

## **Consequentialism, Integrity and Demandingness**

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In this paper I will develop the argument that a cognitivist and virtue ethical approach to moral reasons is the only approach that can sustain a non-alienated relation to one's character and ethical commitments. [Thomas, 2005] As a corollary of this claim, I will argue that moral reasons must be understood as reasonably partial. A view of this kind can, nevertheless, recognise the existence of general and positive obligations to humanity. Doing so does not undermine the view by leading to a highly demanding view of morality. Indeed, it offers a defence against the view that an analogy between obligations of immediate rescue to particular individuals and general and positive obligations to humanity leads to the conclusion that morality is highly demanding.

The plan of this paper is as follows. The first section sets out the main elements of a cognitivist and virtue ethical approach to moral reasons. The second applies it to the test case of an argument that claims that one way in which one seeks to lead a non-alienated ethical life, a life of integrity, is incompatible with the requirements of consequentialism given certain very general facts about the moral state of the world. [Ashford, 2000] My

aim is both to undermine this line of argument and to clarify how an appeal to integrity allows one to resist the conclusion that morality is extremely demanding. Section three shows how an extremely demanding conclusion flows naturally from some of the main assumptions of impartialism. Section four further clarifies the claim that all moral reasons are reasonably partial. The fifth section develops my alternative view, treating integrity as a transcendental condition of beneficence in the context of the other virtues and comparing the argument with the parallel arguments of Robert Hanna and of T. D. C. Chappell. Section six explains how an appeal to the presuppositions of beneficence avoids the demanding conclusion. The final section rebuts another line of argument used in support of the extremely demanding conclusion, namely the use of epistemological contextualism. I conclude that the general approach to normative ethics defended here can accommodate both duties of immediate rescue and general and positive obligations while not conceding that ethics is extremely demanding in a philosophically problematic way.

### *1 Virtue Ethics, Cognitivism and Integrity*

In a recent paper I suggested a new line of argument in defence of a virtue ethical perspective on problems of normative ethics. [Thomas, 2005] The basic idea is that it is fundamental to our best theoretical account of conscious experience that it consists in absorption in its intentional objects. Our conscious experience is diaphanous; we consciously experience with it but are not conscious of it. [Thomas, 2003, 2006a] A consequence of this is that self-knowledge, too, must assign a central place to the related

intuition of transparency, provided that the mental state self-ascribed is an ‘outward directed’ belief. The transparency intuition is that in setting out to determine whether, for example, I believe that the Battle of Hastings took place in 1066 I put in place the very same procedures that establish the fact itself, namely, the date of the Battle of Hastings. [Moran, 2000; Thomas, 2003] Both questions, one about historical knowledge and one about self-knowledge, are settled by setting oneself to answer the ‘outer directed’ question.<sup>1</sup> Given that I am not only a virtue ethicist but also a moral cognitivist, it seems to me that our best reflective accounts of consciousness and self-knowledge and of the nature of moral considerations can be integrated around an understanding of this transparency point. Virtue is a form of knowledge. [Thomas, 2006b] It is a cognitive response to value, as well as an expression of fine inner states. [Swanton, 2000] A central core of ethical representations, those that Wiggins described as ‘specific evaluations’ are beliefs and hence must meet the transparency constraint. An avowal that self-ascribes an ethical belief must satisfy the constraint that such self-knowledge be non-alienated. This capacity to avow our knowledge is central to our concept of a person as a rational author of thoughts and actions. In avowal one expresses one’s identification with a theoretical or practical content and simultaneously integrates it into one’s beliefs and rational plans. [Moran, 2000]

I have argued that one ethically important respect in which one’s self-knowledge must meet this condition is that one’s relation to one’s own character cannot take the latter as an object. That looks like a suspiciously global and implausible claim: surely a person can decide to take the whole of her character as an object for her deliberations and

decide to be a better person tout court, not better in this or that respect? [Chappell, 2006]

In response, I use the term “object” in the same way as Sartre, who means something precise by it: your character is an object for you if you evade your responsibility for it by taking it as fixed, prior to the settling of those practical questions that both focus your existing virtues and, in sufficiently dramatic cases, determine your character. (At the very least, occasions of action contribute to your character in the weakest sense that you are, after the time of action, now a person who carried out that act.<sup>2</sup>) I would add, further, that there are psychologically realistic models of self-change in ethics than go to great lengths to treat one’s moral character as the indirect object of one’s ethical concern. The tradition of an art of living and the use of manuals or techniques of self-improvement from the ancient Stoics to Foucault emphasise the point that self-change requires an indirect ethical attention. [Nehamas, 2000] The idea of care of the self is, in this tradition, bound up with that of work on the self, including spiritual exercises, the keeping of letters and diaries and guidance by a mentor, all techniques that address the paradox that self-change seems unable to take oneself as its direct object. The issue, then, is not globalness versus localness when it comes to ethical self-criticism, but the fact that such self-criticism typically exhibits this kind of indirect focus. I would also connect this to the claim that all practical reasons are internal, an issue that I will briefly touch on below.<sup>3</sup>

If this argument can be made good, then an important consequence follows. Much recent writing on virtue ethics has aimed to subvert its explanatory superiority over other views by arguing that every normative ethical view can develop its own proprietary notion of virtue ethics, be it the deontological conception that character ought to be a

reliable instrument of the moral law, or the consequentialist conception that general traits of character can be consequentially evaluated in terms of their contribution to objectively conceived well being. This undercuts the claim that virtue ethics alone gives an account of normative ethics with distinctive explanatory advantages. However, the virtue ethicist can also respond to this intended undercutting manoeuvre by pointing out that virtue ethics is the only view that gives one a non-instrumental relation to one's character. My aim is to deepen that argument: virtue ethics is the only normative ethical view that makes possible a non-objectified view of one's character, where objectification is prior to instrumentality.

