certain sort of relationship, e.g., one's students. But things don't

meet a friend). My uncertainty about what to put in the proviso arises from the fact that at almost any given time we could help some very needy person somewhere, and do so easily and safely (by, say, contributing money to Oxfam); yet it seems clear that Kant's duty of beneficence does not require that we do so at every such opportunity. For a searching discussion of Kant on beneficence, see Herman, 2002.

18 This seems to be the point of *MM* 6: 390. As I explain in Baron, 1995, Ch. 3, Kant's point seems to be that we may not altogether reject an end of (for example) helping needy strangers on the ground that we are taking care of elderly parents; but we may limit our pursuit of the first end in favor of the second, putting much more energy into the latter and relatively little into the former. However, there is room for debate about just how to read this passage. See Baron/ Seymour, 2008.

19 If Kant's ethics is to be criticized here, it would make more sense to criticize it for allowing subjective preference so much play, than for allowing it too little. There is certainly scope for objections to the effect that we should in fact be required to attend especially to greatest need.

divide up in this way. Depending on the behavior in question, it is permissible to behave towards my students in a way that reflects differential “liking” for them, inviting only those I like to dinner at my home, for example; yet it is not okay for the grades I give to express differential liking, nor would it be permissible for me to agree to write letters of recommendation only for those I like, rather than for all those I think are good enough as students to merit a recommendation. (Of course some professional responsibilities are such that one has to be very careful indeed not to show partiality. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists need to take care not to show partiality towards certain patients, but then they are also barred from forming friendships with their clients, something not barred to professors and their students.) Nor, more importantly, is it the case that outside of professional contexts, partiality is never a moral issue.²⁰ My fondness for my friend will properly express itself in all sorts of things that I do for her but do not do for others, but it must recognize moral limits. The limits are simply the moral limits on all conduct. If it is immoral to cheat on a test, and to help someone to cheat on a test, the fact that I am helping my friend cheat and helping him out of affection for him does not justify my action. It shows me to have some admirable character traits (along with some not so admirable ones), but neither my affection for my friend nor our friendship renders permissible my act of helping him to cheat.

This might conceivably be a point on which partialists take issue with impartialism. I doubt it, but I might be wrong. Susan Wolf remarks that the thought that there is nothing wrong with someone who violates impartial morality to protect her son or daughter is “perhaps the strongest motivating thought behind partialist morality”. Her example is of a woman whose son has committed a crime and who chooses to hide him from the police, even though she knows that unless he is caught, an innocent person will be wrongly convicted and imprisoned for the

20 I emphasize this because it is often supposed that impartiality is needed only in special contexts, e.g., when one is grading papers, sitting on a jury, or otherwise in the seat of a “judge,” or more generally, that it is needed in what might be thought of as “public” contexts but not in “private” ones. Even apart from the problems with a public/private distinction, this view is misguided. We need to be sensitive to considerations that call for a perspective of impartiality rather than assume they are morally irrelevant except in certain spheres of activity and that apart from that, there is no need to take up an impartial perspective (or worse, that it is usually inappropriate to do so). See Baron, 1991.

crime.²¹ It seems to me, however, that very few partialists would think it morally justifiable for the mother to hide him from the police, but they might claim that though the action was wrong, there is much in it, or behind it, that is admirable. If this is their view, they are not in disagreement with Kantians (and other impartialists). The Kantian could make the same claim – though Kantians are probably slower to find something admirable in an immoral action committed out of love than are their partialist critics.

It is more likely that any partialists who find the position objectionable – the position that the fact that the person is my child or my very good friend does not render an immoral action morally permissible – do so because they misunderstand it. It is easily confused with the position that the fact that someone is my good friend or my child could never be relevant to the question of whether something is morally permissible. But they are different, and the first position does not entail the second. It might well be the case that paternalism of certain sorts is permissible for me with respect to my child but not with respect to anyone else (including other children). It might well be the case that pouring out my woes is permissible vis-à-vis certain people who are very close to me, but would be an imposition on others. And it is plausible to claim that it would be wrong of me never to throw a birthday party for my child, but not wrong of me never to throw a birthday party for any other child.²² Almost all impartialists would agree with these claims, and thus would agree that the fact that it is my friend or child can be relevant to whether something is permissible.²³

21 Susan Wolf, 1992, “Morality and Partiality”, in: *Philosophical Perspectives*, 6, Ethics, pp. 243–259, at pp. 253–254. She suggests that it might well be reasonable for the woman to hide him and that some might infer from this – though she does not – that it must be moral, too. Wolf’s view is that it is not moral, and that the conflict here is between morality and the demands of love rather than between competing moral concerns.

22 This of course depends on the circumstances of my life; if I live with a friend and her child, and the friend has to be away on business at the time of the child’s birthday, refusing to throw a birthday party for the child because it isn’t my child would be highly dubious. But the point is clear enough: the wrongness of not throwing a party has to do with the nature of the relationship between the child and me. I thank Wade Robeson for pressing me on this point.

