

Are utilitarians right to prefer humanity in general over our family in particular?

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A doctrine-abiding utilitarian in a fire would save a brilliant stranger over their father—preferring *humanity in general over family in particular*. This essay does agree that one has a moral obligation to have concern for humanity. Nevertheless, the utilitarian's perspective is wrong because it is incoherent, as it requires a 'valuer' who cannot exist—one universal in obligation, yet without positioned origin.

Impartiality maintains that everyone's good is regarded equally; deliberation from the contingency of birth is arbitrary, thus partiality is devoid of moral salience. William Godwin asks: "What magic is there in the pronoun "my" that should justify us in overturning the decisions of impartial truth?" In Godwin's 'fire' thought experiment¹ two people are trapped in a burning building, one a common valet, the other Archbishop Fénelon. Utilitarian actions must engender the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people; Godwin thus answers to *save Fénelon*—even if the valet were your own father—because Fénelon's *Télémaque*² produces more good.

Peter Railton's "sophisticated consequentialist"³ does not bite Godwin's bullet; impartiality might be a rightness-criterion, but Godwin errs by attempting to apply outcomes to in-the-moment deliberation. Railton posits⁴ that a non-deliberating agent reliably creates more good than an impartially deliberating agent: the non-calculative moral disposition of simply being 'good' is unavailable to the calculative impartialist. In regarding what dispositions one ought to have, impartiality is partial in motive, yet impartially justified.

¹ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (London: J. Watson, 1843), 1:60–61 (Bk. II, "Of Justice").

² The famed work Godwin invokes is Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699). Godwin anglicizes this as "*Telemachus*".

³ Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13, no. 2 (1984): 153. Railton's "sophisticated consequentialist" is one with a standing commitment to an objectively consequentialist life, who simultaneously need not deliberate consequentially (as per the "first thought").

⁴ Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13, no. 2 (1984): 152–158.

“Humanity in general” over “family in particular” is intuitively quite attractive—‘8 billion bigger than 4’ seems like widening concern, *ergo* greater good. But ‘humanity’ is an abstract concept—to extend value from ‘humanity’ *per se* would be to abstract away from every existing relation, and then ‘rank’ goodness from nowhere. The question’s polarity of family and humanity displaces Henry Sidgwick’s *dualism of practical reason*⁵—between one’s own good and good for all, which reason cannot adjudicate. This is consequently a problem regarding *standpoints* disguised as a problem regarding quantity: preferring humanity over family demands the Sidgwickian self to take an impossible standpoint.

The *contra* impartial argument cannot be built on any variety of causal dependency. That my mother constituted my identity cannot oblige anything—constitution cannot entail obligation. That I owe my mother her care makes our bond a debt—debt is weighable against others, rendering this flawed impartial accounting. That I owe my mother for existence is incoherent—requiring a ‘myself’ prior to my existence to measure against, the pre-relational agent impartiality lacks. All have me *owing* my mother. But I am not in her debt. *I am of her making*.

The substantial argument is that the capacity to value is realized relationally, and cannot be exercised prior to relations. Railton grants that the self exists “in relational, not absolute space”⁶ or *relationally constituted*. Simultaneously, he quarantines his endorsement of impartiality as only a justifying criterion of acts and not a deliberative mode⁷, relocating the standpoint upstream from the ‘deliberation’ level to the ‘justification’ level. Yet the act of endorsing the criterion, even at the ‘justification’ level, is *eo ipso* a *positioned act* performed by a *relational self* inhabiting a relational space. Railton might answer: impartiality is recognizable as fact, rather than adoptable as a deliberative method. Nevertheless, recognizing facts differs from adopting practical standards. Recognizing ‘2+2=4’ does not commit to a priority among attachments or an answer to ‘what governs one’s deliberation?’ Regarding impartiality as an objective moral authority is to prefer a standpoint from nowhere over a standpoint that one

⁵ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), bk. IV, ch. vi, 496–509. The “dualism of the practical reason”.

⁶ Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” 167.

⁷ Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” 152–54.

actually inhabits, which is *in se* an act of valuation. There is no action or justification where valuation eludes one's standpoint. Railton relocates 'self-abstraction' upstream but cannot eliminate it; a whirlpool isn't water, it is a shape of water, yet cannot be removed from water. Water *continuously* sustains a whirlpool. Relations *continuously* constitute positioned valuation.

Confucianism articulates this *positioned* self. Tu Weiming interprets the Confucian self as “a center of relationships... never conceived of as an isolated or isolable entity”⁸—the moral self is constituted by relations, non-existent prior to them. Hall and Ames envisage this through the focus-field⁹: the self is a “focus” within a “field” of relations. Agency is constitutive of the focus itself rather than fastened onto it—to be a focus is to take a perspective within the field: to do that is to value. If the self dissolves into the field, *no focus* to value exists, and if we abstract into a nowhere-standpoint, *no field* to value from exists; in both *positionality* is destroyed, *ergo* no valuer/valuing exists.