I intend this as a further gloss on a remark of Bernard Williams's that also, if taken seriously, places a serious obstacle in the path of those who want to undercut the distinctive explanatory advantages of virtue ethics:

Is there anywhere in the mind or in society that a theory of this kind can be coherently or acceptably located? The theory finds a value for these dispositions, but it is still an instrumental value. The dispositions are seen as devices for generating certain actions... That is what those dispositions seem like when seen from outside... But it is not what they seem from the inside... The dispositions help to form the character of an agent who has them, and they will do the job the theory has given them only if the agent does not see his character purely instrumentally, but sees the world from the point of view of that character. Moreover, the dispositions require the agent to see other things in a noninstrumental way. They are dispositions not simply of action, but of feeling and judgement, and they are expressed precisely in ascribing intrinsic and not instrumental value to such things as truth-telling, loyalty and so on. [Williams, 1985, p. 108, emphasis added]

This very general argument, then, points to a pervasive feature of how we view persons as non-alienated from those mental commitments that they are prepared to avow.

Identification is with a perspective from which one judges and acts, that cannot be an object for one's judgement. This is a more general argument than Williams's well-known integrity objection to consequentialism but it seems to me that this wider setting is the appropriate one for understanding his remarks about the "value" of integrity.

Furthermore, because the version of virtue ethics to which I am committed is combined with moral cognitivism it seems to me that an even stronger defence of this focus on integrity is available – or so I will argue in what follows.

## 2 *Understanding the Appeal to Integrity*

Tim Chappell has recently discussed the problematic reception of Williams's argument about integrity and his concerns parallel my own. [Chappell, 2006] Summarily put, it seemed to several of Williams's consequentialist critics that he was simply adding another consideration to the overall consequentialist determination of the rightness of outcomes, and a dubious consideration at that. As Chappell points out, that cannot be right: integrity is not a consideration for an agent and, therefore, not a consideration to be weighed in the balance alongside other considerations. Indeed, an agent who cites his or her integrity as a reason against a course of action seems, to use another Williams phrase, to have misdirected her ethical attention. Consider Williams's famous example, that initiated this appeal to integrity, of George the hapless chemist who has the "opportunity" of pursuing a career in chemical weapons research against his deepest convictions.

[Williams, 1973, pp. 116-117] If this is ethically reprehensible then how much more so is it to cite integrity as a reason against taking a job as a chemical weapons researcher

when, as both Williams and the act consequentialist agree, taking that job would be right? The framework I have sketched in already begins to give us some traction on the problem of how best to understand appeals to integrity: a corollary of the fact that one's character is something that one deliberates from, not with, in just the same way that one's conscious openness to the world is something that one thinks and acts from, not with, is the kind of first personal/third personal asymmetry in the use of terms of ethical appraisal emphasised by virtue ethicists since Aristotle.

A compassionate person has many features, including sensitivity to those considerations that ground the exercise of the virtue of compassion, but typically he or she does not conceive of proposed courses of action using the concept of **compassion** (except in the cases of the concepts of **justice** and **righteousness**). This feature generalises across a wide range of virtue terms. Similarly, integrity displays this kind of first personal/third personal asymmetry such that integrity is not a reason for an agent, but an interpretative artefact of our intentional stance towards him or her. It is a plausible candidate as an instance of such a first person/third person asymmetry. However, in the peculiar case of integrity one can add further considerations: ambivalent between a meta-level virtue and something of a more architectonic significance, connected to ethical meaningfulness, Williams's appeal to integrity seems to do double duty. [Williams, 1973] It is both an admirable quality of people and yet also grounds a class of considerations as a whole. It functions, as other parts of Williams's normative outlook do, more like a transcendental condition than an object of judgement. It explains how other, more particular, classes of consideration are possible. Very general identifications, such as

being a Quaker, or being a homemaker, or being a person of integrity, serve to demarcate which general classes of consideration are relevant, while “being a Quaker” may not itself function as a reason giving identification. (It seems odd to say, of such architectonic identifications, that a person has a reason to adopt them.)

The phrase “transcendental condition” refers to a certain kind of functional role. One and the same consideration may function in different contexts both in the kind of context determining role that I have highlighted, while elsewhere figuring as a reason alongside other reasons. On particular occasions of use it might be indeterminate which sense of a phrase is involved: suppose I further clarify George’s inability to research into chemical weapons, even when doing so is overall the best thing to be done, by telling you that he is a Quaker. Have I given you a certain kind of ultimate reason, that stops further argument in that context of enquiry, or supplied a very general identification that identifies a wider class of relevant reasons without itself being a reason? Either interpretation might be reasonable in a particular case, but it is the architectonic function of such considerations that seems to me more likely to be neglected when one reflects on the roles that these kinds of considerations play. That is particularly so in discussions of Williams’ integrity objection or more general discussions of the importance of a personal point of view.

Combine this account of how some considerations can function “architectonically” with cognitivism and several advantages follow. First, it is the cognitivism that makes clear that virtues are outer directed states, subject to the transparency constraint. A person who acts from integrity, as you might put it in your

interpretation of her actions, has an outer directed focus on the values bearing on decision, as she ought. Not only does this explain why she is not focused on her own integrity, it also poses problems for a certain kind of consequentialist response that argues that we can simply apply a “switching argument” to prove that integrity is, at best, an instrumental value and, in fact, in an extension to that argument, not a value at all.

Compare a slave owner, leading a life in which he abuses, humiliates and maltreats others with a person leading a virtuous life. Do they not, the consequentialist asks, have something in common? [Ashford, 2000, pp. 423-425] Surely they do, Elizabeth Ashford has argued: they are both committed to ground projects underpinned by their integrity.<sup>4</sup> A person of bad character leading an evil life can exhibit a steadfast commitment to slave owning, such that we can describe them as possessing integrity.

Cognitivism brings out just how disingenuous this argument is: the invitation to isolate the highest common factor across the life of a slave owner and that of a person living virtuously should be politely declined, just as the invitation to isolate the highest common factor between successful visual perception and visual delusion ought to be declined. [McDowell, 1998] In the relevant respect there is no such highest common factor: a commitment to narrow psychological explanation underpins the demand that there must be in both cases. But the exercise of virtue, like perception, is a way of acquiring world-involving knowledge, so one can set aside the ersatz integrity exhibited by both slave owners and virtuous people as entirely beside the point. There is no isolable highest common factor in these cases so we cannot isolate “integrity”, as a narrow

psychological feature of a person, that a person could possess without regard to whether that person is leading an admirable life or one of false consciousness or ethical error.