23 Critics of impartialism sometimes write as if it is part of impartialism to disagree with these claims (and to hold that the fact that it is my friend or child can have no bearing on the permissibility of my action). The only authors I am aware of who come close to fitting their picture of impartialists are William Godwin and

Of course it will often take sensitivity and finely-tuned judgment to determine whether the special relation one bears to the person is of a sort to warrant acting as one proposes. It is not as if the mere fact that this is my child justifies a particular paternalistic action that I am thinking of taking; the particulars about the child, and not the mere fact that he is my child, matter, as do the particulars of our relationship. Knowing to which friends it is fine (and perhaps even important to the relationship) to pour out my innermost doubts and fears likewise requires sensitivity and perceptiveness.²⁴

This need for sensitivity and finely-tuned judgment might seem to pose a problem for Kantians. Some critics hold that it is part of Kantian impartialism that principles, and the commitment to adhering to them, are supposed to supply all of the motivation and understanding that the agent needs. Arguing that compassion and other “care virtues cannot be captured within the framework of ... impartialist morality,” Larry Blum claims that according to impartialism, there is no need for agents “to draw on moral capacities beyond the mere ability to consult the principle.”²⁵ This may be true of the impartialism of Lawrence Kohlberg (the focus of Blum’s discussion), but it is not characteristic of Kantian impartialism in moral philosophy. And Kant himself held that the moral law requires “judgment sharpened by experience” for its application [*G* 4: 389] and shows in many passages in the *Tugendlehre* that sensitivity is crucial for moral conduct. For example, in discussing beneficence, he writes:

Someone who is *rich* (has abundant means for the happiness of others, i.e., means in excess of his own needs) should hardly even regard beneficence as a meritorious duty on his part, even though he also puts others under obligation by it... He must also carefully avoid any appearance of intending to bind the other by it; for if he showed that he wanted to put the other under an obligation (which always humbles the other in his own eyes), it would not be a true benefit that he rendered him [*MM* 6: 453].

Peter Singer. (I think it no accident that the only people who even come close to taking this view are consequentialists.) See notes 16 above and 36 below.

24 The idea here is (a) if an action really is immoral, the fact that it is being done for a loved one does not make it permissible; but at the same time (b) there are actions whose permissibility or impermissibility depends on the relationship the agent bears to the recipient. These usually are actions done for the benefit of the recipient or for the relationship itself (or perhaps for the agent) *and* are actions that (unlike cheating, or violating someone’s confidence) have no significant negative bearing on others.

25 Lawrence Blum, 1994, *Moral Perception and Particularity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 203.

That it is a duty (albeit indirect) to “cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them” [MM 6: 457] is further evidence that sensitivity is crucial, in Kant’s view, for moral conduct. It should also be borne in mind that there are, according to Kant, “certain moral endowments” that “lie at the basis of morality, as *subjective* conditions of receptiveness to the concept of duty,” viz. “*moral feeling, conscience, love of one’s neighbor, and respect for oneself (self-esteem)*” ([MM 6: 399], italics Kant’s).²⁶

In sum, the fact that sensitivity and judgment will often be needed to determine whether the special relation one bears to the person warrants acting as one is thinking of acting is not a problem for Kantian impartialism, for Kantian ethics does not hold that such capacities are unnecessary.

IV.

It seems so far that there is very little in Kantian impartialism for partialists to disagree with. So what *is* the basis for their charge of excessive impartialism? One possibility is that the main, or most serious, objections that partialists have and that they speak of as applying to impartialist ethics in general actually apply only to consequentialism. I bring this up because it seems to me that the strongest argument that claims that impartialist ethics does not leave room for love and (deep) friendship is one that does not apply to Kantian ethics and has greater plausibility as a criticism of consequentialism.

Here is how the criticism goes if it is a criticism of consequentialism. Consequentialism requires us to maximize some impersonal value. (I am here ignoring satisficing consequentialism, and will throughout my paper.) But this requires putting impersonal value ahead of our friends and loved ones, even if it is just a slight increase of impersonal value that can be realized by, say, taking on a major project aimed at alleviating homelessness or world hunger, a project that requires that we spend far

26 For further discussion, see Baron, 1995, Ch. 6; Lara Denis, 2000, “Kant’s Cold Sage and the Sublimity of Apathy”, in: *Kantian Review*, vol. 4, pp. 48–73; Paul Guyer, 1993, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ch. 10; Nancy Sherman, 1997, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ch. 4; and Wood, 1999.

less time with our young children than we otherwise would. Consequentialists retort that consequentialism does not require that we base our decisions on a calculation of what will maximize impersonal good. Making decisions on that basis is likely to reduce, on the whole, how much impersonal good is produced. More good is produced if in fact we do not focus on maximizing impersonal value and instead rely on common-sense moral “rules.” They may even claim that it is best that we *never* assess our options by asking what will maximize utility, or some other impersonal value, and indeed that it is best if we never hear of consequentialism at all.

This may seem to be a viable solution, but let’s take a closer look. The consequentialist has two options. The first is to say that consequentialism is intended only as an analysis of what rightness consists in and perhaps as a tool for determining retrospectively whether what we or someone else did was right (though once it is introduced as a useful tool, it seems likely that people would want to use it prospectively as well; so probably introducing it as a tool of any sort would be too risky). But if consequentialism has no implications for how to lead our lives, it is not a very helpful theory. At best it would be useful only for an elite, who would have the authority to decide what “moral rules” to try to manipulate (almost) everyone into accepting as “commonsense” (and to decide which moral rules that they now accept they ought to be persuaded to discard). This would of course work only if social and political arrangements were such as to invest in some people the power to so manipulate the populace. It would not work in a society in which the free exchange of ideas was encouraged. For it to work, moral philosophy would be “classified” research, not a subject to be offered to students; or at the very least, consequentialism would itself have to be entirely off the table, rather as communism is in the United States. Public policy debates would have to be fully concealed from the public.

The other option – an option that is necessary if consequentialists want their theory to provide guidance on how to live, and not through having a secret elite, invested with power to manipulate our moral views – is to acknowledge that there have to be some points at which we assess what we are doing and make adjustments so as to maximize impersonal good. But then we are back (almost) where we started, for doing this involves putting impersonal good ahead of loved ones, even if it is just a slight increase of impersonal value that can be realized by neglecting loved ones; and it is in this sense that consequentialism is incompatible with love and friendship.

