Partiality Traps and our Need for Risk-Aware Ethics and Epistemology

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“Our eyes see nothing behind us. A hundred times a day we make fun in the person of our neighbor, and detest in others, defects which are more clearly present in ourselves, and we marvel at them with prodigious impudence and heedlessness. Oh, importunate presumption!” –Michelle de Montaigne

Abstract. Virtue theories can plausibly be argued to have important advantages over normative ethical theories which prescribe a strict impartialism in moral judgment, or which neglect people’s special roles and relationships. However, there are clear examples of both virtuous and vicious partiality in people’s moral judgments, and virtue theorists may struggle to adequately distinguish them, much as proponents of other normative ethical theories do. This paper first adapts the “expanding moral circle” concept in order to illustrate the difficulty of adequately distinguishing virtuous from vicious partiality. Later sections aim to show how an adequate philosophical ethics will be able to both a) attribute virtue (and hence praiseworthiness) to agents whose actions may directly serve only their special interests, roles, or special relationships; and b) attribute vice (and hence censure) where agents’ attitudes and/or actions mirror known personal biases (for instance, an egoistic attitude) or social biases (for instance, an ethnocentric attitude). This dual ability leaves space for much virtuous partiality, while also reflecting a “risk-aware” approach, recognizing the deleterious consequences of our human penchant for constructing and imbuing moral significance to oftentimes factitious us/them dichotomies.
1. Partiality, Virtue, and Vice

This collection has as its central focus the problematic nature of properly distinguishing between virtuous and vicious partiality. There are clear instances of actions which are representative of each; but when as philosophers we consider how to sort cases, we are confronted with a long-standing puzzle: a puzzle concerning the proper balance between our general moral obligations (obligations associated with reasoning impartially and treating others as equals), and our specific or relational moral obligations to a smaller subset of people: our family, our nation, our friends, etc.

How well are extent normative ethical theories equipped to deal with this problematic? If we assess an answer to this by looking to the master principles which normative ethical theories have typically tried to supply, I think we have to say that extent theories are pretty ill-equipped to deal with it. How to properly distinguish between virtuous and vicious partiality, and how to establish the mentioned balance, are questions addressed neither in the norms that normative ethical theories provide to evaluate agents and their actions, nor in the moral guidance that they prescribe. Among normative ethical theories, deontology and consequentialism each propose a master principle for decision-making, a principle demanding impartiality in an agent’s moral deliberations. Virtue ethics (and care ethics, if one wants to distinguish it) seems not to supply such a master principle, and is often criticized by its ‘rivals’ on this account. Yet it may be advantageous not to be tied to strict impartiality as the measure of moral intensions: resistance to such a claim allows philosophers to make needed space for virtuous partiality in special relationships, and to defend the integrity of person’s fulfilling social roles and localized commitments. Virtue ethics also allows acknowledgement of quite substantial cultural-variance
in aretaic concepts, while yet supporting genuinely universal virtues like justice, care, toleration, etc.

Still, virtue theorists may struggle to adequately distinguish virtuous and vicious partiality much as proponents of other normative ethical theories do. We should perhaps begin by acknowledging that all normative ethical theories appear to flounder on this problem to a lesser or greater extent. This chapter will explore the reasons why this problem is so ubiquitous in our moral experience, yet challenging for ethical theory to take proper account of. We need an account that makes place for social roles and that issues guidance that allows agents to balance between their general moral obligations and more specific moral obligations. At the same time, we need an account which supplies tools for distinguishing vicious from virtuous partiality, and which explains the ground for censure of agents whose moral judgments mirror known personal or social biases. I will argue more specifically that philosophers can only provide an adequate response to the virtuous/vicious partiality problem when their approach is adequately risk-aware. This means taking a direct and empirically-informed interest in study of the many partiality traps that we often fall prey to, both as individuals and in our group associations.

Together with some literary examples to initially illustrate the difficulty of adequately distinguishing virtuous from vicious partiality, Section 2 adapts the “expanding moral circle” concept and its treatment by two thinkers, Tu wei ming, and Peter Singer. The expanding moral circle helps illustrate attitudes that may seem at once to be either virtuous and vicious, or perhaps even both. There is an ever-present possibility, as Peter Goldie points out in unison with Tu, of evaluating the same action — say, of special kindness or generosity towards a particular child by a parent — as virtuous or vicious, depending on the frame of reference, and how the treatment of that one child relates to the target agent’s treatment of others. So Section 3 interprets vicious
partiality especially in terms of what virtue ethicist Peter Goldie refers to as “domain-limiting partiality.” This is one of several problems which might serve to motivate risk-aware virtue theories, moral or epistemic. I will relate Goldie’s articulation of domain-limiting partiality to the blind spots that so often hinder or skew emotional development in a person, and which frustrate cooperative strategies of problem-solving in and between groups.

While giving place both to self-interest and to the particular social roles that people adopt or inherit, a virtue theory of the prescribed sort casts what I will argue is a needed, critical focus upon our pronounced tendency to attribute moral value only or mainly to members of one’s favored ingroups, or to make similarly self-serving presumptions. Our epistemic partiality is implicated in this as well. The judgments we make in ignorance of our own biases Michele de Montaigne calls our “importunate presumptions” in the caption quote of this paper. Although many factors may make biased reasoning appealing and comforting to us, my project in this paper in regard to vicious partiality shares much of Montaigne’s concern with moral psychology when he writes, “We are all huddled and concentrated in ourselves, and our vision is reduced to the length of our nose. We are all unconsciously in this error, an error of great consequence and harm.”

2. Sentimental and Rationalistic Interpretations of the Expanding Moral Circle

The “expanding moral circle” is a concept with ancient roots that I think helps clarify key issues in our problematic concerning virtuous and vicious particularity. Confucian scholar Tu wei Ming describes the expanding circle concept as ever-present in Confucian thought, closely connected with emotional maturation and moral self-cultivation. Ethicist Peter Singer develops the idea more explicitly as part of his utilitarianism in *The Expanding Moral Circle: Evolution, and*
Moral Progress (1981; revised 2011). The treatments of it provided by Tu (1985; 1993) and by Singer share a good deal in common, yet there are important differences and supporting my preference for Tu’s sentimentalist account over Singer’s defense of an impartiality principle of rationality will help articulate some advantages of virtue ethics over Singer’s utilitarianism.5

Classical Chinese thought, as Tu elaborates it, depicts human beings as born cloistered in upon themselves, yet able, through healthy moral development or cultivation of one’s own character, to overcome various self-imposed limitations, or traps. In doing so they are progressively ameliorating their own condition, and widening their moral circle: the range of interests that they allow as relevant in their moral reflection and judgment [see Graphic 1].
Each of the self-imposed domains may represent a broadened moral horizon beyond simple self-interest, yet at the same time may present a “trap” to still fuller moral cultivation.\(^6\) That these are traps or stumbling blocks for us as moral reasoners is attested by the fact that we typically have ample concepts of moral vice to individuate and describe them [Graphic 2]. So, for example, if I never develop my moral circle to include the interests of others, I am at a moral egoist (and in the case of an extreme lack of normal moral sentiments, may even be potentially psycho or sociopathic). I can extend my concern to my family, but should not merely stop there, which may result in a kind of nepotism. Perhaps I can extend my circle of moral concern to countrymen, those of the same language, same gender, same race, etc. But there are “isms” that are negatively-valenced terms of vice, to go with each of these; we may evaluate an agent as, for example, viciously ethnocentric in their moral judgments, or more specifically as sexist, racist, nationalistic, etc. Tu writes,