Having already accused the consequentialist of disingenuousness once, let me do so again, as I have not yet addressed the main line of response to the integrity argument. That is the response that for a consequentialist agent, adopting what may prove to be extremely demanding projects is no violation of her integrity. Indeed, such an agent will welcome an occasion to display integrity as it is precisely to display one's over-arching commitment always to do the right thing, in what, following Michael Smith, you might call the "de dicto" interpretation of that phrase. You are always required to do that which, in fact, falls under that description. [Smith, 1994] Shelley Kagan has argued that a demanding consequentialist ground project is in fact the highest freedom for a person whose ground project is, precisely, impartialist consequentialism. [Kagan, 1989]

I have chosen to phrase the consequentialist response this way, to bring out the disingenuous respect in which this line of response tries to argue that the consequentialist, like ordinary agents, can have a stable commitment to doing the right thing. I have already noted that the argument sketched in my first section is a general framework for understanding the integrity argument, related to it as genus to species. I think we need to have recourse to that general framework to illustrate what has gone wrong in this second disingenuous argument. Commitment is the genus, integrity a species of it, but while a ground project like "being a Quaker" can, on a particular occasion of use, function not as a form of knowledge but as an architectonic aspect of one's character that makes particular claims to knowledge available, it does share a feature with knowledge, namely

that it involves an element of commitment. That commitment within knowledge has always seemed to epistemologists to be stable, in a way that the consequentialist treatment of one's commitment to ground projects in our ordinary ethical thinking seems precisely to undercut. What strikes one as odd about the way in which Kagan, Parfit and others embrace Williams's argument is that precisely what he objected to was the contingency and instability of one's leading a meaningful life in some particular form (de re, as it were) being permanently open to consequentialist revision. I can now identify this disingenuousness: the consequentialist passes off the stability of his or her commitment always to do the right thing de dicto with our ordinary commitment always to do the right thing de re. These are, however, very different kinds of commitment, such that the former is hardly a commitment at all.

Recent treatments of knowledge have brought out one interesting feature of it, namely, its relation to luck. One influential line of thought is that more fundamental than ruling out salient alternatives to a particular knowledge claim is Sosa's safety principle: an agent S has a safe belief in a true contingent proposition if and only if in most near-by possible worlds in which S believes p, p is true. [Sosa, 2000; Prichard, 2005] We can directly connect this principle to one of hazard: the relevant sense of closeness here involves possible circumstances in which one's epistemic commitment is endangered.

Tim Williamson puts the point as follows:

We do have an intuitive notion of factual closeness and remoteness; it is neither doxastic nor epistemic. We find it in the ordinary concept of danger...Thrown into the sea with your legs tied together, you are usually in danger of drowning, whether you know your situation or are under an illusion...What matters is whether or not you are in

fact likely to drown; what you believe or know has no constitutive relevance.  
[Williamson, 2001, p. 32]

We can extend this thought to the consequentialist's response to the integrity argument: intuitively, what is objectionable to the consequentialist's ersatz notion of commitment is that it is either too chancy, or not chancy enough, depending on whether we read that commitment de re or de dicto. As I have already noted, the kind of ground project that Williams was concerned with was not a form of knowledge, but more like a condition that made other particular forms of knowledge possible. However, we do take it that, as a form of commitment or identification, it meets an analogue of the safety condition in that it ought to be a robust commitment. The consequentialist's notion of ersatz integrity is insufficiently robust to play that role and is thus in two respects insufficient as a response to the integrity argument. In the sense in which Williams connects integrity with a condition on possessing ground projects in a stable and robust way, and then connects the idea of a ground project with the idea of leading an ethically meaningful life, we can see that the consequentialist's claim that, for a person committed to consequentialism, ethics is not demanding is indeed disingenuous. One's ordinary notion of a ground project cannot be permanently at moral hazard given contingent conditions wholly outside one's control.

### 3 *Benevolence, Impartiality and Ethical Demandingness*

Let me turn now to the problem of moral demandingness that can be simply described. [Fishkin, 1982; Cullity, 2004] An uncontentious core of common sense morality can be described as follows: there are large areas of our life that do not give rise to moral issues at all. There is a zone of moral neutrality. (I prefer this to Fishkin's term "indifference".) There is a range of action descriptions open to us where the proposed action is described as obligatory and a range which characterise acts as heroic, such that you are not blameworthy if you do not perform those acts but especially admirable if you do. A further assumption of common sense morality is that when we categorise actions morally our descriptions are mutually exclusive, in the sense that one and the same action cannot be neutral and heroic, obligatory and heroic, obligatory and neutral and so on.

If you can save a life at very little cost to yourself in a situation of immediate rescue this action is obligatory: you would be wrong if you did not do it. Minimally decent Samaritanism seems morally required, even if you are not committed to this action by a social role, by inherited obligation or by a voluntarily assumed obligation. Cases of immediate rescue exhibit the features of immediacy, both physical and moral, and detailed knowledge of salient features, particularly the victim's vulnerability. Via the introduction of a life saving analogy these cases of immediate rescue are used to introduce a different class of reasons. [Singer, 1972] Extended by analogical reasoning to this further class of case, it seems that the virtue of benevolence commits you to respond to a positive and general duty; positive because you are required to act, general because it is owed to humanity in general. Only two kinds of view will deny the existence of such obligations: a particular kind of foundational and entirely rights based ethical theory or a

view that denies that obligations can ever be wholly general in form. (Both of these positions seem independently problematic.)

The problem of demandingness arises if one combines two thoughts: that there is a significant analogy between cases of immediate rescue and the humanitarian claims of those in other societies who are leading lives of great impoverishment such that their lives are routinely endangered or their quality significantly impaired. Secondly, one can think of responding to the needs of each of the distantly impoverished one at a time, or as Cullity puts it, iteratively. [Cullity, 2004, pp. 70-71, 78] If one does combine this analogy with the iterative interpretation then if it is wrong not to help in an immediate rescue situation, then it is wrong not to continue to give one's resources, including one's time, to each of the persons affected when one responds to a general and positive obligation of benevolence. However, iterated, this succession of requirements will reduce the person who gives the life saving assistance to the point where it seem she is only permitted to stop assisting at the point where her own further capacity to continue assistance is endangered. I will refer to this latter position as 'the extreme demand' and will treat it as a *reductio ad absurdum* of any set of assumptions that generate it.