I do not mean to endorse this as a knock-down argument, but I think it is serious as a criticism of consequentialism. (Peter Railton goes quite far in addressing the objection, however, in his “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality”).²⁷ By contrast, as a criticism of Kantian ethics it makes no sense at all, since Kantian ethics has no requirement that we maximize impersonal value (or, for that matter, any value). Kantian ethics is far less concerned with bringing about certain results than is consequentialism, and to the extent that it is concerned about it – we are, after all, obligated to promote others’ happiness – there is no requirement that we do as much as we possibly can to bring about such results. We have a duty to promote others’ happiness (and to perfect ourselves), but just how we go about this is to a considerable extent up to us. There is no requirement that we maximize others’ happiness (or the general happiness, or respect for persons, or any other good). A Kantian’s positive duties thus appear less likely to dominate her life in a way that precludes or undermines meaningful relationships than do a consequentialist’s positive duties.

One possibility, then, is that some critics fail to notice that their argument against impartialism relies on the assumption that impartialism is concerned to maximize impersonal good, an assumption that is true only for consequentialist, and not for Kantian, impartialism. Actually, it is more than just a possibility. In his reply to Railton’s paper, William Wilcox says that his criticism of Railton applies to my work, as well, apparently not noticing that his criticism hinges on the theory under criticism being of a sort that requires maximizing impersonal good.²⁸

Another possibility is that partialist critics may maintain that while Kantians *want* to hold that it is permissible to do favors for a loved one that one would not do for most others – and permissible to do so because of who she is, and because of one’s love for her – in fact they cannot consistently take this view. I don’t know of anyone who has *argued* this, though some have assumed that there is an inconsistency. The belief that

27 Peter Railton, 1984, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality”, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 134–171. For critical discussion, see William Wilcox, 1987, “Egoists, Consequentialists, and their Friends”, in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 73–84; Dean Cocking/Justin Oakley, 1995, “Indirect Consequentialism, Friendship, and the Problem of Alienation”, in: *Ethics*, vol. 106, no. 1, pp. 86–111; and (more supportively) Alastair Norcross, 1997, “Consequentialism and Commitment”, in: *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 4, pp. 380–403.

28 Wilcox, 1987, pp. 73–74.

Kantians cannot consistently take this view is fueled, I suspect, by a confusion concerning the “level” at which an impartial standpoint is required, on an impartialist picture.²⁹ Whereas impartialists hold that justification has to take place from an impartial standpoint, critics often suppose that impartialists believe that one should *always* take an impartial standpoint. So, whereas impartialists hold that doing *X* (say, lavishing one’s resources on one’s children) is justifiable only if it would be permissible for anyone similarly situated to do *X*, it is often claimed that impartialists hold that the mere fact that it involves favoring certain people over others, and favoring them simply on grounds of personal attachment or family ties, suffices to render an action unjustifiable.³⁰ What is involved here is a level confusion. At a meta-level – at the level at which we reason about what is permitted – we are, on an impartialist

29 In Baron, 1991. See also Cynthia Stark, 1997, “Decision Procedures, Standards of Rightness, and Impartiality”, in: *Nous*, vol. 3, pp. 478–495. For misgivings about a two-level approach, see Susan Mendus, 2002, *Impartiality in Moral and Political Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 59–64.

30 John Cottingham argues: “When I sit up all night with my sick child, the impartiality thesis tells me that I am not acting morally; or at least, if my action is to be justified morally, I have to show that I could not be making a greater contribution to human welfare by helping any other child who may be in greater need of care and attention” (John Cottingham, 1983, “Ethics and Impartiality”, in: *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 43, pp. 83–99, at p. 88). The impartiality thesis holds that “to reason ethically, to consider things from the moral point of view, is to adopt an *impartial* standpoint.” It is reasonable to suppose that impartialists hold this thesis (although I should note that I, at least, would count as ethical reasoning reasoning about what is, say, best for my child, as long as in thinking about this I recognize and am prepared to abide by moral constraints on what it is permissible to do for my child). But does it entail what Cottingham says it entails? Only if it is interpreted in a way that virtually no impartialist would accept. The unclarity concerns at what level, or with regard to what sorts of things, one is to adopt the impartial standpoint. Is it with regard to actions one is thinking of performing? Or is it with regard to the principles which hold some promise of giving one direction as to what actions to take? In the first instance, the idea would be that to reason ethically about whatever it is that I am thinking of doing, I must take care not to allow my decision about what to do to be influenced by partiality to myself or to others. In the second instance, the idea would be that we should, in deciding whether it is permissible for us to do *X*, detach ourselves as far as possible from our own particular attachments and ask whether it is permissible for anyone similarly situated to do *X*. Impartialists hold the latter, not (usually) the former; but the principle Cottingham adduces has the implication he alleges only if it is understood to apply as described in the first instance (as well as in the second instance). For more on this, see Baron, 1991 and Stark, 1997.

view, to be strictly impartial: the principle that I endorse for others, I endorse for me and my kin, too. If something is permissible for me, it is permissible for everyone similarly situated. If it is wrong for children in circumstances *C* to do *X*, then it is wrong for my kid, who is in circumstances *C*, to do *X*. So, impartialists do endorse the irrelevance of “But it’s my kid we’re talking about!” to the validity of the principle in question (and to its reach to my child). But that is *not* to endorse the idea that “But it’s my kid!” is never morally relevant. Some critics have wrongly supposed that it is.³¹ They have not recognized that the position that in deciding whether a certain principle or policy is permissible, I should ask whether it is permissible for anyone similarly situated, does *not* entail that I should never allow my decision about how to act to be influenced by partiality to, or my bonds to, certain others. Now *if* one thought that my decisions about how to act should always be dictated by moral principles, there would be little need to distinguish impartiality at the level of principles from impartiality at the level of deciding what to do. (There would still be a need to draw such a distinction, though; it would be between the content of the principle, which could include particular ties, as in “Honor your parents,” and reasoning about, and seeking to justify or to challenge, such a principle). But if, as is the case in Kantian ethics, moral principles typically limit what is permissible without directing us to take precisely this option and no other, there is ample room for subjective preference and ties of love and friendship to influence one’s choices without coming into conflict with morality.