> But if we extend sympathy only to our parents, we take no more than the initial step toward self-realization. By embodying our closest kin in our sensitivity, we may have gone beyond egoism, but without the learned ability to enter into fruitful communication outside the immediate family, we are still confined to nepotism. Like egoism, nepotism fails to extend our sensitivity to embody a larger network of human relationships and thus limits our capacity for
self-realization. Similarly, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinistic nationalism are all varying degrees of human insensitivity. In the dynamic process of self-realization, they are inertia or limitation. In either case, they are detrimental to the human capacity for establishing a community encompassing humanity as a whole.7
In the recent animated film *Mulan*, Mulan’s father expressly reminds her that “Devotion to family is a virtue.” The expanding moral circle acknowledges this virtuous partiality. Yet the special relationship of a person to and within their family are not presented as a person’s *only* loyalty; nor does the father allege that this loyalty is always to be valued above other relationships. In theory one may be able to serve these obligations consistent with a broadening conception of the moral community. Confucianism plies especially strongly on the metaphor of the polity as the family writ large. But conflicts and trade-offs are of course commonplace in real life. Not unlike Jean-Paul Sartre’s real-life example of a student of his who had to choose, during the fascist occupation of France, between staying to aid his mother, or leaving her to join the Resistance, Mulan indeed is caught between caring for her family in a particularly difficult time, and her wish to serve in the military and to protect the country against invasion.

We can sometimes serve more local and global concerns, and even find our efforts *harmonizing*. But our moral situation often appears to us as presenting trade-offs, choices where we believe that we cannot equally serve a more particular and a more universal caring. Mulan’s choice like that of Sartre’s student isn’t between virtuous and vicious partiality, but rather between virtuous partiality towards one cause or towards another, where it seems unlikely or impossible to serve both. The happy ending to Mulan’s story is that despite appearing to abandon her family to join the war, she is able eventually to reconcile these goods: Returning home after serving the king army, her father first confronts for having left home and forsaken her expected roles within the family; but he then forgives her and the family indeed shares in the honor which
the King bestows upon: She has in fact managed to serve both her nation and her family, by 
bravely but unconventionally aiding the military defense of her homeland.

Here we might pause briefly to distinguish moral *conflicts* from moral *dilemmas*. If 
decisions like the young Frenchman’s, or Mulan’s, or Antigone’s or many others were merely 
*moral conflicts*, their situation would be one where the agent knows the morally right thing to do, 
but is conflicted because they desire to act otherwise than they believe they morally should. We 
could then evaluate their choices as either *enkratic* or *akratic*, that is, we could evaluate them as 
able to resist the temptation they feel (i.e., they remain continent), or as instead submitting to an 
immoral desire (i.e., they are incontinent). They are moral, or else they culpably selfish or weak, 
in which case they are blameworthy for their decisions. But our topic of virtuous and vicious 
partiality instead arguably directs us to cases which often appear to involve genuine moral 
*dilemmas* for agents, rather than mere moral *conflicts*. These competing demands that they 
experience, or more positively, the goods with they must decide between, are not easily weighed 
as on a scale, but are often processed by moral agents as choices among incommensurable goods. 
adding greatly to their personal struggle. If locally and globally-directed efforts harmonize as 
they did for Mulan, this is something that she and her family could only discover along the way. 
With limited time and energy, choices for action are often forced upon us, with the consequences 
of *alternative* actions we might have taken remaining mysterious to us, or apparent only 
retrospectively in reflection upon or remorse for missed opportunities for harmonizing actions.

Let us note also that Confucianism, as a role-centered virtue ethics connected closely 
with the traditional “five relationships,” relatedly aims to harmonize different levels of obligation 
through a division of labor. There is much to be said for role-centered ethics as an alternative to 
strong impartiality in reflective morality (see Beaty, this volume, for a further development).
Harmonization of one’s more local and global social roles may occur; but roles ethics of a stern and hierarchical sort may also undercut harmonization, or lead to a good deal of insincerity or dissatisfaction on the part of agents. Roles are often assigned to people on the basis of sex or other factors, and roles that come with titles or entitlements are often unearned, which becomes another form of. If socially assigned, social roles don’t always deserve to be respected, and a person’s integrity in such cases of conflict may reside not in fulfilling, but in challenging assigned identities or social roles. So, let us note in passing that a critical stance towards culturally-assigned roles is another important aspect of the risk-aware account towards which we are progressing in this chapter.

Returning to compare our two charts, Graphic 1 suggests that there may be agents aplenty to ascribe virtuous partiality to, however narrow their object be beyond simple egoistic self-interest. Graphic 1 in this sense looks benign, since the viewer of this circle focuses on moral concern for others, and on the expansive, outward-moving locus of concern. Devotion to family is fine, especially in contrast to purely egoistic actions, and taking care for community members is better than care only for family members, and so on. It is morally better not in the sense of being more inclusive, but not in the sense of representing a leap from partiality to impartiality, or from ‘non-moral’ to moral considerations. But as comparing the two graphics shows, the matter of “framing” is important, and attributions of virtue to an agent should properly await consideration of a broader and at the same time more critical perspective on the agent and their moral judgments. Sympathy, empathy, antipathy, and other moral emotions may not develop in people; or egocentric or ethnocentric biases may take hold, and become more rather than less pronounced marks of one’s character, shaping one’s social identity, one’s politics, and one’s broadest outlook on moral life.
So, Graphic 2 helps us recognize censure of an agent for a morally or intellectually vicious partiality, a censure supported with an explanatory argument. What appears on Graphic 1 as the virtuous achievement of widening or extending one’s moral horizon by allowing more people’s interests to be of legitimate concern, appears on Graphic 2 as an agent who has sadly gotten trapped or ‘stuck’ in an unhealthy place in their moral development. Some of the terms on Graphic 2 will seem uncontroversially to be negatively-valenced thick concepts for the reader; this follows from their close association with a specific recognized form of personal or social bias. “Nepotism,” “sexism,” “ethnocentrism,” “racism,” etc. are thick evaluative concepts describing attitudes that philosophers and others attribute to agents with negative valence; they are pejorative terms describing one or another attitude taken to be a social bias, and a form of vicious partiality.

Those who exhibit these attitudes, or who perform actions characteristic of them, typically do not think of them as biases for which they are blameworthy, of course, and we who recognize them as such should not assume that the various traps are related to bias studies in quite the same ways. Also, whether “anthropocentrism” (often referred to as “speciesism” by its critics in order to establish formal analogy with sexism, racism, etc.) is indeed analogous to these acknowledged biases is a question that seems to require special handling in moral assessment. We haven’t space for that here, and I am content to leave this an open question, since it is a matter of debate both publicly and among ethicists. But this question is itself illuminating of our problematic concerning virtuous and vicious partiality, and in passing I would note that this question is important because it involves moral concerns with our attitudes towards non-humans, including animal welfare and central issues in environmental philosophy. Issues of political theory may also depend on how we think of the strength of the analogy: Certain laws, such as
laws prohibiting voluntary physician-assisted suicide, a paternalistic in nature, and the rationale that accompanies them may lean upon a faith-based assumptions setting human beings as creature of divine design apart from the rest of nature. For they shoot horses, don’t they?