That the practical implication of the virtue of benevolence, given the obvious facts about the low quality of life of many people in the contemporary world, is this extremely demanding conclusion is a consequence accepted by several impartialist philosophers.<sup>5</sup> In his attempt to rebut these views Garret Cullity, who has developed the most sophisticated response to these arguments, is led to a variant of an impartialist position which is, once again, significantly revisionary towards our ordinary views.<sup>6</sup>

[Cullity, 2004] Notably, there seems to be no room in his final position for either a zone of moral indifference or a meaningful sense of supererogation. How might one resist the slippery slope to the extreme demand more successfully than Cullity?

The first point to be made, as Cullity points out, is that there is a clear sense in which we can see that the reasoning leading up to the extreme demands is fallacious as it is analogous to familiar Sorites-style reasoning. It is argued, on the basis of the life saving analogy, that if there is a duty of immediate rescue, then there an equally stringent obligation to help the distant impoverished, but the grounds of the latter claim are assumed to be claims on the part of individuals such that those claims can be iterated. Iteration proceeds until the extreme demand is justified, but that is a familiar instance of a familiar paradox. One might hesitate before describing the alternative approach to the problem an instance of that which Cullity calls ‘aggregative thinking’, on the basis of Anscombe’s point that there are no moral analogues of “class action” suits in law, however, a virtue ethical approach explains why the demands of benevolence can reasonably be expected to be satisfied before one has reached the point of the extreme demand. It is simply not empirically plausible to represent ethical demands as free from vagueness in the way that allows one to set up the iterative component of the reasoning leading to the extreme conclusion.<sup>7</sup> From a virtue ethical perspective, this is another instance of where the requirements of instrumental rationality must be embedded in a wider account of practical reasonableness. Introducing the idea of moral character immediately introduces a diachronic dimension of judgements of right action missing from the iterative conception in so far as it bears on demands on the agent. Not every

ground of a requirement is also the ground of a demand, when viewed from the perspective of the practically reasonable and benevolent agent.

Nevertheless, knowing that there is an indeterminate point at which the demands of benevolence can reasonably be taken to have been met offers only part of a response to the concerns underpinning the argument that leads to the extreme demand. In addition to this negative argument, we need a positive argument for resisting this line of thought. That is where I believe some of the considerations I mooted in the opening section of this paper can help in the development of such an argument.

#### *4 Resisting the Extreme Demand: the Partiality of Moral Reasons*

First, a remark about what one might call the geography of possible positions. A major obstacle to any positive resolution to the problem of demandingness is that it seems it is generated by intuitions that are so well grounded that it is intolerably costly to deny them. All that is required is the simple impartialist thought that each person is equally real and that each successive person who generates demands on the benevolent agent does so iteratively. Tim Chappell has suggested that a view such as mine is committed to denying the cogency of these simple and uncontested intuitions and is unacceptable for those reasons. Naturally, I want to resist that thought. The kinds of consideration that I have presented in the first section of this paper support the claim that there are only reasonably partial moral reasons. (I have presented these arguments more fully elsewhere.) [Thomas, 2005] However, my commitment to reasonable partiality is qualified by two caveats. The first is that, given a virtue ethical perspective, an agent's reasons are always subject to the

background constraint of the operation of the other virtues, guided by overall practical reasonableness. In particular, they are constrained by justice. Secondly, as a contingent truth, certain of our values can receive a procedural specification, whereas the understanding of other values indicates that most cannot. In particular, we can give a procedural specification of justice, modulo a general “thick theory” of the good. [Rawls, 1971] For those two reasons I am prepared to concede that the impartialist modelling of justice can seem like a plausible view: this is not the same as an admission that all moral reasons are, of their very nature, impartial reasons.

Given that this is how I understand an appeal to partial reasons, I am resistant, as others in this debate are not, to the idea that a key thought in generating the extreme demand is Sidgwick’s claim that a substantial impartialism can be motivated solely by a conception of oneself as amongst a range of separate people who are equally real and whose concerns and interest are of equal impartial importance. That thought can itself then take two forms: the claim that there are only agent-neutral values, or that there are agent-neutral reasons that must be taken into account alongside agent-relative reasons. In that sense Chappell is right: I do deny that moral reasons are impartial. In another sense he is incorrect: I do not deny the cogency of the Sidgwickian perspective, merely its reflective impact. Believing that all moral reasons are reasonably partial is certainly compatible with a reminder that there are other people whose interests matter. Nothing in that claim destabilises the thought that my point of view of the world is mine, and from here. There are, indeed, other people whose interests and concerns are as important as your own. We can all agree that a morally solipsistic egoism is a grave moral fault. Since,

then, this description of the objective demands placed on moral judgement is all that the impartialist thought can amount to, we do not have to go along with the requirement that its demands be balanced with those of a partialist perspective, or that the latter can in fact only operate under a local license granted to it by the impartial perspective. There are only reasonably partial reasons plus the demands of justice. That picture contrasts with those impartialist views that have the most difficulty resisting the extreme demand, amongst which I include the hybrid ethical views of Scheffler, Nagel and Cullity alongside the impartialist consequentialism of Kagan, Ashford and Unger.

How, then, on the basis of a general understanding of ethical reasons as reasonably partial, reflecting an agent's virtues as a form of knowledge, and as grounded on the deeper requirement that one stand in a non-alienated relation to one's own epistemic commitments, might one begin to develop an argument against the claim that morality is extremely demanding? Let me begin by considering three arguments that seem to me not wholly successful attempts to develop a response similar to my own before setting out my own view.