So far I have canvassed some reasons for objecting to “impartialism” or “impartialist ethics” and have said that at least as applied to Kantian ethics, the objections are based on a confusion or a misunderstanding. But I do think there is probably a genuine disagreement to be ferreted out, so I’ll probe further.

V.

Susan Wolf’s discussion of impartialism in her essay, “Morality and Partiality,” provides another point of entry into determining just what the partialist objections are to impartialism (and in particular to Kantian impartialism). It is admittedly an odd point of entry, for her characterization of impartialism is quite sweeping. Her characterization centers on

31 See for example Cottingham, 1983.

what she calls the “Impartialist Insight.” The Impartialist Insight is “the claim that all persons are equally deserving of well-being and respect.” Impartialism is “the position that a moral person is one who recognizes and appreciates the Impartialist Insight and integrates it into her life.”³²

Although Wolf did not intend this as a slap in the face to partialists – indeed, she expresses a strong sympathy for their views – the characterization might well offend. Partialists might protest that they too recognize that all persons are equally deserving of well-being and respect, and that they too hold that a moral person recognizes and appreciates this insight. Depending on what is meant by “integrating the insight into one’s life,” aren’t virtually all of us impartialists? I’ll set aside this concern and consider how her very inclusive characterization can help locate disagreement about the value of impartiality and its place in our lives. Lest this seem offensive or, if not that, simply bizarre, I should explain that as I see it, the division between impartialists and partialists, and the labels “impartialist” and “partialist,” are clumsy, and thus it is not imperative that a characterization or definition of impartialism accurately capture that division. Since my concern is to locate, understand and attempt to reply to the criticisms of Kantian impartialism – criticisms that are at the heart of the motivation for virtue ethics – rather than to find a characterization of impartialism that does justice to the labels “impartialists” and “partialists,” Wolf’s characterization is useful for my purposes. And while it has the result that some who would usually be called “partialists” become, on her terminology, “moderate impartialists,” it does provide for a wide range of views regarding the proper role or place of impartiality in our lives.

I take it that her characterization of impartialism is not meant to entail that according to impartialists, it is a sufficient condition of being a moral person that one recognize and appreciate the Impartialist Insight and integrate it into one’s life. The idea, presumably, is that it is a necessary condition. (Any doubts one might have about this are allayed by her remarks to the effect that morality is “not just about treating people equally or fairly, but about treating them well.”)³³ That being the case, room for disagreement – and for varieties of impartialism – will arise in connection with what it means to integrate the Impartialist Insight into one’s life (and relatedly, just what it is to appreciate the

³² Wolf, 1992, p. 245.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

Insight). As Wolf says, integrating it into one’s life need not involve letting it absolutely take over.³⁴

What will it involve? At a minimum, that one holds herself to “the same standards that she expects of others.” This is the “strict” part of impartialism. The part that is harder to spell out precisely is this: integrating the Impartialist Insight into one’s life means that one is “moved to practical effect by the thought that others – all others – are as deserving of the fundamental conditions of well-being and respect as are she and her circle of friends and loved ones.” It will have some practical effect, as Wolf puts it, “on one’s politics, on one’s activities, on one’s choice of how to spend one’s money.”³⁵

The place where disagreement initially seems most likely is in the last bit I quoted – in how much and what sort of effect one’s appreciation of the Impartialist Insight will have on one’s politics, one’s activities, one’s choice of how to spend one’s money. But I am not sure that such disagreements will have much to do with disagreements about the value of impartiality and the value of bonds of love and friendship. They will have more to do with views about property rights, economic distribution, etc., views which could, but needn’t, be tied to views about the value of impartiality and the value of family bonds. I am not aware that impartialists more typically hold that one should give a large percentage of one’s income to charity or to social programs designed to reduce social and economic inequalities than do partialists. It is true that impartialists may have a harder time justifying gross economic disparities, but there are many different views as to the best ways – and the prospects for – altering the disparities, and it does not seem that partialists and impartialists line up on opposing sides. So far then, it does not look as if disagreements regarding the practical effect that an appreciation of the Impartialist Insight will have on one’s life will be such as to split partialists and impartialists into two camps, or even into several groups that could be plotted along a scale where extreme impartialism is at one end, and extreme partialism is at the other.

But there is another way in which Wolf’s characterization of impartialism yields a source of disagreement. The disagreement concerns how one is to integrate the Impartialist Insight into one’s life but does not mainly concern the practical effect of the Insight on one’s politics and on how one chooses to spend one’s money. It has more to do with how it is

34 Ibid., p. 245.

35 Ibid., p. 246.

that we are to integrate the Impartialist Insight into our lives without letting it “absolutely take over.” Specifically, it concerns *just how ready we should be to take up a detached perspective, to view our relations to others just as someone’s relations to others (and to think of the people we love just as some persons)*. It concerns the notion that there can be “one thought too many.”

I can best reflect the sorts of disagreements I have in mind by noting some disagreements among those who write on the subject. First, consider Wolf’s rejection of some forms of impartialism. In characterizing impartialism as she does, Wolf makes a point of avoiding what she calls “Extreme Impartialism.” One form of Extreme Impartialism is something that virtually all impartialists would reject: on this view, “a person is morally required to take each person’s well-being, or alternatively each person’s rights, as seriously as every other, to work equally hard to secure them, or to care equally much about them, or to grant them equal value in her practical deliberations.”³⁶ That the view is absurd is evident from the fact that it entails, as she puts it, that “morality requires one to care, or to act as if one cares, no more about one’s own child than about a stranger’s.” So far I am in complete agreement with Wolf. But she deems “only slightly less absurd” the “much more popular view ... that permits partisan emotions and behavior, as long as in fact they promote nonpartisan goals.”³⁷ Apart from the fact that her wording makes the connection between “partisan emotions and behavior” and “nonpartisan goals” sound rather loose, this view is the standard consequentialist reply to partialist criticisms. It is, I take it, Railton’s position. (In fact as stated it is weaker than the standard consequentialist reply because it says nothing about maximizing: it does not require that the partisan emotions and behavior *maximally* promote nonpartisan goals. But her subsequent comment on it does mention maximizing).