As another example of a potentially illuminating controversy, what about “religious exclusivism” appearing as a trap or roadblock to moral self-cultivation on Graph 2? I have elsewhere contended that soteriologies and conceptions of faith which normalize exclusivist responses to religious diversity are indeed reflections of bias and subject to censure as a form of vicious partiality, in ways which inclusivist or ‘bridge-building’ (Knitter, 2002) responses to religious and theological differences are not. But while some readers might agree that Graphic 2’s characterization of religious exclusivism as a partiality trap is fitting, seeing here a kind of smugness, other readers might want to argue that these religious attitudes are disanalogous to attitudes towards difference that they concede reflect a kind of vicious partiality.

Argument by analogy is thus a primary philosophical means by which to investigate the distinction between virtuous and vicious partiality, and the expanding moral circle concept encourages more careful use of analogies and analogical arguments. The expanding moral circle concept may be helpful in showing where issues of relevant analogies and disanalogy need to be more closely studied and debated. Such questions naturally arises with this collection’s central problematic of distinguishing vicious from virtuous partiality raises, and I would argue that these questions need to be addressed in recognition of social scientific study of the personal and social biases. More specifically, they need to cognizant of what some psychologists call our tribalistic tendencies, even when ensconced in theological orthodoxy. So, it is important to the risk-aware account that I am developing that we at least raise this question about whether there may be examples of vicious partiality rationalized as theologically-correct beliefs and attitudes,
and whether exclusivist beliefs and attitudes is one such example. I again, do not insist that the reader accept each concept on Graphic 2 as negatively valenced; some may take anthropocentric beliefs, and/or theological exclusivist beliefs as theologically-correct, or as somehow inevitable, and try to offer arguments from disanalogy in order to make philosophical sense of their position.

We can return to some of these topics in the final section, but my task in the remainder of this section is to compare Tu and Singer’s differences in articulating the expanding moral circle idea and its moral implications. The ancient Chinese account, Tu shows us, is sensitive to the many distinct by related “traps” or “stumbling blocks” to adequate moral self-cultivation. Tu approaches the realization of moral universals from the perspective of self-cultivation philosophy, or “the process of learning to be human”: “The Confucian view of personal development can be visualized as an open-ended series of concentric circles…. [T]he self is always understood as the center of relationships. This open-ended series of concentric circles points to an ever-extending horizon.”20 The assumption is that “the more we broaden ourselves to include others, the more we are capable of deepening our self-awareness.”21

So, this approach is broadly sentimentalist in character, and far from an impartialist ideal theory which Tu, directly critiquing Singer, characterizes as “a romantic utopian assertion about equality, unity, and universality.” Sympathy, empathy, antipathy, and other moral emotions may not develop in people; or strong egocentric, ethnocentric, anthropocentric biases will take hold in our outlook on life. But if the expansion of our moral circles is in some sense an imperative, this is not an imperative of logic, or of reason a priori, but more so of nature: “The ability to feel the suffering of others or the inability to endure their suffering empowers us to establish an experiential connection with another human being. This provides a great resource for realizing our moral nature.”22 Yet self-cultivation is a precondition for harmonizing human relations, Tu’s
virtue ethics emphasizes: “Confucians recognize that human beings are social beings, but they maintain that all forms of social interaction are laden with moral implications and that self-cultivation is required to harmonize each one of them.”

By contrast with Tu, Singer treats adherence to a Principle of Equal Consideration as a matter of ethical obligation, or a decision rule to follow in delineating right and wrong action. At the least, he thinks that if we were ideally rational, we would base our decisions on this principle. “If we were more rational, we would be different…[But] an ethic that relied solely on an appeal to impartial rationality would…be followed only by the impartially rational” (157). Singer’s approach in The Expanding Circle thus supplements his earlier, more rationalistic defenses of strict impartialism in “Affluence, Famine, and Morality” (1972), where geographical and other differences make no moral difference to our obligation to reduce suffering. The sentiments are given greater place, but arguably still only as supplementary to the work of his impartiality principle. The assumptions building ethical norms upon an ideal theory which strictly aligns “rationality” and “impartiality” and makes the ‘ought’ of morality a matter of this maximizing this peculiar sense of rationality, still predominates in Singer’s account of the moral circle.

“Impartiality” rings of objective reasoning and of “rationality” as Singer wants to employ that term. But the present account disputes this expectation that rationality or objectivity simply tracks a stateable ideal of perfect impartiality. Utilitarianism demands of moral reasoners what Bernard Williams terms “an output of optimific decision,” (1973, 117), but at the same time poses an integrity challenge, since it neglects, or even requires sacrifice of the projects, attitudes, and commitments upon which a person’s integrity is staked (see Beaty and Goldman (this volume) for further discussion of the integrity challenge). An impartiality principle seems and
to impose an ethic of a strongly altruistic character, and perhaps also a saintly ideal of self-sacrifice for the common good, the ‘general will,’ etc.

What I affirm is that there is an ever-present invitation to include the interests those outside our closest thinking. That we should love our children, and care for our community seem like very natural thoughts. That we should or always act altruistically, love our neighbors as ourselves, or treat all humanity as of intrinsically equal value and moral concern, seem to many people to impose some very unnatural ‘oughts.’ An “invitation” to expand our moral circle is perhaps too weak, since to use Stephen Darwall’s terms this is often a matter of what second-personal demands we can legitimately make upon one another.27 But it describes the character of a sentimentalist approach.28 Tu’s sentimentalism appears similarly cognizant of the limits of what moral duties can impose, far better than Singer’s rationality-focused approach.

Singer seems to struggle as he tries to make sense of the supererogatory, or actions which are praiseworthy but which aren’t plausibly required of people in order for them to be moral, let alone rational.29 Even setting aside the difficult matter of whether or not to recognize a class of supererogatory actions, it would seem overly assertive to maintain that there is an objectively better between acting locally – say in care contributing to or working at a local food bank – and acting globally, say with contributions to or working on a project aimed at addressing world hunger. It is not as if one is praiseworthy and the other not; nor even that one is in general morally better than the other. It seems instead intuitively better to hold that a person may be active more locally or more globally in a cause, and be praiseworthy for it.

Beyond the question of the possible harmonization of our local and global projects discussed earlier, our choices are often limited by practical factors, or by factors outside our control. Our own and our national financial resources are limited, for example, while worthy causes are many.
In some of the most troubling cases an agent’s choices, as Richard Rorty (1996) argues against Singer, may demand something analogous to a medical process of triage, prioritizing some aid projects while necessarily deprioritizing others.\textsuperscript{30} Mill, like Singer, appeals to a disinterested standard of right action, yet the closer we look, the basis for expanding our moral circle is not the impartial demand of rationality, or ‘the good-ought tie-up’ asserted by moral perfectionists, so much as successful engagement of what Mill called “conscientious feelings of mankind.”\textsuperscript{31}

3. Motivating Risk-Aware Virtue Theories
It is no small irony that while demanding impartiality and associating it closely with rationality, Duty ethics and Consequentialism actually describe this rationality in contrary ways: the one directs it ‘upstream’ to reflection upon one’s motives, and the other ‘downstream’ to reflection upon consequences of alternative actions. It is tempting to say that it is not the appeal to impartiality that is mistaken, but rather the idea of a single master-principle of normative ethics. If we have shown some advantages of virtue ethics, it is not the advantage of one ethical theory over other, where each claims to be a “complete” ethical theory founded upon a single, all-encompassing decision rule.\textsuperscript{32} The metaethical conclusion I would draw from the previous section is much closer to Dewey’s “independent factors in morals” thesis: “The three things I regard as variables are first the facts that give rise to the concept of the good and bad; secondly, those that give rise to the concept of right and wrong; thirdly, those that give rise to the conception of the virtuous and the vicious.”\textsuperscript{33}

Dewey held that his thesis of the “independence” of these factors from each other “has significant forward-going implications for debates in ethics, insofar as it functions to deflate debates among ethicists that turns on claims about the conceptual primacy of any one of these three ethical concepts over the other two.”\textsuperscript{34} And while I cannot fully argue the case here, I want to
suggest that debate over how best to fit partiality and impartiality into moral theory, and properly balance them, *is just such a debate*. I suspect that we should concede to Dewey’s claim that we need, “a moral philosophy which frankly recognizes the impossibility of reducing all the elements of moral situations to one single principle….”