##### 5 *Agents, Contexts and Reasons*

I will begin with an argument against Unger's reasoning to the extremely demanding conclusion developed by Robert Hanna. He argues that that which Unger rejects under the heading of "separational thinking" is a legitimate component of moral reasoning:

It seems to me that the insider/outsider distinction is not an artificial construct, but rather reflects a primitive fact about our moral lives...those lives are essentially

indexical or contextual: we cannot fully eliminate a reference to the special point of view – or ‘personal horizon’ – of the human moral agent in making either first-order moral decisions or second-order moral judgements about those first order decisions...separational thinking is a condition of the possibility of human moral life itself...given the brute fact that moral life is essentially contextual, and given the deep or ‘transcendental’ connection between moral judgement, contexts and moral situations...moral judgements are legitimately based on discriminations between insiders and outsiders. [Hanna, 1998, pp. 462-463]

There are two aspects of Hanna’s argument that seem to me correct. The first is his recognition that any general argument against the extremely demanding conclusion will take the form of a transcendental argument. The second is that, in contrast to the Sidgwickian thought, ordinary moral agents lead their moral lives not from the point of view of the universe, but from the point of view from here, where that is indexically tied to the particular kind of agent that they are. It is from that perspective that their interests allow them to identify particular contexts that are salient to particular moral judgements. However, and this is where the discussion of the first part of this paper can play an important supplementary role, there is a fundamental first person/third person asymmetry in this talk of perspectives that is integral to the virtue ethical perspective itself. The virtuous agent takes herself to be responding to the various demands presented to her as salient by the world in a way that is disciplined and hence objective. It seems, third personally, that the evaluative domains of the different virtues single out aspects of the world as relevant and that practical reasoning is informed by an unavoidable psychologism: a person’s reasons are those accessible by sound deliberation from (metaphorically) here. However, from the first personal perspective the agent’s sole concern is to respond, in an objective way, to what is valuable.

However, promising though Hanna's arguments are, I am not sure that they are finally successful in resisting the extreme demand. It seems to me that there are three ideas here that need to be separated out: that lives are lived from a particular perspective on value, not simply as a particular instantiation of the Sidgwickian point of view; that moral individualism is defensible moral idea and that our moral judgements are often contextually sensitive to relevant alternatives. It seems to me that the best way to develop the first two of these thoughts is that we can only understand reasons of benevolence in terms of attachments more local than those of the Sidgwickian point of view, but that we are not going to get very far with the third thought. This is because the reasoning leading up to the extreme demand begins by acknowledging the thought that common sense morality often individuates moral situations in such a way as to determine a space of relevant alternatives, but then simply redraws the salient boundary of a context in such a way as to motivate the extreme demand. I will return to this point when I discuss the contextualist component of arguments for the extreme demand in section seven. But Hanna's idea is that we can cash out the idea of a context very literally as a discriminable situation:

What is separational moral thinking? It is to think of the world as filled with 'moral situations'...discriminable real world events... This distinction is not a matter of mere physical distance or causal relevance: it is, instead...a matter of psycho-social distance and practical relevance. [Hanna, 1998, p. 462]

The problem with the first version of those thoughts is that, ironically, the contextualist argument for demandingness makes the perfectly reasonable point that in the only

relevant sense of context there is only one such context. I will return to this point in my final section below, but more promising is Hanna's appeal to 'practical relevance'. That is best interpreted, I would argue, as the claim that practical reasons are all 'internal reasons'.

That is one important respect in which my position differs from that of Chappell, who has argued, in a similar vein, that the relevant argument here must be a transcendental one and, in particular, that an agent who is alienated from his or her ground projects is not able to act on reasons at all, a conclusion that seems to me overstated. [Chappell, 2006] His basic argument is that the world contains many evaluatively relevant states of affairs that are potentially reasons for an agent, but that not all of these reasons can be an agent's reasons on the contextual basis that they cannot be integrated into the particular evaluative profile of a particular agent's life. My concern about this argument is similar to that of my concern about Hanna's. From the fact that reasons are only accepted from within the context of a particular agent's salient concerns it seems to me difficult to generate a constraint on their content. (The internal reasons theorist, by contrast, connects these two issues in a way Chappell cannot.) Unger and Ashford precisely believe that simply drawing the agent's attention to the concern expressed by the extreme demand is to make it salient to any agent. Recall that Chappell agrees that the Sidgwickian thought that everyone's life has the same impartial value is the philosophical expression of an intuition that is simply part of everyone's common sense moral outlook. That seems to me to concede everything needed to resurrect the argument for the

extremely demanding conclusion. The most promising line of resistance, it seems to me, is to draw on the internal reasons thesis, which Chappell thinks is false.

I do not want the argument of this paper to rest entirely on the internal reasons thesis given that this thesis is a matter of recurrent controversy. [Williams, 1985a; Thomas, 2006, chapter 4] That is partly because I understand that thesis as not committed to any substantive Humeanism, but rather as combining three features: a content scepticism about the possibility of pure reason being practical, a refusal to idealise the idea of a practically rational agent and the requirement that the truth conditions of a reason ascription are relativised to those particular agents that are their putative subject. However, the thesis does seem to me to put further pressure on the idea that the world is, as it were, made up of an indefinite number of individuable states of affairs, each potentially reason generating, that can support the iterative conception of how demands on an agent arise and can be met. I will not develop this argument any further here besides noting, as Cullity notes, the role played by an appeal to internal reasons in defending the distinction between duties of immediate rescue and general and positive obligations. [Cullity, 2004, p. 248, n. 36; Williams, 1985, p. 186; Blackburn, pp. 211-212] What we have here is, precisely, an analogy and not an identity.

I draw three conclusions from Hanna's and Chappell's arguments. The first is that one cannot allow the impartialist to annexe the idea of a moral reason. In understanding how reasons are always from a "here" that is more local than the point of view of the universe, that has, as it were, to be a constitutive point about the nature of moral reasons as always reasonably partial. In understanding the Sidgwickian thought from a reasonably

partial perspective I have argued that it is simply a reminder of the virtues and vices inherent in trying to judge objectively. Secondly, the required argument from the possibility of a personal point of view to resisting the extremely demanding conclusion has to take the form of a transcendental argument. Thirdly, the relevant argument cannot be contextualist: an appeal to the way in which common sense morality individuates situations or contexts will not help.