Mencius posits anyone who sees a child teetering on a well's lip invariably feels “compassion” (*ce yin zhi xin*) before any moral calculus—not to ingratiate himself nor to win praise¹⁰. This “compassion” is indexed: it is a nascent moral disposition arising *from the agent's position*, not impartial calculus about children *per se*. *Ce yin zhi xin* is a sprout¹¹ (*duan*) that can grow into mature virtue, so origin is pre-positioned—concern transcends mere origin, it is particular structurally. Positioned valuation may originate in particular, nevertheless, it remains universal in obligation.

Per *Analects* 1.2, Youzi states that filial and fraternal devotion are the “root” of benevolence¹². Confucian moral development is sequenced: relations are the root, then out grows the plant of benevolence. Relations are to be outwardly *extended*; *Mencius* 1A:7 instructs: “Treat the aged of

⁸ Tu Weiming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 53.

⁹ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 237–238 (ch. 5.1). They utilize the term “focus-field” extensively within the book, but this chapter specifically simply uses the words “field” and “focus” instead.

¹⁰ *Mencius* 2A:6, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

¹¹ 端 (*duān*). D.C. Lau's *Mencius* translates as “germ,” James Legge translates as “principle.” The horticultural sense of Bryan W. Van Norden's translation, “sprout” is standard in current scholarship.

¹² *The Analects* 1.2, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979). All *Analects* citations in this essay use this translation. Lau translates the Chinese “為仁之本” as “the root of a man's character” instead of “root of benevolence”. 仁, the character being used, in terms of virtue, is more often translated as benevolence.

your own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend this treatment to the aged of other families”¹³, extending likewise with young of one’s own and of others. He reprimands King Xuan, who sympathetically spared a trembling ox soon-to-be slaughtered, but did not extend that benevolence to his suffering subjects.

Mencius names this as *tui*¹⁴ (literally: “to push”)—*extending* a response from its original objects to similar objects. King Xuan possessed the moral sprout (pity for the ox) but lacked *tui*. The gap between the sprout and extended virtue is the space of obligation, separating *tui* from mere natural widening. Impartial concern is the terminus of extension, and cannot be its origin. Confucian extension presupposes an origin (family) as a *moral axis* to extend from; *tui* is the normative demand of extension. Impartiality demands universal concern while negating the origin that extension requires.

Impartiality also has a classical Chinese advocate, Mozi, who articulates morality through “*jian xiang ai, jiao xiang li*”¹⁵: inclusive mutual care/love, reciprocal benefit. *Jian ai* supposes equal concern, with no graded priority. Mencius refutes this—*jian ai* lacks the sprout of concern; supposing the plant’s existence without the sprout. If there is no positioned origin to extend from, *jian ai* is thus uninhabitable as the actual valuer is invariably positioned. In *Mencius* 3A:5, Yi Zhi the Mohist buries his parents lavishly¹⁶. Even for a Mohist, the graded-priority structure surfaces when it cannot be absent: his parents’ death. Mozi’s *jian ai* impartiality and Railton’s justification-level impartiality err likewise; impartial mourning is the Mohist-*qua*-utilitarian’s self-abstraction in classical Chinese clothes.

Bernard Williams posits the best-known objection to impartialism. Suppose a man’s wife and a stranger are simultaneously drowning. The man saves his wife. The impartialist wants justification for this—the only rationally presentable reason is: ‘this is permissible in situations like this’. Williams states this justification gives the man “one thought too many”¹⁷—the

¹³ *Mencius* 1A:7.

¹⁴ 推 (tuī), “extension,” literally “to push.”

¹⁵ *Mozi*, “Jian'ai” 兼愛 (Universal Love), esp. bk. 16.

¹⁶ *Mencius* 3A:5. The Yi Zhi dialogue.

¹⁷ Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality,” in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–19. “one thought too many” is at page 18.

deliberation of permissibility. The right motivating thought is simply ‘it is my wife’, without any deliberation—once impartiality fastens another clause, the agent’s relation to his wife is corrupted. The deliberative structure that impartiality demands is incompatible with standing in the relationship. One cannot run wife-saving through an impartial filter. That a husband would save his wife per impartial permission rather than ‘because wife’ displays his character when nobody is drowning, during breakfast on an ordinary Tuesday. Her position of ‘wife’ is provisional—she is dropped when the scales tip. She is merely *cleared* through the filter; this marriage is not a moral relationship. Williams’s impartial agent is pathological; the relational-self demonstrates he is metaphysically impossible, as the criterion-level valuer cannot exist. Deliberation lacks the extension of dispositional cultivation—to first think ‘save wife, because wife!’ is the first thought of an extended self, which *tui* formed prior to anyone drowning. Impartiality could demand the second thought, but *tui* has already discharged into the man’s moral identity before he dives into the water.