Why I bring this up is that in explaining the implications of his thesis, Dewey turns our attention away from decision rules, and at the same time away from focus on thin evaluative concepts like “good,” or “right.” He shifts attention as many others have, onto thick *affective* concepts like lewd, rude, dangerous, and onto thick *characterological* concepts of virtue and vice. Pragmatists and virtue ethicists are both ‘thickies’ in contrast to ‘thinnies’ as Simon Blackburn describes them; they are “friends of entanglement” as Hilary Putnam (2002) describes them in *Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, who recognize the enormous impact of emotion and temperament over our cognitive ecology.

Despite the appeal to impartiality in deontological and consequentialist ethics, partiality is often recognized as not only permitted, but even as required by morality where it revolves around people’s special relationships, or social roles that they play. Special relationships and social roles both come with responsibilities attached. I cannot leave my children (again) to fend for themselves during my research conference without shirking my parental duties of care. I cannot do so without being not only legally negligent in the care of my dependents, but also morally culpable for my actions and omissions.

These are risks we take on in the assumption of social roles and special relationships, but there are many other considerations which might serve to motivate risk-aware virtue theories, moral or epistemic. There are real-world problems of *epistemic injustice*, and of *willed ignorance* and its effects. There are also problems with *historically contingent particularity*, such as in
constructing one’s identity in a manner conditioned by one’s own family or culture, but in blindness to other cultural traditions. There are relevant considerations with each of these three problems, but I will set them aside in order to focus this section’s examination of vicious partiality on what Peter Goldie refers to as “domain-limiting partiality.”

Goldie (2008; 2011) can help us analyze vicious partiality, because he urged ethicists to make closer study of a range of morally-troubling phenomena of people’s circle-of-care being sharply or arbitrarily constrained. He called these cases of bias, due to limited domain of care: A father is kind to his children, but cruel to his spouse; a woman is kind to her family, but mean to her employees at work; a child is honest in school, but dishonest with friends; a self-described patriot is loyal to countrymen, but bigoted towards non-citizens (or perhaps towards ethnic sub-groups he chooses to see as cultural aliens despite all evidence to the contrary). For Goldie, if we ask why a person’s fully-engaged range of application of a thick concept seems arbitrarily restricted, the answer lies in people’s emotional dispositions.

A person’s emotional dispositions, and the thick concepts which can be involved in their sincere, fully engaged, expression in thought and speech, are often in these ways restricted in their domain of application, so that we rightly withhold the attribution of a general character trait -a virtue or a vice- to that person: …his use of thick ethical concepts tracks, and is explained by, these emotional dispositions, or by the lack of them….  

We will return to the role of thick concepts in reflective morality, but these and similar cases already help establish our strong thesis of the need for risk-aware virtue theories. Goldie not only saw cases of vicious partiality as prevalent in real life, but also as something he explicitly claims
philosophical ethics, including virtue ethics, has yet to adequately address. It is hard to know what to say about a person who is kind to their own child but mean or indifferent to other children in characterological terms of virtue and vice, because their ‘virtues’ are so compartmentalized by domain or “focus.” The focus to which kindness is directed clearly has an object, but it is a severely limited one, and appears to have limited that agent’s success in moral self-cultivation; it has left them ensnared by a strong bias. All of these examples “of pro-attitudes but of limited domain” are reasons why Goldie thought that virtue ascription to an individual should often be withheld, despite there being some good aim and motive in respect to a favored ingroup or special relationship. For they are often equally as well failures to extend this same pro-attitude more broadly.39

The study of partiality and impartiality in moral reasoning raises especially difficult questions in part because actions which in one way of describing them exhibit care for and cooperation with persons who are part of one’s ingroup, in another way of describing them exhibit a failure on the part of the agent to broaden their circle of moral concern to include others not part of one’s ingroup. Cooperation, our best inheritance from nature, remains frightfully clustered into ingroups, where competition rather than cooperation so often characterizes intergroup relations, and where available win-win cooperative strategies of problem-solving are thereby often ignored. People often draw ingroup/outgroup distinctions in ways that reflect us/them social biases and doubtful assumptions of superiority or access to truth. I argue that virtue theories can and should be risk-aware, and that being risk aware means being informed by psychology of tribalism, i.e., psychology that recognizes the troubling effects of our tribalistic tendencies and social biases.40 Not only the study of individuals as in Goldie’s case, but also the study of groups and collectives, needs to be double-edged, recognizing that groups in which
members act cooperatively with other ingroupers may yet exhibit moral indifference, or even quite antagonistic and dehumanizing attitudes towards outgroupers.

Goldie questions whether ethicists have studied domain limiting partiality enough, but he doesn’t think it motivates the situationist challenge to virtue theory, or negate the value of concepts of virtue and vice, either for philosophers or for agents themselves. It rather confirms that thick evaluative concepts “not only help to explain the connection between depth of feelings and sincere judgements involving thick concepts; they also help to explain, in ways that no general account can aspire to do, our individual inconsistencies.”41 It is to virtue theory’s great advantage that moral emotions and the engagement with thick concepts are closely entwined, and available for study. Virtue ethicists are ethical “thickies,” and character epistemologists are epistemological “thickies.” We should not be surprised that attribution of a local virtue to an agent may at the same time help identify and analyze an agent’s blind-spots, and associated moral or intellectual vices. Goldie argues that there is often a logical inconsistency behind the moral inconsistency of an agent’s judgment encapsulating a narrow or seeming arbitrary choice of focus.

There is often a logical inconsistency behind the moral inconsistency of an agent’s judgment encapsulating their narrow or seeming arbitrary choice of focus, which Goldie urges ethicists to study. Indeed, both the logical and moral inconsistency of a censured agent are likely to be features which the independent observer will perceive, and take as explanatory, but which are not evident to the individual.42 This blindness to their own bias, or at least their ‘mirroring’ of a known bias, is reason why moral censure backed by inductive evidence serves to stir moral reflection in agents when it is pointed out to them. This allows that agent to take seriously considerations they previously have not; as with pointing out the weaknesses in their analogical
reasoning, it encourages them to apply better critical reasoning skills to their moral reflections and judgments.