### 6 *The Presuppositions of Beneficence*

The best prospects for resisting the problem of moral demandingness, I suggest, starts from the claim that one's most general ethical interest is in living well, but in a way that incorporates a direct altruistic concern for those with whom one stands in an ethically significant relation. Ethical concern certainly extends beyond one's nearest and dearest to general and positive obligations to humanity in general, but cannot reach the self-stultifying point at which the demands of benevolence undermine the point of one's leading an ethical life at all. Furthermore, the emphasis on character points to a diachronic focus that supports the idea that one cannot think of moral demands as simply iterated without regard for the involved agent's past history of benevolent action, such that the one thousand and first case placing a demand on your virtue of benevolence requires the same response from you as the first without concern for your prior history of benevolent action.

That is the general framework of the argument but it requires more precise specification: the kind of argument required is, as Cullity points out, an argument from

the presuppositions of beneficence and Williams's argument in 'Persons, Character and Morality' took this general form:

My present projects are the condition of my existence, in the sense that unless I am propelled forward by the conatus of desire, project and interest it is unclear why I should go on at all...Life has to have substance if anything is to have sense, including inherence to the impartial system; but if it has substance, then it cannot grant adherence to the impartial system, and that system's hold on it will be, at the limit, insecure. [Williams, 1985b, p. 12]

It is self-stultifying to understand the demands of objectivity as a discipline imposed on judgement by impartiality, only for impartiality to then motivate a theoretical account of beneficence that removes an agent's reason to take anything to be of ethical importance at all.

It seems to me that this argument can be strengthened by taking into account Thomas Scanlon's view that it is not always appropriate to record a certain kind of ethical loss as a cost. [Scanlon, 1998, chapter 3; Cullity, 2004, p. 94] In his subtle discussion of the role of the concept of well being in moral argument, Scanlon argues that no single concept plays the disparate roles assigned to it in first personal deliberation, the stance of a benevolent adviser, or in theories of distributive justice. From the first personal point of view, in setting out his neo-Aristotelian account of well being Scanlon draws on the same phenomenological considerations about diaphanousness that I have described in order to support his claim that:

From an individual's perspective...what matters are these goals and other particular values, not the idea of well-being that they make up...An individual who rationally

holds these values has reason to deliberate and act as they require...as I argued...this is not the same thing as seeking to maximize the degree to which one's actions, over one's whole life, are in conformity with these values...from an individual's point of view many of the things that contribute to his or her well-being are valued for quite other reasons. From this point of view the idea of one's own well-being is transparent. When we focus on it it largely disappears, leaving only the values that make it up. [Scanlon, 1998, p. 133]

Certain kinds of ways of living make certain goods available to an agent and make certain considerations salient to judgement: those values and reasons call for a response from the agent and the agent does not always, indeed sometimes must not, think of those reasons in terms of egocentric benefits. More radically, in comparing the kinds of architectonic, structuring identifications that Williams had in mind when he spoke of ground projects, a transition between such identifications may involve an incommensurability in values that is misrepresented when such change is represented either as a "cost" or as a "gain".<sup>8</sup>

This stance towards well being contrasts with that of the consequentialist who looks, precisely, for one concept to play the three disparate roles that Scanlon outlines. From his or her third personal perspective on an agent, the consequentialist draws up a balance sheet of costs and losses across self and other, assuming that these are comparable. From that perspective, one can now level the charge that a life of integrity is costly and, in the contingent circumstances of the world, too costly. I am now in a position to return to Ashford's argument that Williams's integrity based view that consequentialism is objectionable, precisely because it is too demanding, is unsustainable. There are two respects in which I am unhappy with that argument: first, integrity is not a consideration for an agent, so it cannot be a cost to the agent to lose it.

Secondly, the loss of a ground project is, once again, not correctly registered as a cost given Scanlon's point that losing certain goods and the reasons to pursue them in one's life is not a matter of incurring costs as, conversely, an agent does not respond to these goods and reasons with a view to adding to her well-being.<sup>9</sup>

### 7 *Epistemological Contextualism and Demandingness*

There is one particular ground for the claim that ethics is very demanding that is worthy of separate consideration and that is the appeal to epistemological contextualism. A commitment to contextualism is explicit in the work of Peter Unger but, as I will argue, I believe it is detectable in Ashford's arguments too. [Unger, 1984, 1996, 2006a, 2006b]

An epistemological contextualist argues that there is a concealed relativity in knowledge attributions in that such attributions are guided by context specific standards governing a particular conversational context. To adapt a well-known example from Keith De Rose, suppose I ask you whether or not the bank is open on Saturday. On the basis that this is a casual enquiry, you respond that 'yes, it is'. However, suppose that this is a high stakes context. Suppose that today is Friday and that it would take a great deal of time and trouble, and I would have to miss an important meeting, to get to the bank today.

However, if I don't get to the bank to authorise a transfer of funds either today or tomorrow, then I will miss the opportunity to put down a deposit on a house that I really want to purchase. Now the evidence for your claim to know that the bank is open tomorrow, Saturday, has to be much higher: the context relative standards for knowledge have risen in the shift from a low stakes to a high stakes context. The fact that you once

went to the bank on a Saturday and it was open is now not enough to support your claim to know; you had better have more evidence than that.

What mandates a change in context? Importantly for the present discussion, Unger appeals to Lewis's rule of attention: I simply have to draw your attention to unnoticed epistemically accessible possibilities to increase the demandingness of the implicit standards governing that particular conversational context. [Unger, 1984, 2006b; Lewis, 1999] In the case of the problem of ethical demandingness, it is noteworthy that two of the ordinary aspects of an appeal to epistemological contextualism are missing in Unger's presentation and this is directly connected to his use of the rule of attention. The first striking omission is that contextualism is usually used to localise and hence defuse scepticism. The idea is that the sceptic operates in a "high stakes" context, the ordinary person making an ordinary claim to know, by contrast, operates in a "low stakes" context and that with this implicit relativisation highlighted one can resist sceptical conclusions. The sceptic's higher standards are simply not mandatory as she claims that they are. The second, related, striking omission is that when one moves between contexts, standards usually rise and fall in a contextualist interpretation of our ordinary practice. However, in Unger's presentation it seems clear that when one's ordinary epistemic standards for judgements about the demandingness of morality have been significantly revised upwards, they do not fall again. That is because Unger believes that simply drawing your attention, via thought experiments, to your genuine values uncovers what the governing standards really are, such that the psychological obstructions in the path of acknowledging these truths can then be explained away. In this case, then, contextualism is a vehicle of

scepticism, not a means of resisting it. In his discussion of the parallelism between epistemological and ethical contextualism Unger does not highlight this striking asymmetry.