One might object grounding morality in family licenses favouritism. The utilitarian argues the man who saves his father, letting Fénelon burn, allows personal attachment to corrupt moral judgement; saving Fénelon may be cold, but warmth is not morality—the ‘warm’ relational-self excuses unjust favouritism within the fire. Nevertheless, the agent who weighs his father through calculation cannot have ascended to a higher moral standpoint. There is no higher standpoint. In attempting this ascent, he deliberately severs himself from the positioned origin from which all valuing stems—so he cannot coherently value. Godwin presents the burning building as impartiality’s proof, but the case he built to demonstrate that partiality is corruptive renders the impartial agent impossible.

Nepotism is favouritism *in concreto*, partiality metastasized. In *Analects* 13.18, a son covers for his sheep-stealing father—Confucius approves: “Straightness is to be found in such behaviour”¹⁸. In *Mencius* 7A:35, Mencius is asked what Shun (Confucianism’s exemplar of moral rulership) would do if his father killed a man—Shun would carry him off to the coast to live happily. Liu Qingping describes this as “consanguinitism”¹⁹—kin overriding justice. As he means it, a

¹⁸ *The Analects* 13.18.

¹⁹ Qingping Liu, "Filiality versus Sociality and Individuality: On Confucianism as 'Consanguinitism,'" *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 2 (2003): 234–250.

murderer might escape the law because he is a ruler's father—indeed, Mencius presents this as admirable.

In actuality, Shun does not pervert justice in this hypothetical—he does not use state power to protect his father; he abdicates, abandoning the empire as “discarding a worn shoe”²⁰, and only then acts as a son. Rather than corrupting the public, the murderer's escape is the withdrawal of the agent who cannot be moral ruler and moral son simultaneously. The consanguinitist's wrong is instrumentalizing public power for kin. Shun refuses. His father walks because he vacated his rulership, not because he perverts justice.

These ideas risk conflation with care ethics, which also grounds morality in relation rather than impartiality. Nel Noddings builds care into a deliberately anti-universalist ethical theory²¹: obligation attenuates with relational distance. The relational-self is centrifugal—it demands extension. Noddings does not merely fail to demand extension, she *normatively* resists extension as an obligation. Noddings's parochialism shares an origin with the Confucian conception of morality—they split on whether the origin obligates extension: *tui* maintains a particular origin is the starting point of an obligation's means to extend, Noddings posits it is the end in itself. Confucianism meets the demand of universality, care ethics forgoes it.

Mencius 3B:9 condemns Yang Zhu, an egoist who loses all bonds other than self, and Mozi, an impartialist who loses partial ties—losing these bonds is to be “no different from the beasts”²². Both abstract the agent from constituting relations: egoism abstracts inward, impartiality outward. Mencius's condemnation of these two structurally echoes the Sidgwickian *dualism of practical reason*²³, which presumes two coherent poles: the agent's good, and the universe's good. Yang Zhu's egoism occupies the place of the self-pole, Mozi's impartiality the universe-pole. The question's displacement of self to family hides that the self-pole presupposes

²⁰ *Mencius* 7A:35. “the Blind Man” in Lau's translation is Shun's father.

²¹ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 16–18. The “Circles and Chains” discussion (in ch.3), discussing caring that diminishes with distance from a relational center.

²² *Mencius* 3B:9. Mencius posits the doctrines of Yang Zhu and Mozi reduce men to *qín shòu* (“beasts”).

²³ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907), bk. IV, ch. vi, 496–509. The “dualism of the practical reason”.

a self set apart—yet that ‘self’ is constituted by the relations that the universe-pole demands one must transcend to be moral. Thus neither Sidgwickian pole can be occupied relation-free.

Morality must be partial in origin because there is nowhere else ‘concern’ can begin—this origin must be sustained. Indeed, relations are the mother of morality—but the umbilical cord is never severed; concern is invariably relation-bound. The impartialist’s error is not that he cares about humanity—he errs by demanding an abstract universal destination (humanity) while denying the origin (family) extension requires. One cannot liberate oneself from that partial origin. The Confucian explicates that agents are tethered to the morally salient relational milieu that bears them; *positioned acts* are done by the *relational self*. Morality remains universal in obligation, as *tui* normatively demands extension. Therefore, utilitarians are right to extend concern to humanity in general, but wrong to *begin* extending concern abstracted away from family.