Goldie’s thesis has the support of Appiah in *Experiments in Ethics* (2008), who explains that the logical and moral inconsistencies of the censurable agent are likely to be features which the independent observer will perceive and take as salient, but which are often not evident to the persons whose character and actions are being assessed. Like Appiah, Christina Cleveland (2014) brings an awareness of risk, and the relevance of empirical studies of personal and social bias to the fore, for both philosophers and theologians, tying together our argument that we cannot adequately address the partiality-and-the-virtues/vices problematic without confronting pan-human facts about our biases and the tribalistic aspects of our thinking, and the politics of identity:

The worry is that when social biases like *Ingroup–Outgroup Bias* do take hold—in whatever sphere of life—the tendency to cling to rigid and oversimplified categories of other groups. This in turn often leads people to exaggerate differences between ingroup and outgroups, or *us* and *them*... We want to be perceived as different from *them* so we exaggerate our differences with the other group. ... In fact, we often distinguish ourselves from other groups even when there’s no logical reason to do so. ... This natural inclination to obsess over the characteristics that distinguish our group from other groups is exacerbated by the fact that we spend the majority of our time with fellow group members who confirm our beliefs, culture, and way of life. ... Exaggerating differences also gives way to wider differences in viewpoints. This is called *perspective divergence*—[or] the *gold standard effect*—and is one of the main causes of
divisions between groups . . . lead[ing] us to believe that not only are we different from them, but we are also better than them.\textsuperscript{43}

In summary, situations which involve agents in choosing between a more local or a more universal cause of action, or between their personal projects and commitments and more impartial reasoning, suggest the misguided nature of the search for a complete normative ethical theory governed by a single master principle, a decision rule that any similarly-situated agent should impartially apply. The misguided nature of the search for a ‘complete,’ hard universalist normative ethics, which the sorts of cases discussed in this paper make so apparent, has many implications.\textsuperscript{44} But none are bigger than the need to study the complexities of \textit{agents themselves}, rather to study moral judgment on the basis of an ideal theory.\textsuperscript{45} But pragmatists and virtue theorists tend to be meliorists (rather than skeptics or Panglossians) about human rationality and agency, and they draw critical attention to major obstacles to justice, and to social cooperation in problem-solving.\textsuperscript{46} Meliorists acknowledge the data of psychology, but remain optimistic that cognitive developmental approaches in psychology will continue to reveal intellectual aspects of moral judgment, and emotional aspects of epistemic inquiry.\textsuperscript{47} No one is free to hold themselves justified in claiming that “the pattern stops here, with me/us” any more than they are in claiming that “the moral buck does not stop here,” but necessarily passes on to others as the responsible party for wrongdoings. Meliorists are realistic in regard to frailties of the human condition; they respect and highlight active participation in learning, and the role of the imagination, including thinking hypothetically, in effective learning.\textsuperscript{48}

Risk-aware virtue theory utilizes social and cognitive psychology, and does not take ideal theories as most useful to its normative projects. It aims to further integrate moral theory with moral psychology, political psychology, religious psychology, and other human sciences. It tries
to supply thick descriptions of the social goods that positive rights and cooperative problem-solving makes possible. As they add to the toolset of moral agents, enabling greater critical thinking, virtue theorists critique values that were originally functional but that have grown into something hypertrophic and dysfunctional. They also recommend, in their ameliorative efforts, what Rachel Cohon (2008, 3) calls prosthetic character traits: new virtues developed to remediate our natural disabilities. A risk-aware approach takes the censure of agents who ‘mirror’ known biases to be an important task, but a respectful, constructive task, conducted perhaps paternalistically yet not in the pathologizing language of “deprogramming.” It is encouraging when theologians and religious philosophers (Vainio, 2017) separate themselves from merely apologetic projects, and instead insist that a better understanding our own psychology can encourage intellectual humility, moderate dogmatic attitudes, and lead us to “disagree more virtuously.”

That strict impartiality is no constant mandate of rationality; that the call for greater impartiality is a call for open-mindedness, and for fuller engagement with thick moral concepts; and that thick concepts of virtue and vice are therefore a resource for avoiding “traps” or “stumbling blocks” to moral self-cultivation: These are three claims we have supported while arguing for the advantages of virtue theory in coming to a more adequate treatment of differences between virtuous and vicious partiality. In conclusion, beyond insisting that ethical theories provide a comfortable home for virtuous partiality, we today need philosophical approaches which help educate agents in how to emotionally engage, and to avoid various “traps” in the cultivation of their moral sensitivities that then harden into biases. We should hope to provide assessment and guidance which leaves agents better able to distinguish virtuous from vicious partiality in their own thoughts and actions. Risk-awareness should aid moral agents’ ability to recognize (and erase)
the “enemies in the mirror” that we so often propagate when we let our tribalistic psychology run unchecked.

Works Cited


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Endnotes

[* Highly detailed in the present draft, but to be shortened in editing, as needed] x

1 Montaigne (Frame, ed.), 116.
In ancient China, accusing one’s own parent or grandparent with a crime was itself sometimes deemed a crime punishable by death. Filial piety in this tradition trumps impartiality, and there is little merit to an ethics that would insist as hard universalists do on the primacy of agent-indifferent reasons. But this is different than what we may call virtues of reflective detachment, which fuel the expansion of our moral circle. These virtues in the Chinese tradition include shu, the ability to take-perspective, or to put oneself in another’s shoes.

The earliest version of this paper briefly discussed each of these four motivating problems, but this developed version presents a fuller discussion of just one of them: Goldie’s problem of domain-limited partiality. These four problems, and others connected with them, are each connected with our bias blind spot. As problems that are examined in risk-aware virtue theory, they collectively call for what Rachel Cohen terms prosthetic character traits, new virtues cultivated in order “to remediate our natural disabilities” (2008, 3).

Montaigne (D. Frame, ed.), 116.

Goldman and Beaty (both this volume), point out that utilitarians need not be impartialists all the way down; Beaty sites a Millian argument to support this. So perhaps a better way to put my point is that (early) Singer is committed to a strong Symmetry thesis according to which you are required to optimize your beneficial sacrifices even when they are genuinely supererogatory (beyond the call of unconditional duty); whereas Asymmetry, which allows you to prioritize your own well-being and reasons to a greater degree while still placing constraints on the options that you may permissibly choose, is far more plausible. See Barry and Lazar 2022 for analysis of these positions, and an argument that Asymmetry occupies a wide region in logical space, and provides the best account.

Compare Tu (1985, 58) where he writes, “As we become increasingly subjectivistic, individualistic, and narcissistic, we can neither remember the old nor instruct the young. We are politically isolated and spiritually alone. Yet in our scholarly endeavors we assume that we have to take an impersonal stance in order to reason objectively in the abstract.”

Tu, 1985, 175-176.

Many plays, novels, and films, depict our problematic, and although it has rarely been given name, it has clear examples in epics and tragedies which explore the human condition. The dilemma of Antigone and of her sister Ismene in Sophocles’ tragedy Antigone is an example: After their brothers fell on the battlefield, Antigone and Ismeme were unable to honor both siblings in the tradition manner they felt divinely sanctioned or morally compulsory, and also remain obedient to the laws and authority of the city. For the new King, Creon, had buried one brother as a hero, but declared the other a traitor and his body to remain on the battlefield and desecrated. Antigone and Ismene each had to choose whether to follow the demands of their religious and cultural tradition, or to abide the laws of the land, laws which King Creon decreed as necessary to the stability of the polis, also warning the sisters directly that their royal status and his family blood ties with them would not exempt them from the death penalty he had just publicly set for disobedience of his decree.