Why does Wolf think it extreme, and rather absurd? She explains: “The acceptability of coaching one’s daughter’s soccer team, or taking one’s friend to dinner on her birthday does not rest on the fortuitous coincidence that this action, or even the way of life that gives rise to it, is

36 Ibid., p. 244. One impartialist who appears to accept this thesis is Peter Singer. He tries to argue from the position that ethical judgments should be made from a universal point of view to the conclusion that ethical conduct requires agents to weigh up the interests of “all those affected” by one’s decision and “adopt the course of action most likely to maximize the interests of those affected” (Peter Singer, 1979, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 10–12).

37 Ibid., p. 244.

the one that will maximize human welfare or equal respect all around.” Not, I agree, on the *fortuitous coincidence*, but if we replace “fortuitous coincidence” with “fact” is the view that she rejects absurd? Not being a consequentialist, I do not endorse the view; but it does not seem to me to be an “extreme” form of impartialism, or in any way absurd.³⁸ I suspect that to those who find it absurd, the problem is that it runs afoul of the “one thought too many” requirement, a requirement that I find elusive, but which seems to involve the notion that justification either should not be sought, or should not be sought from a distant, objective point of view. More on that shortly.

VI.

The first disagreement was Wolf’s disagreement with a view that is associated with Railton. The second is a disagreement I have with Railton. Whereas Wolf finds extreme impartialism in the view he develops, I find no such thing; by contrast, I find him to be too hard on impartialism (and in that sense, insufficiently impartialist). Railton’s article begins with two examples that are designed to show the need to explain how impartial morality and friendship are compatible. For the sake of brevity, I’ll discuss just one of them, but since the details matter, I need to quote it in full.

To many, John has always seemed a model husband. He almost invariably shows great sensitivity to his wife’s needs, and he willingly goes out of his

38 An alternative is suggested by Cottingham (John Cottingham, 1997–1998, “The Ethical Credentials of Partiality”, in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. XCVIII, pp. 1–21). Cottingham emphasizes that “goodness grows *from the inside outwards*,” i.e., that “human lives are valuable not primarily in virtue of how far they conform to impersonally defined rules of conduct, or in so far as they contribute to some giant amalgam called ‘the good’, but in so far as they are lived in ways which give richness and meaning to the short journey each of us has to undergo” (pp. 7–8). And thus one might argue that it is absurd to think that the acceptability of coaching one’s daughter’s soccer team and the like rests on the fact that this action or the way of life that gives rise to it will maximize human welfare for, the argument might go, they rest on the meaning they give to the agent and those close to her. But this is implausible; for even if we grant Cottingham’s point about the source of value, the question of permissibility or acceptability still remains, and it hardly seems absurd to think that the permissibility rests on facts about how this action fits or fails to fit with something beyond it, e.g., whether it or the way of life that gives rise to it maximizes human welfare.

way to meet them. He plainly feels great affection for her. When a friend remarks upon the extraordinary quality of John's concern for his wife, John responds without any self-indulgence or self-congratulation. "I've always thought that people should help each other when they're in a specially good position to do so. I know Anne better than anyone else does, so I know better what she wants and needs. Besides, I have such affection for her that it's no great burden – instead, I get a lot of satisfaction out of it. Just think how awful marriage would be, or life itself, if people didn't take special care of the ones they love." His friend accuses John of being unduly modest, but John's manner convinces him that he is telling the truth: this is really how he feels.³⁹

John's reply is supposed to be jarring, unsettling. It may be unwise of me to admit this in print, but I don't find it jarring. Not that it strikes me as entirely devoid of oddness. The one thing that I find odd in his reply is something that was pointed out by one of my students, who remarked that she kept waiting to learn that Anne was a paraplegic. John's tone regarding his wife seems peculiarly solicitous. But I don't think that has anything to do with what Railton expects us to find disturbing.

What might be thought a more appropriate reply to his friend? John could simply say that he loves Anne, but this would not speak to his friend's suggestion that there is something remarkable about the quality of John's concern. Presumably lots of husbands love their wives. And it would be presumptuous of John to suggest that he loves his wife more than most husbands love their wives, or that Anne is exceptionally lovable, and that that is why he does more than most husbands do for their wives. Alternatively, John could claim that he does not think that he is unusual, but that if he is, that suggests that something is amiss with other husbands. That reply, I suppose, would be just as "impersonal" as the one that he does offer.

I don't see John's reply to be disturbingly impersonal, and, apart from the solicitude that I noted, I don't see it as in any way peculiar. Why does Railton think that it is? He invites us to reflect on how John's remarks might sound to Anne.