Note a crucial assumption about this ethical use of standards raising contextualism in defence of a sceptical conclusion: the claim that our ordinary “low stakes” context is an illusion, such that we are in fact in a “high stakes” context, but we do not realise it. Having one’s attention drawn to the implicit commitments of one’s ordinary context suffices to reveal that it conceals an underlying, more stringent context whose point is concealed by the demands of the quotidian context. As an understanding of how a sceptic might use standards raising contextualism, that seems to me both exactly right and to explain why standards raising contextualism is, in itself, of no assistance in resisting radical scepticism. It will only allow one to resist radical scepticism if one adds the further claims that the ordinary (‘low stakes’) and sceptical (‘high stakes’) contexts are distinct and that the sceptic’s invocation of the latter is arbitrary and unmotivated. However, that is not how the sceptic typically proceeds: she argues that our ordinary contexts of epistemic appraisal are, implicitly, high stakes contexts but that we do not realise this. Sceptical argument serves precisely to draw one’s attention to the fact that you don’t know which context you are in until the sceptic’s reflections enlighten you.

I think it is helpful to view both Unger’s and Ashford’s arguments in this light: Unger’s contextualism and scepticism are explicit, but in Ashford’s case the argument takes the form of interpreting Williams’s arguments about integrity as drawing attention to a value, but then pointing out that given the contingent facts about how the world is,

integrity is a cost that is unaffordable relative to other more stringent demands placed on us by humanitarian obligations:

Utilitarian demands are for the sake of the interests and ground projects of particular individuals. The stringency of these demands in the current situation arises from the fact that extreme poverty threatens many person's most basic interests and ground projects, such as not seeing their children die from preventable disease. [Ashford, 2000, p. 438]

Note the appeal here to "the current situation" which, from the context of Ashford's discussion seems to be the entire current state of the world. Unfortunately, however, I do not think that introducing contextualism does anything to strengthen the case that ethics is highly demanding in either Unger's or Ashford's case. That is for the simple reason that this is a very implausible use of contextualism as it implies that, in ordinary contexts of evaluation, ethics is assumed to be undemanding. All that it takes is a shift in attention to register the truth that, in fact, it is highly demanding. This is, however, simply a mis-description of ordinary contexts of assessment. Consider this case:

Mr Lee lives in a small village in China. His moral outlook consists in self-concern, regard for his family and concern for other villagers in general. He would assist any strangers who came to the village who were in need but none ever have come to his village in living memory. But this did happen in a story that Mr Lee was told once about something that happened in a nearby village, and on that basis he would help such a person.

This looks like the contextualist's ordinary context of appraisal: Mr Lee's standards are very lax, but if we were able to draw his attention to the many people starving elsewhere in the world, the applicable standards would rise and his commitment to general

humanitarian obligations would overwhelm his other obligations and take up all his time and resources, commensurate with his continuing to sustain himself in such a way as to remain productive enough to meet his general and positive duties.

However, my description of the case was deliberately incomplete. Mr Lee lived his life in the fifth century AD. At that time many people lived lives of poor quality, blighted by poverty and illness, but Mr Lee had no means of knowing this and no means of taking any effective action had he known this. In his village he barely had knowledge of the rest of China, or of distant cities like Peking and no knowledge of those who were starving in different parts of the world. I take it this relativisation to circumstance leads us to withdraw our judgement that his context was implicitly a high stakes context, such that he did not know that that was the context that he was in.

Contemporary contextualism, however, as used to argue that ethics is highly demanding, represents us as no better off than Mr Lee. While emphasising global connectedness and the irrelevance of distance, contemporary contextualists simply represent our ordinary contexts of epistemic appraisal as inherently parochial. That simply seems to me untrue. This common way of describing the ordinary contexts of appraisal seems to me to invite scepticism, as the relevant alternatives to which the sceptic draws attention are simply excluded from the description. We are represented as living by a parochial morality that dictates, as it were, the terms of small-scale interaction and then being surprised by the discovery that large spaces are made up of small spaces. I take it that this should be no more of a surprise about morality than about the relative size of spaces.

What the sceptic has lost here is any dialectical leverage. A successful contextualist standards raising argument needs to convince us that the context to which we are already committed, our ordinary context, contains within itself a commitment that is not authentically honoured in that context, such that we are remaining faithful to that commitment in recognising that we have occupied a high stakes context all along.

[Thomas, 2006, chapter 7] However, by starting the argument with a description of something called ‘common sense morality’ that is simply defective on the grounds that it is incomplete, so the sceptic undercuts the only effective motive she could cite for this recognition, on our part, that we are living our globally connected twenty first century lives as if we were medieval Chinese villagers.