I find the distinction between moral conflicts and moral dilemmas quite helpful. Sartre does say that part of the young man’s motive to join the resistance is to avenge his brother’s recent death in the war. If vengeance is considered an immoral rather than moral motive, then the distinction would still allow us to analyze his decision, but now it would be a moral conflict, since he would know that the moral thing to do
was to care for his mother than to seek satisfaction in vengeance, at her cost. But the description I used depicted the case as a moral dilemma for the agent, because the collective aim of the resistance was that freedom and self-determination prevail over tyranny, so that what joining the resistance stands for makes it a morally praiseworthy choice as well.

10 We might here admit to Voltaire’s judgmental dictum, that in some sense we are all guilty of the good that we did not do in our lifetimes. But as I will argue, morality cannot demand strict impartiality in an agent’s moral reasoning, any more than the concept of moral duty can plausibly demand moral saintliness of us, or unlimited altruism, or self-sacrifice for the common good, etc.

11 The five constant relationships are those between ruler and subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend.

12 Still more troubling, the “harmonization” in question here is only quite tenuously connected with an agent’s happiness or eudaimonia. For if the social situation for moral agents is one of oppression, or of calamity, then even if there is potential harmony between a local and a more global resistance, the virtues they manifest may be what Lisa Tessman terms “burdened virtues”: the virtues that such conditions require the oppressed or traumatized to develop. "What I think of as the burdened virtues include all those traits that make a contribution to human flourishing--if they succeed in doing so at all--only because they enable survival of or resistance to oppression (it is in this that their nobility lies), while in other ways they detract from their bearer's well-being, in some cases so deeply that their bearer may be said to lead a wretched life." Tessman (2005), 95.

13 It appears to be a strong bias in Western ethics (which virtue ethics, and non-Western perspectives help to rectify) that particularity, partiality, and relational qualities are associated with non-moral thinking, and that “universalarity” in reflective morality reduces to impartiality in the sense of applying the one correct decision rule. A role-centered ethics is a virtue ethics which recognizes the special relationships which comes from the various social roles we play. Yet a strict role ethics (as for example in an institutionalized caste system) may tend to thwart the aspirations of people to break from the social roles assigned to them by society according to gender, social rank, inherited title, etc. So, while I hold the recognition of social roles and special relationships as an advantage of virtue ethics over hard universalist theories like Singer’s utilitarianism, it should be noted that a philosophically adequate treatment of social roles and the virtuous partiality that accompanies them, must not treat virtue to simple obedience to a socially-assigned identities and associated norms.

14 Tu is keen to weigh in on this issue, pointing out, “The Confucian ideal of human flourishing is …not anthropocentric…The proper measure for humanity is cosmological as well as anthropological…and self-transformation features prominently in Confucian tradition…. The more we broaden ourselves to involve others, the more we are capable of deepening our self-awareness [through] an ever-expanding network of human relatedness” (1999, 205-6). But some would argue that the result of rejecting anthropocentrism is vague, and may be characterized as “biocentrism” rather than greater objectivity.

15 Three bridges to religious dialogue and interfaith or ecumenical projects are developed by Knitter. See Axtell 2020 for discussion. Some will admit that ethnocentrism (attitudes of ethnic or racial superiority, etc.) is a bias, but describe my position that cogent arguments connecting attitudes of religious exclusivism (sometimes called theological intolerance) as “reductionist” for not properly recognizing the uniqueness of the domain of religious language. Philosophical naturalists and secular thinkers like myself will see this presumed asymmetry in the religious case as an instance of “special pleading.”
I suspect we find plentiful examples that constitute smugness in regard to religious differences, both between ‘militant’ atheists and fundamentalists, and between fundamentalist adherents of different religions, denominations, or sects. See Stohr, this volume for a general discussion of Kant and the vice of smugness. Arrogance, defamation, and ridicule, are vices which Kant in his *Doctrine of Virtue*, identifies as vices that violate duties of respect for others. Risk-aware thinkers whether irreligious or religious should be keenly aware of epistemic injustices that accompany such violations, even they are represented through the strict impartialism of skeptical evidentialism, or again through an epistemic partiality towards the ‘home’ religion’s sacred texts and theology/soteriology in a testimonial faith tradition.

Despite the concerns I am raising that attitudes of religious absolutism, including doctrinal and soteriological exclusivism are indicative of vicious partiality, most adherents do not find it difficult to avoid such extremes in their conception of faith and its demands. So, I hold my treatment to be consistent with Gardner’s thoughtful account (this volume) of Christian faith as a social virtue. But two notes of caution. Gardner moves quickly from a perceived necessity for religious “particularity” to an agent’s epistemic “partiality” informing the testimonial trust that is partly constitutive of their faith, while would urge that these are distinguishable, and that while particularity is not especially philosophical problematic, epistemic partiality certainly is. Also, when testimonial trust is understood as legitimizing epistemic partiality, the agent is likely to gloss over important differences between the *narrative* testimony in revelation/scripture, and ordinary or *assertive* testimony. People often deal poorly in processing these important differences even apart from religious examples, as cognitive psychology has shown. See Axtell 2020, Chapter 3 for developments.

Some scholars have indeed held that “analogy is the core of cognition,” and is the “fuel and fire” for human thought and reasoning (Hofstadter and Sander, 2013). Analogies are intricately related to our ability to apply *categorization* schemes. Despite the many wonderful things that analogies and disanalogies do for us, one extreme of this impacted by our tribalistic tendencies is our penchant to create and apply stereotypes: distorted categorizations. “And think of stereotypes based on such things as sex or race or nationality or age or profession or religion --they too are a kind of categorization, made hastily or unreflectively. Most people buy wholly into their stereotypes without realizing that such coarse-grained judgments of other peoples are often way off the mark. In short, stereotypes are a frequent source of deeply erroneous categorizations” (527-528).

My referring to tribalistic aspects of our psychology presents a generalization that of course needs to be hedged, since the personal and social biases are themselves quite varied. But there is a growing literature on psychology of tribalism, and scholars who study it are especially concerned with these specific problems. For an introduction, see Kahan (2018) and Packer and Van Bavel (2021). It has been applied to philosophy or religion and theology in Wright’s John Templeton Foundation (2021-2023) funded “Project to Foster Intellectual Humility and Counter the Psychology of Tribalism.”

Tu 1993, 205.

Tu 1993, 144.

Tu 1993, 175.

Tu 1985, 56.
The expectation of charitable giving, Singer argued, should be to donate all the way up to the point where the giver herself is reduced “very near to the material circumstances of a Bengali refugee” (1972), 236–237.

Singer does sometimes try to distance himself from dependence on ideal theory: “An ethic for human beings must take them as they are, or as they have some chance of becoming. The goal of maximizing the welfare of all may be better achieved by an ethic that accepts our inclinations and harnesses them so that, taken as a whole, the system works to everyone’s advantage” (157). However, this comment seems highly inconsistent with Singer’s appeal to his impartiality principle of reasoning.

The integrity challenge seems also to overlap with several of the five reasons Silverman (this volume) develops as showing that impartiality is not as central a moral value as some traditional ethicists have contended. Williams held that the doctrine of negative responsibility in utilitarianism, which leaves little if any role for well, social roles and projects, and the integrity challenge this presents an actual moral reasoner, “represents in this way the extreme of impartiality, and abstracts from the identity of the agent…. [T]he reason why utilitarianism cannot understand integrity is that it cannot coherently describe the relations between a man’s projects and his actions” (1973, 85-86). See also McNabb 2003 for a teaching-friendly introduction.