Anne might have hoped that it was, in some ultimate sense, in part for her sake and the sake of their love as such that John pays such special attention to her... It is as if John viewed her, their relationship, and even his own affection for her from a distant, objective point of view – a moral point of view where reasons must be reasons for any rational agent and so must have an impersonal character even when they deal with personal matters. His wife might think a more personal point of view would also be appropriate, a

³⁹ Railton, 1984, p. 135.

point of view from which “It’s my wife” or “It’s Anne” would have direct and special relevance, and play an unmediated role in his answer to the question “*Why* do you attend to her so?”⁴⁰

An answer to that question, it seems to me, would be likely to take the form of “I think relationships are best if...” Actually, such questions are hard to answer, partly because it is not clear just what the person is wondering. But a reasonable guess would be that John’s friend is not wondering what particular qualities of Anne’s make her especially lovable, or anything of that sort, but rather is interested in hearing the sort of thing that John in fact does say. Later in his essay, Railton draws an analogous example, of Juan and Linda, and what is interesting is that the chief difference between Juan and John is that it takes more time, and some very definite prodding from the questioner, to get Juan to take a distant, impersonal perspective. This supports my hunch that one difference in views about impartialism concerns *how ready* one can be to take up the distant, impersonal perspective without that readiness properly raising suspicions. Juan is less ready than John; that, it seems, is why he, unlike John, does not seem to Railton to be alienated from his wife or from his affections. So perhaps one disagreement between partialists and impartialists, and between moderate impartialists and immoderate or extreme impartialists concerns how readily one should be able to shift from a personal to an impersonal perspective.

There is a complication that I omitted. Discussing John, Railton says, “That he devotes himself to her because of the characteristically good consequences of doing so seems to leave her, and their relationship as such, too far out of the picture...”⁴¹ Now, if John does devote himself to her *because* of these consequences, then I agree with Railton (though I didn’t read John’s reply to his friend in this way). But Railton also says, as quoted earlier, that the answer that Anne might hope for, and which he thinks is in order, is one in which “It’s my wife” or “It’s Anne” would play *an unmediated role*. And the suggestion thus seems to be that the thought that marriages are better, and indeed that the world is a better place, thanks to such devotion, is one thought too many.⁴²

40 Ibid., p. 136.

41 Ibid., p. 136.

42 Related to this position is the claim that actions done from love or friendship should not be “mediated” (or rather, the love itself should not be mediated) by a commitment to doing what is right, being a virtuous person, or anything else of that ilk. Here again the idea seems to be that one thought too many is involved –

Now, to connect this up with the question of why impartialism is found objectionable: It seems to me that the deepest disagreement that partialist critics have with impartialism (once misunderstandings are cleared away), and that some moderate impartialists have with what they might, following Wolf, regard as “extreme impartialism,” concerns when, and how readily, it is decent or even good to take up a detached perspective, and when doing so involves having “one thought too many.” That being the case, it is now time to try to figure out what it means to have one thought too many, in the way developed by Bernard Williams and endorsed by (among others) Julia Annas and Susan Wolf and to some extent by Peter Railton.⁴³ (Given my leanings towards rather extreme impartialism, I am not in the best position to appreciate the possibility of one thought too many. Hopefully this essay will prompt some who are in a better position to explain it.)

VII.

I do understand that there are thoughts such that the fact that one has them calls the person’s character into question – thoughts, for example, about what forms of torture one would most enjoy inflicting, should one

even, it seems, if the person is not thinking about rightness or virtue while acting lovingly. I discuss this below, and at length in Baron, 1995, ch. 4.

43 The locus classicus of “one thought too many” is Williams, 1981a. In mentioning Julia Annas, I have in mind Julia Annas, 1984, “Personal Love and Kantian Ethics in Effi Briest”, in *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 8, pp. 15–31. I reply to her article in Marcia Baron, 1988, “Was Effi Briest a Victim of Kantian Morality?”, in: *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 12, pp. 95–113. Wolf invokes the notion of “one thought too many” in Susan Wolf, 1982, “Moral Saints”, in: *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 79, no. 8, pp. 419–439, as does Jean Rumsey in Jean Rumsey, 1997, “Re-visions of Agency in Kant’s Moral Theory”, in: Robin May Schott (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press; Harry Frankfurt also endorses it, though he takes issue with Williams’ way of putting the point (Harry Frankfurt, 2004, *The Reasons of Love*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 36–37). For (generally critical) discussions, see Baron, 1995, ch. 4; Guyer, 1993, ch. 10; Herman, 1993, ch. 2; Thomas Nagel, 1982, “Williams: One Thought Too Many”, in: *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 6, reprinted in: Thomas Nagel, 1995, *Other Minds*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 167–173; Madison Powers, 1993, “Contractualist Impartiality and Personal Commitments”, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 30, pp. 63–71; Samuel Scheffler, 1992, *Human Morality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; and David Velleman, 1999, “Love as a Moral Emotion”, in: *Ethics*, vol. 109, pp. 338–374.

find oneself in a position where torturing others was part of one’s job description.⁴⁴ Likewise, if upon reading Bernard Williams’ example of Pedro and Jim, one’s thought was “I’d never ordinarily choose to kill an innocent person, but if I were in Jim’s situation, not only would I not hesitate, I would savor the richness of the experience.”⁴⁵ But even if, as seems unlikely, one or both of these thoughts should be classified as *one thought too many* – as opposed to something like *one horrendous thought* – they do not seem to be a helpful model for understanding how it is that the thought that what one is doing is morally right is one thought too many.

I also appreciate that there are times when some thoughts, though innocuous enough in themselves, are inappropriate, and cause for some consternation. I remember a film, “Ordinary People,” in which the protagonist recalls that as he and his wife dressed to go to the funeral of their child, she suggested that he wear a different pair of shoes (and not for reasons of comfort). That she was thinking at that time about which shoes he should wear troubled him, and possibly it is in roughly this way that some find attention to moral matters at a time such as when one’s spouse is in grave danger of drowning, disturbing. But the point about one-thought-too-many seems to go beyond this. And it seems to take two rather different directions. The more radical direction is that justification is unnecessary or that justification should not be sought from an impersonal, impartial perspective; this I take to be Williams’s suggestion. (In reference to the example of someone in a position to save one but not both people in an accident, and who chooses to save his wife, Williams says that the “random” element in such events...should be seen...as...a reminder that some situations lie beyond justifications.)⁴⁶ The other, more moderate direction is the one that I see in Railton’s discussion: Railton is not at all opposed to seeking such justification but has doubts about agents who are quick to think about their deepest attachments from an impartial perspective. A readiness to detach and view things objectively is, it seems, alienating, or expressive of alienation,

44 I discuss this in Marcia Baron, 2002b, “Character, Immorality, and Punishment”, in: Walter Sinnott Armstrong/Robert Audi (eds.), *Rationality, Rules, and Ideals: Essays on Bernard Gert’s Moral Theory*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 243–258.