This seems to me to misrepresent our ordinary outlook: that outlook itself contains an acknowledgement of positive and general obligations, alongside duties of immediate rescue and the more familiar categories of obligation and permission. I think we should simply reject the thought that ordinary morality is insensitive to these considerations until, in some conversational context, our attention is drawn to them. Secondly, an implicit individualism in our thinking about morality is not a commitment to the iterative conception that generates the argument for the extreme demand. If there is, in fact, any contextual variation in ordinary moral thinking it is of a kind that undermines the argument for the extreme conclusion. Mill’s famous passage on Comte’s act utilitarianism ran as follows:

The golden rule of morality, in M. Comte’s religion, is to live for others, ‘vivre pour autrui’...Novalis said of Spinoza that he was a God-intoxicated man: M. Comte is a

morality-intoxicated man. Every question with him is one of morality, and no motive but that of morality is permitted... The regimen of a blockaded town should be cheerfully submitted to when high purposes require it, but is it the ideal perfection of human existence? M. Comte sees none of these difficulties. [Mill, vol x, pp. 335-336, 337]

My interest in this passage is not in Mill's evident commitment to rule consequentialism, but in his recognition of the contextualism implicit in ordinary moral thinking well expressed by his analogy of 'the regimen of a blockaded town', where we might suppose that issues that ordinarily fall in the zone of moral neutrality, such as whether I use the limited supply of fresh water to clean my teeth, now become morally relevant. That is, however, not contextualism in the Unger sense. Attributor contextualism is not going to allow one to develop a novel argument in support of the claim that ethics is highly demanding, because Unger's subtle views are easily misrepresented. It is easy to fall into thinking of an Unger-style context as something like an individuable situation. But what he actually means by a context is the context of utterance in which an occasion sentence is appraised by an attributor, and a conversational context is not an individuable context in the sense in which, for example, Hanna appealed to local contexts to support the legitimacy of separational thinking.

To approach the current discussion from another direction, we have learnt from Thompson Clarke to treat the words of a sceptic either 'plainly' or 'philosophically'. [Clarke, 1972] Plainly, I think when Ashford, for example, argues that the current state of the world is one of a constant and on-going emergency in any plain sense of that description it emerges as empirically false. The current state of the world makes our general and positive obligations very demanding, undoubtedly, but that is not to obliterate

the distinction between the duty of immediate rescue and humanitarian duties; nor is it a proof of the explanatory depth of consequentialism, uniquely placed both to bring us the bad news and to theorise about it. Philosophically, when it is argued that the current state of the world is one of a constant and on-going emergency, only by overlooking Cullity's point that the life saving analogy is an analogy and not an identity could one sustain the ramping up of our standards to the point of that which Mill called moral intoxication. I conclude that contextualism does nothing to make the case that ethics is highly demanding any more plausible than the use of a life saving analogy and the impartialist conception of values and reasons that more usually motivate that conclusion taken together.

### *Conclusion*

There is no small irony in the fact that a great deal of philosophical work on the most urgent of contemporary moral problems seems to operate at a degree of abstraction far removed from that of people's ordinary moral outlooks. Issues about the demandingness of morality have become concealed by a separate, highly theorised, discussion, as to whether the representation of the demands of morality in impartialist ethical theories is, or is not, an advantage or disadvantage of such views. This paper has, regrettably, continued this tradition of operating at one remove from the moral issue, but with a view to setting aside what seem to me to be damaging misrepresentations of the capacity of common sense morality to acknowledge the existence of general and positive obligations. The separate task of determining the stringency of such obligations does not seem to me

to be a philosophical task, but this paper aims to have indirectly contributed to approaching that task without underestimating the materials that common sense morality already has to hand.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, the term “transparency” is best reserved for precisely this relation, namely, that the answer to the second question is “transparent to” the first.

<sup>2</sup> If that looks circular it is no more circular than the claim that literary characters are the determinants of literary plots, and that literary plots are the unfolding of actions and events that are expressive of literary character.

<sup>3</sup> The familiar paradigm of global and direct change, applied to moral character, is that of conversion. It is striking that those who think conversion is an appropriate model for a certain kind of moral change appeal to it to defend the idea that moral reasons can be external, an issue that I will touch on below. See, for example, John McDowell, ‘Might there be External Reasons?’ in Altham and Harrison, [1995].

<sup>4</sup> Ought I not to distinguish between act and rule consequentialism? Ashford thinks so; Chappell [2006] disagrees if the focus is solely on the argument from integrity. In this he follows Williams, [1973, pp. 79, 81] who claims that his critique depends on the teleological aspect of consequentialism. Brink [1986] argues that the familiar distinction between a decision procedure and theory of right making features can allow indirect consequentialism to respect the demands of the personal point of view (at least “in normal circumstances”, p. 424); for an effective response see Harcourt, [1998].

<sup>5</sup> The extreme demand, or demands only notionally less extreme, has been endorsed by Peter Singer, Peter Unger and Shelley Kagan. A less demanding, but nonetheless far more demanding than common sense morality’s conception of the limits of individual responsibility, view, has been defended by Elizabeth Ashford and Liam Murphy.

<sup>6</sup> Cullity actually describes his final view as “a moderately demanding one ... It is revisionary, though, in a demanding direction”. That strikes me as something of an understatement, but it is made, from within an impartialist perspective, to distinguish Cullity’s views from those of consequentialists who view the demands of morality as extremely demanding. That gives Cullity his sense of “moderate”. Qua impartialist his view seems to me vulnerable to the “one thought too many objection”; restricting one’s personal spending, for example, in a principled way remains, on Cullity’s view, something that you are *permitted* to do so. (Provided you have conducted an annual review of your major spending plans and do not intend to use your resources in way that is not impartially defensible.) There is, on this view, no zone of moral neutrality in the use of one’s resources.

<sup>7</sup> A point that Philip Stratton-Lake made to me in conversation.

<sup>8</sup> These considerations may also have a bearing on the problem that may be called “Slote’s Paradox”. [Slote, 1992] One of the many arguments that Michael Slote gives for a virtue ethical perspective that has a direct bearing on the issue of moral demandingness is the puzzle of what he takes to be an incoherence in common sense morality on self/other asymmetry. Slote accuses common sense morality of sanctioning an irrational self/other asymmetry in which benefits to oneself are morally discounted whereas

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benefits to another morally count. I agree with Slote that we ought to adopt virtue ethics and that we ought not to adopt a reflective account of morality that downgrades one's own moral agency. However, Scanlon's arguments about well-being pose problems for understanding the reasoning to this conclusion as starting from the paradox of self/other asymmetry: there is no single concept of well-being available that spans benefits to another and benefits to oneself.

<sup>9</sup> For a related argument that focuses on the problem for all kinds of consequentialism that it has to represent relations to values by preference orderings see Harcourt, [1998].

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Kathryn Brown, Tim Chappell, Garrett Cullity, Roger Crisp and Simon Kirchin for their help with this paper.