See Darwall 2006. Neither the law, where one’s negative rights, including property rights and freedoms to disassociate from voluntary groups or associations tend to predominate, nor social contract theories will attribute moral blame to persons for acting out of a primary self-interest. The Bible may command loving one’s neighbor as oneself, but this is arguably an expression of ideal human brotherhood, or of a saintly moral character not expected of those not of the faith. Note that the ‘love thy neighbor’ command stands out as one of the only positive duties among the biblical commandments. In Civilization and its Discontents, Freud’s is famously critical of this commandment, and more generally of “a state of evenly suspended, steadfast, affectionate feeling [toward] all men alike” (1930, 49), as ill-fitting human psychology. Morality must be made for humans, not humans for morality, on his naturalistic approach.

As David Hume comments in the Treatise while summarizing his “accurate proof of this system of ethics” in Part III (p. 619),

“It requires but very little knowledge of human affairs to perceive, that a sense of morals is a principle inherent in the soul, and one of the most powerful that enters into the [human] composition. But this sense must certainly acquire new force, when reflecting on itself, it approves of those principles, from whence it is deriv’d, and finds nothing but what is great and good in its rise and origin. Those who resolve the sense of morals into original instincts of the human mind, may defend the cause of virtue with sufficient authority; but want the advantage, which those possess, who account for that sense by an extensive sympathy with mankind. According to the latter system [i.e., Hume’s own], not only virtue must be approv’d, but also the sense of virtue: And not only that sense, but also the principles, from whence it is deriv’d. So that nothing is presented on any side, but what is laudable and good.” [*Add to sent draft& Hume citation].

The very concept of supererogation is a vexed one, stemming from deontological language even if Kantians commonly find this category of actions senseless. But the perfectionist view held by Symmetry, which would eliminate the category of good-but-not-obligatory actions in favor of the ‘best possible’ action as always obligatory, is committed to a very strong form of impartiality to determine what ‘optimization’ is or means. While some have argued that virtue ethics has as much trouble as other theories in accommodating praiseworthy but undemanded actions, I here agree with Stangl that this
objection is over-blown, and that it is “implausible to think that all virtuous actions are equally virtuous” (2016, 353). If so, this undercuts both the Kantian view that an action has moral worth only in so far as it is done from duty to the moral law, and the more broadly perfectionist ‘good-ought tie-up’ principle asserting that what is good, ought to be done.

In "Moral Universalism and Economic Triage," Rorty criticizes his impartialist moral universalism, where one ought always to help the worst off, as idealistic, and naïve in regard to economics and financial resources. His does so in part by repurposing this medical term, triage, referring to the parsing of medical cases in order to primarily or only serve those deemed the worst off, or the most savable, among multiple victims in a medical emergency. Traditional moral universalism “claims that the presence of common traits testifies to a common purpose.” Rorty goes on to challenge this, and to argue that the universalist who answers the question, "Who are we?" with "We are members of a moral community which encompasses the human species," is leaning upon the assumption “that we can avoid economic triage” (3-4).

For further development of a sentimentalist approach, see Goldman, this volume. Some of the further differences which give a virtue ethics advantages will emerge in the next section. Utilitarian reasoning may be expected of policy-makers, but Mill is far more explicit than Singer that the times when ethics obliges one to reason in this way are actually quite exceptional. The rest of the time, Mill states, “the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to tend to.” Mill (2001), 252. Not only Singer’s, but arguably all impartialist theories are at odds with Mill’s claim. But we should not accept any potential new dichotomy between virtuous and vicious partiality. Much lies between, as Mill seems to acknowledge, which we might call excusable partiality, or loyalties that are not especially troubling, as with being a fan of a particular sports team or city, where loyalties and their connections with issues of identity are so clearly on display. For a fuller critique of Singer’s impartiality demand, see Axtell 2015, Chapter 6, “Ethics and Objectivity.”

I find substantial connections between what I am terming Tu’s sentimentalism, and John Dewey’s pragmatist ethics, and both to be connected with virtue ethics. Even as we engage quite self-consciously in what Dewey calls reflective morality, care for those we have special relationships are typically our most natural thoughts. It is from these relationships that we take most of our “concrete” moral expectations. Larry Hickman (2007, 32) says that according to Dewey, “humans make self-reflection a part of evolutionary history when they come to consciousness by means of social intercourse.” See Timothy J. Madigan 2012 for further relevant work focusing on Dewey’s close connections with virtue theory.

Dewey and Tufts (1908), p. 7 presents “the hypothesis that there are at least three independent variables” that in problem situations the reflective moral agent must take account of. Dewey also claims that “Each of these variables has a sound basis, but because each has a different origin and mode of operation, they can be at cross purposes and exercise divergent forces in the formation of judgments. From this point of view, uncertainty and conflict are inherent in morals; it is characteristic of any situation properly called moral that one is ignorant of the end and of good consequences, of the right and just approach, of the direction of virtuous conduct, and that one must search for them. The essence of the moral situation in an internal and intrinsic conflict; the necessity for judgment and for choice comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator” (Later Works Vol. 5: 280)

35 Dewey and Tufts, 8. “Because these forces pull different ways there is genuine conflict—and a problematic quality pervades the whole situation,” Dewey claims that “Each of these variables has a sound basis, but because each has a different origin and mode of operation, they can be at cross purposes and exercise divergent forces in the formation of judgments. From this point of view, uncertainty and conflict are inherent in morals…” (8).

36 These two descriptions --thinnies and thickies-- are closely-related monikers for their positions in metaethics. But more formally, pragmatists and virtue theorists deny the thesis of moral “centralism” which Putnam and Williams both argue directly against. Thinnie’s like Blackburn endorse centralism, the claim that the normative tasks of ethics should primarily focus on analysis of central concepts of ethical rightness/wrongness, and ethical goodness/badness. Thus, Kirchin and others describe Blackburn as a “separationist,” along with others claiming to factor moral judgments between cognitive and emotive factors (the factorability thesis). See Axtell and Carter (2008) for an argument exposing and refuting the epistemological analogue of moral centralism, epistemic centralism. See Axtell and Olson (2008) writing as virtue epistemologists making an analogical argument for “three independent factors in epistemology,” in substantial parallel with Dewey’s early ‘Club Paper’ first introducing the “three independent factors in morals.”

37 One might try to distinguish virtuous particularity from vicious partiality, but such a distinction seems strained. Still, particularity and partiality are distinct concepts, and while particularity (for example, your identifying with one tradition rather than other extent traditions) might be thought to exhibit a kind of bias, it is a fact of life that we start out embedded in our cultural surroundings and influences; this seems morally problematic only where it grows into attitudes of parochialism or is attended by unjustified superiority assumptions.

38 Goldie 2008, 108. If we compared one case where a father cares for his own children but is just rather indifferent to the welfare of children other than his own, and another where this ‘caring father’ actually exploits or harms other children in a way that he never would his own, then we would plausibly judge him viciously partial only in the latter case. The first man’s lack of caring of non-blood relations, if that is an assumption he brings to his reflective morality, is morally troubling, and may not be fully excusable; but surely this is not as blameworthy as second man’s active mistreatment of non-blood relations.