45 See Bernard Williams, 1973, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”, in: J. J. Smart/Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge: Cambridge University.

46 Williams, 1981a, p. 18.

both from others and from one's own affective nature. At least this seems to be the idea. The more moderate direction, taken by Railton, may just be that there are times when such detachment is inappropriate; but I expect, given his examples, that there is more to it than this.

For other (arguably more extreme) misgivings about one-thought-too-many, I turn to a discussion by Julia Annas, "Personal Love and Kantian Ethics in *Effi Briest*," in which she argues that whether or not it was his intention, Theodor Fontane's novel, *Effi Briest*, shows the disastrous effects of a Kantian moral outlook.⁴⁷ The relevant part of the story is as follows. When Effi's husband learns that six years earlier she had an adulterous affair, he divorces her (and, challenging the former lover to a duel, kills him), and Effi's parents announce that they will have nothing to do with her. Subsequently their family physician, concerned about Effi's failing health and general misery, urges her parents to drop their stance towards her and invite her to live with them. Her mother is initially reluctant and says to her husband, "I love her as much as you do, perhaps more. But we've not been sent into the world just to be weak and forbearing and show respect for all that's against the laws of God and man." He replies: "Oh really, Luise. One thing's more important...Parents' love for their children."⁴⁸

What Effi's father says seems to me straightforward: he is saying that parents' love for their children (and expressing that love) are more important than showing respect for prohibitions on adultery by refusing to have anything to do with anyone who ever committed adultery. He is speaking from an impartial point of view – and, I would add, doing so quite appropriately. Annas rejects this reading (or something very like it).⁴⁹ She writes: "He does not mean that parents are morally permitted to love their children, which could hardly have much weight against their moral condemnation of Effi's actions, and anyway would be a classic case of what Williams aptly calls having 'one thought too many,' weakening

47 See Annas, 1984.

48 Theodor Fontane, 1967, *Effi Briest*, trans. by Douglas Parmee, London: Penguin Books, p. 251.

49 I say "or something very like it" because the view she rejects is one in which he is saying, among other things, that parents are morally permitted to love their children, whereas I take him more literally to be saying that parental love is what is most important in a case like this. (See below.)

the force of a natural attachment by giving it a roundabout and unconvincing justification from the impartial point of view.”⁵⁰

I find Annas’ statement puzzling for a number of reasons. First, the idea would not be exactly that parents are permitted to love their children, but just what he says: parents’ love for their children is more important [more important than (public) condemnation of immorality]. Permissibility enters in, but not in the way she suggests: it comes in because the implication is that because parental love is more important, it is okay to permit one’s love for one’s children to carry the day in a situation such as this. Annas says that this could not have much weight against their moral condemnation of Effi’s actions. Why not? It seems clear that it would. Probably she says this because she was thinking of the mere fact that parents are permitted to love their children, not what Effi’s father says, namely, that parental love is more important.

Second, why is there one thought too many? It is not as if *he* brought up the question of moral permissibility, an issue which, I would agree, it seems unnecessary to bring up, since we can hardly imagine that it would be *wrong* to welcome their daughter back (though we can well imagine that it would violate some community mores). Had he brought up the question of moral permissibility, I would agree that it is one thought too many; not, however, because one should not think about morality when one’s son’s or daughter’s welfare is at stake, but simply because it should be obvious (at least to us, in our era) that what Effi’s father proposes to do is not immoral. But in fact he is not raising the issue of moral permissibility. He is replying to his wife’s worry that what they are doing is wrong, and is claiming that it is not wrong. It is hard to see how his thought could be one thought too many.

The third thing that I find puzzling about Annas’ remark is this: how would this thought – the thought that dropping their moral condemnation and welcoming her back is not wrong – *weaken the force of a natural attachment*? I’ll address this in a moment, but first I should acknowledge that there is another possible reading of Effi’s father’s remark.

50 Annas, 1984, p. 28. The details of her interpretation of Effi’s father’s remark are not important here, since I am citing her discussion only to have a better understanding of what counts as one thought too many, and what makes it “too many.” But for those who are curious, here is her understanding of Effi’s father’s remark: “he realizes belatedly that it cannot be right to see morality as assimilating deep love and commitment to pathological weakness and self-indulgence” (p. 28).

I construed his remark to be that because parental love matters more, taking Effi back is not wrong. But it might be claimed that he is *not* speaking from a moral point of view but is rejecting it (and I do mean *it*, not merely rejecting the point of view of conventional morality). “Morality be damned! Parental love matters more.” I don’t think this is what he means, but I don’t want to press that. I am interested in how things would be different if this were what he meant. Would there no longer be one thought too many? Perhaps, but that is not entirely clear. He would be rejecting the idea that moral justification is appropriate here; so if the one thought too many is the thought that what is being proposed is morally justified, that thought is absent. Notice, however, that he is saying that parental love matters more, *not* simply that it matters more to him, but that it matters more – presumably from an impartial perspective. If taking up that perspective involves one thought too many, then the reinterpretation of what he is saying would not take care of the problem. There would still be one thought too many. The thought would change, but its status as “one thought too many” would not.