39 Some of these concerns raise the issues of whether some or all versions of virtue theory are committed to robust and global character traits, and whether they are empirically adequate if they do. Such concerns have been presented to as a challenge to virtue ethics, or to certain versions of it, by proponents of situationism in psychology. Non-Aristotelian virtue theories, including eastern perspectives, have recently made this a particularly interesting debate. Axtell (2017) offers a direct response to formal dilemmas posed for virtue theory (Olin and Doris’ “Vicious Minds” hypothesis (2013), and Alfano’s Character as Moral Fiction (2014)). My response centrally involves the idea that mental heuristics and Type 1 ‘fast and frugal’ thinking isn’t wholly virtuous or vicious, as these authors suppose a virtue theorist must take them to be; rather they are virtuous (potentially credit-conferring) to agents when the zetetic strategies they employ are well-suited to their problem-situation or zetetic context (i.e., are ecologically rational, given the context of inquiry and the aims of situated inquirers), and vicious when they are employed even though ill-suited to their problem-situation, or when markedly inferior to alternative zetetic strategies available to these agents. This is also partly why I title my particular version of virtue theory as zetetic responsibilism (Axtell, 2008b). For two other responses to the situationist challenge which similarly try to wed virtue theory to dual-process theory, see Samuelson and Church (2014); and Olhorst (2021).
What Francis Bacon called the “idols” which beset the human mind aptly illustrates an early modern-eria attempt to study human biases and their effects across all domains of inquiry. Noted critical thinking pedagogy author Douglas Walton points out how in Novum Organum (1620), Bacon explicitly described the human understanding as a “false mirror” that “distorts and discolors the nature of things” (1999, 12). The idols contain a bias or distortion because they are constructions built on our own human ways of seeing things, constructions that are often like false mirrors. But these false mirrors we employ that can lead to idols of the Tribe, Cave, Marketplace, and Theatre do not undercut us completely, some fields may resist them better than others. “To point them out, however, is of great use. For the doctrine of the idols is to the interpretation of nature what the refutation of sophisms is to common logic” (17). These are concerns that disciplinary standards of objectivity in the sciences are primarily put in place to monitor and forestall: “to fortify themselves as far as may be,” as he puts it. “The formation of ideas and axioms by induction is without doubt the proper remedy to be applied for the keeping off and clearing away of idols” (cited from Ariew and Watkins, p. 18). It is for these reasons that I develop zetetic responsibilism as a “risk-sensitive” account, and why I associate it with assessment of “inductive risk,” where this concept denotes the risks, moral and epistemic, or ‘getting it wrong’ in an inductive context of inquiry (Axtell 2021).

Goldie (2008), 94.

Psychologically, then, “full engagement with a thick concept, and correlative its action-guidingness in application by that person, need not apply across all domains. One can be fully engaged with a concept here but not there” (Goldie 2008, 103-4). Yet philosophically this engagement, even if it seems to involve the expected emotional disposition, is not virtuous in the universal or human sense if its scope is arbitrarily curtailed on unprincipled grounds or morally-irrelevant factors.

Cleveland (2014), 68-70.

In debates over moral universalism, a useful distinction is often drawn between “hard” and “soft” universalism. Soft universalists recognize that values and customs do vary across cultures but argue that some values may be universal. Virtue theories surely support soft universal, but not hard universalism, the claim that there is one never-changing standard for deciding whether an action is ethical. These are further advantages of virtue ethics, and why it can endorse universal human rights as principles that all societies should respect and aspire to. The distinction also helps to show that not every approach that is not hard universalist is thereby moral “relativism.”.

Timmons (2012) argues that “any plausible moral theory is likely to be a limited, pluralistic moral theory” (299). The present paper agrees with this view, and sees the issue of properly distinguishing vicious and virtuous partiality as a powerful argument for it. The “limited” position as Timmons describes it is a negation of “Determinacy: A moral theory should feature principles which, together with relevant factual information, yield determinate moral verdicts about the morality of actions, persons, and other objects of evaluation in a wide range of cases” (305). “Pluralism” is a denial of “monism”, the view that there is some single basic feature of actions in virtue of which they are right or wrong (310). Virtue ethicists are considered to be moral pluralists (Timmons 2012), where moral pluralism combines two claims: There is plurality of basic moral rules, and no underlying moral principle from which these rules can be derived that serves to justify them (298). I find these contrasts to be more directly relevant to our problematic, than the question of moral particularism, which Timmons says describes as denying (1) the generalist thesis, (2) the universal relevance thesis, and (3) the polarity thesis (276). I argue that by
developing non-centralism (Hilary Putnam (2002); Bernard Williams), rather than non-generalist ethics, virtue theory finds resources to defend moral pluralism. It finds resources to distinguish moral pluralism from moral relativism, on the one hand, and moral absolutism on the other.

46 We should approach the virtuous and vicious partiality question in a manner that is neither unhelpfully Skeptical nor self-servingly Panglossian / Apologetic. But when the attitudes or conduct of a particular agent “mirrors” a known personal or group bias, and their moral justification for them leans on counter-inductive thinking, this is sufficient grounds for censure. A challenge becomes mountable that bias is the most salient factor in their coming to have the attitudes that they have. When the bias-explanation has inductive evidence or “pattern” on its side, then the agent’s response to being primed to those facts, will predictably respond in a manner that is protective, but leans upon counter-inductive thinking.

47 Deweyan experimentalism is one expression of a melioristic approach, optimistic about educational tools and committed to pedagogical innovations. Dewey’s philosophy of education emphasizes that much of what we learn in inquiry, is how better to conduct it! We must start from where we are, and learn how to learn; we must start with problems of practice, and recognize ourselves as approaching them with uncertain or incomplete information, and often with varying explanatory goals, and zetetic strategies.

48 On the role of thick concept in ethics and education, see Kotzee (2011). For more on Dewey and the cultivation character as an aspect of personal growth, see Ralston 2022.

49 Despite having evolutionary advantages in an earlier period of social evolution, a character-trait becomes “hypertrophic,” as Nietzsche reminds us, as it turns an originally life-promoting idea into a life-denying one.

50 See Thomas (2021) for an analysis of QAnon ideology that emphasizes the ills of epistemic paternalism, insofar as it associates ideologies with ‘cult brainwashing.’ Thomas’ work is an illustration of how our tribalistic psychology is already being studied in an emerging sub-literature within religious studies. But I agree with Thomas that what is needed is more detailed study of social influence, and of group dynamics, in cases of extreme beliefs and echo chambers, not a treatment that, by pathologizing the moral or epistemic partialities of the agents, deprives them of their autonomy and of their responsibility for their beliefs and actions.

51 Vainio (2017) is treated extensively in Axtell (2020). In my (2021) I discuss Goldie and virtue ethics further, and argue that when we make proper distinction between dispositional and occurrent attributions, as attribution theory in psychology allows for, judgments of censure can primarily be occurrent, or concerned with behaviors that 'mirror' known personal or social bias. It can proceed without actually attributing bias to a particular agent (dispositional attribution), since insight into individual motives is often opaque. Part of risk-awareness is recognition of the risk in over-attributing vices, as Cassam (2020) also acknowledges. Careful use of the distinction between dispositional and occurrent aids virtue theorists in responding to the situationist challenge, and it also helps us clarify important asymmetries between attributing virtue and attributing vice. Occurrent attributions also help makes sense of attributions to groups, in contrast with individuals.