The other question I want to ask is this: Would we think better of Effi’s father if his remark were, or meant, “Morality be damned! Parental love matters more!”? Is it better to say that morality does not matter here – does not matter as much as parental love, anyway – than to say that morality endorses what they are doing? I don’t think so. To take that view would seem (by conversational implicature) to endorse the notion that it actually *is* morally wrong of them to drop their moral condemnation of Effi for the adulterous affair that she had many years earlier. It seems much more apt to deny that it is morally wrong to do so, and to affirm that it is right to welcome her back into the family, and into their home.

Now, back to the question of why the alleged one thought too many – the thought that what they are about to do is morally right – would weaken the force of a natural attachment. (I am referring to Annas’s claim that this “would be a classic case of...having ‘one thought too many,’ weakening the force of a natural attachment by giving it a roundabout and unconvincing justification from the impartial point of view.”) If the thought is to have any effect on their love for Effi, it would most likely be to *strengthen* it, for they now will realize that they need not feel guilty or otherwise uncomfortable about welcoming their daughter – a “fallen woman” – back into the family. And they can quit fretting about what people will think; they know that what they are doing is right. So, why is the thought supposed to interfere, and weaken their love? Maybe it is felt

that what will dominate their thoughts and feelings is a sense of moral rectitude rather than love for their daughter. Maybe the worry is that they'll welcome her back *because* it is right, rather than because they love her. I don't see any reason why the thought that what they are doing is right would be likely to take over in this way. They welcome her back because they love her, and in the knowledge that what they are doing is right. Perhaps some would say that their love is mediated, and should be unmediated; the thought is one too many because it would be better, critics will say, if their love were not so qualified. It would be better if they could act from love without caring about, or paying any attention to, whether what they are doing is morally right.

There is some truth to the last point – but only because it seems to us so obvious that they were doing what is morally right that attention to the question of moral rightness seems silly. But it is not the case that in general, love should be unmediated by moral considerations. We are grateful that David Kaczynski did not think that love for his brother, or his relationship with his brother, was more important than going to the FBI with evidence that his brother was the Unabomber. We are glad that his love was not “unmediated.” And this is not a case where we are simply glad because of the results. We admire him for his courage, and we do not judge him cold and unloving.⁵¹ Of course it might be replied that happily, most of us do not have the Unabomber or any other mass murderer as a close relative, and therefore our love can and should be unmediated. I disagree, not because you never know for sure – your brother or sister may be a murderer too – but because these particularly dramatic moral considerations are not the only ones that merit our attention, and that our love for someone may tempt us to overlook. We need to be ready to assess the moral claim that the competing

51 In fact his love for his brother (evident in the lecture he gave at Indiana University, Nov. 11, 2005) is quite dazzling. He did everything he could to provide his brother with first-rate legal counsel and sought repeatedly to visit him, despite Ted's unwavering refusals; in fact he continues to write to him regularly, reiterating his love for him, despite Ted's refusal to have any contact with his family. David Kaczynski is evidence that one's love for another need not be unmediated for one to be committed to standing by the person – in some way – come what may. There are different ways of standing by someone, and some are fully compatible with recognizing and addressing the grave wrongs (and in this instance, crimes) that the other has committed (and may continue to commit if one does not intervene).

considerations make on us, and I see no reason to doubt that we can do so without it weakening or cheapening our love.⁵²

In short, I don't see how the thought that what one is doing is morally right or permissible could be one thought too many unless it is so obvious that what one is doing is morally justified that there is no need to think about it.

VIII.

To recapitulate: After explaining why I think it more fruitful to assess the objections of virtue ethicists to Kantian ethics than to consider whether a Kantian virtue ethics is possible, I turned my attention to the (somewhat vague) objection that Kantian ethics is excessively impartialist, or overvalues impartiality. Focusing then on more precise statements of the objection, I evaluated the claim that Kantians cannot allow me to take the fact that someone is my good friend, or my child, or my sibling (or even just someone I like) as a reason for doing something for that person that I would not generally do for most others. I asked first whether the claim – the alleged fact – is correct, whatever its applicability as a criticism of Kant's ethics. I argued that with two important qualifications, it is correct. The first qualification is that it depends on what it is that we are doing. There are things that we ought to do for anyone, not only our friends and relations, and neither subjective preference nor special ties license us to ignore the needs of others altogether. The second (and closely related) qualification is that the fact that it is my friend or relative is a legitimate reason for doing *X* for him only if it is not impermissible to do *X* in the first place. With these qualifications in place, I claimed that while this position may be at odds with consequentialism, it is not in conflict with Kantian ethics.

Nonetheless, there might be something else in Kantian ethics that critics find unduly "impartialist," and I tried to ferret it out by utilizing Susan Wolf's novel characterization of impartialism. A disagreement that

52 I should clarify that it is not my claim that the fact that someone is a close friend or relative should never affect our judgment about how to deal with a particular (suspected) wrongdoing, and specifically, about whether to turn the person in to the authorities. Our relationship with someone does count in the moral balance, particularly when the wrong was (morally) minor – a harmless wrongdoing or perhaps not even a wrongdoing at all, apart from being a violation of the law – and all the more so if in addition the person is likely to be punished too harshly.

critics have, I suggested, concerns how ready we should be to take up a detached perspective towards those we love or towards our relationships with them. This is a genuine disagreement, but Kantians have no cause for embarrassment, or for worry that Kantian agents have one thought too many.⁵³

53 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a conference on ethics and impartiality at the University of Utah, at a UK Kant Society conference (Keele, England), at McGill University (as a colloquium cosponsored by the philosophy departments of the University of Montreal and McGill University), Auckland University, Indiana University, and the University of Kentucky. I am grateful to discussants, and to Wade Robison, who presented a comment at the Utah conference. I would also like to thank Justin Brown, Sarah Conly, Michael Gorr, Mark Jenkins, Samuel Kerstein, Henry Richardson, David Suryk, Christine Swanton, and David Velleman for their helpful comments.

