**Resisting the Seductive Appeal of Consequentialism:**

**Goals, Options, and Non-Quantitative Mattering**

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Abstract: Impartially Optimizing Consequentialism (IOC) requires agents to act so as to bring about the best outcome, as judged by a preference ordering which is impartial among the needs and interests of all persons. IOC may seem to be only rational response to the recognition that one is only one person among many others with equal intrinsic moral status. A person who adopts a less impartial deontological alternative to IOC may seem to fail to take seriously the fact that other persons matter in the same way that she takes herself to matter. This paper examines this ‘seductive appeal’ of IOC. It argues that IOC is not the only rational way to recognize the fact that each person matters. It presents an alternative conception of how to recognize the status of other persons as beings‑who‑matter, an alternative that has Kantian rather than consequentialist implications.

I

To have a moral point of view is, first and foremost, to reject the egocentric perspective from which one sees oneself as the only person who truly matters. For short, I will call this egocentric perspective ‘moral solipsism’.[[1]](#endnote-1) A moral solipsist need not be a ‘regular’ solipsist. She may admit that other persons are real, and that they do or even should care about themselves. However, the moral solipsist refuses to care about other persons in any non-instrumental way; she refuses to see other persons as beings who matter, in and of themselves, to her. It seems overwhelmingly plausible that the rejection of moral solipsism is the fundamental requirement of morality, and the essence of the moral point of view.[[2]](#endnote-2) Entering the moral realm requires recognizing that other persons have independent moral status–that they matter in and of themselves and apart from any interest that one might take in them, or any purpose for which one might hope to put them to use.

Once we recognize that other persons are beings-who-matter, we might then ask: ‘How much do other persons matter?’ Once this question is asked, the most reasonable answer seems to be: ‘Each person matters as much as any other person–all persons matter equally’. If all persons matter equally, then it seems that their interests and needs must also matter equally. And if the interests and needs of all persons matter equally, then it appears that I can have no good reason for thinking that my own interests and needs matter any more than those of anyone else. This, in turn, suggests that the only perspective that fully reflects the rejection of moral solipsism–and thus the only genuinely moral point of view–is the impartial perspective that puts each person’s needs and interests on an equal footing (weighting them only for intensity). Adopting this impartial perspective, in turn, seems to require adopting an impartial ‘moral preferability ranking’ that ranks actions according to the extent to which they bring about net satisfaction of the greatest number of needs and interests, weighted for their intensity, of the members of the set of all persons. Such a ranking labels as sub-optimal any course of action which makes a smaller expected net contribution to the aggregate satisfaction of needs and interests of the set of all persons than does some other available course of action. Since it seems irrational to choose a less optimal course of action over a more optimal one, adopting the impartial moral preferability ranking seems to require us to try to produce the largest possible contribution to the aggregate satisfaction of the needs and interests of the set of all persons. Thus, adopting the impartial perspective seems to require adopting action-guiding principles that require the agent always to choose that course of action that has the highest expected value as determined by the impartial moral preferability ranking.[[3]](#endnote-3) Any refusal to adopt and follow the action-guiding principles generated by the impartial perspective would seem to be tantamount to a refusal fully to embrace the practical consequences of one’s rejection of moral solipsism.[[4]](#endnote-4) In short, the rejection of moral solipsism seems to entail some form of impartially optimizing consequentialism (IOC).

This short and seductive appeal on behalf of consequentialism can be put even more succinctly as a series of rhetorical questions: If each person is a being-who-matters, then doesn’t each person matter to an equal degree? And if so, then don’t each person’s needs and interests matter to an equal degree? And if so, then don’t we have to recognize the impartial perspective as the only coherent moral perspective? And if that is so, then how can any rejection of impartially optimizing consequentialism be consistent with the rejection of moral solipsism? Thus, the seductive appeal of consequentialism suggests that the commitments that one adopts when one rejects moral solipsism push us inexorably toward IOC, and that anything short of IOC involves a failure fully to appreciate the fact that all persons are equally beings-who-matter.

One can detect versions (or at least hints) of this appeal in the work of Mill, Sidgwick, Hare, Nagel, Parfit, Scheffler, Kagan, and many other philosophers. Its seductiveness lies in the fact that it begins from a compelling contrast between morality and egoism, and works its way via a small number of simple, seemingly reasonable steps to some version of IOC; the case it makes for IOC is, if not quite airtight as a matter of pure logic, at least very persuasive.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Because IOC requires the moral agent to choose the action (or policy) that has the greatest expected value as defined by the impartial moral preferability ranking, it gives the moral agent little if any ‘elbow room’ to decide how to allocate her resources (by which I mean not only her material resources but also her time, energy, and concern). Since the impartial moral preferability ranking gives equal weight to the interests of each person, it seems to imply that disproportionate concern by an agent for certain persons over others can be justified only if it leads to a greater total contribution to the satisfaction of the interests and needs of the set of all persons. Thus, IOC prohibits the agent from choosing to devote any more resources to her own interests and needs, or to those other persons who are nearest and dearest to her, than is optimal from the impartial perspective.[[6]](#endnote-6) Generally, most of those of us who are not in abject misery, lethal poverty, or other severe misfortune could usually make a larger contribution to the net satisfaction of the aggregate interests and needs of the set of all persons simply by transferring most of our resources to persons who are in abject misery, lethal poverty, or other severe misfortune. The dollar I squander on a soft drink satisfies a fleeting and weak ‘need’ for caffeine and sugar, but it could satisfy very much greater needs in the hands of someone in desperate poverty. Almost all of the resources that we who live in affluent societies typically use to satisfy all but the very most pressing needs of ourselves or those nearest and dearest to us could be used to make a far greater contribution to the aggregate satisfaction of the interests and needs of the set of all persons if they were used in some other way instead.[[7]](#endnote-7) IOC condemns what it sees as our excessive devotion of resources to ourselves and those nearest and dearest to us as an irrational or immoral refusal to act in a way that is judged optimal by the impartial point of view–a point of view the adoption of which seems to be the logical result of the rejection of moral solipsism.

Because of its stark demands on the individual agent, IOC feels counter-intuitive to most people. I share that feeling. However, my goal in this paper is not simply to articulate this intuition that IOC is unreasonably demanding. Instead, I want to explore whether the same kind of compelling theoretical rationale available to IOC can also be given to some deontological alternative. Since I find it compelling to see morality as consisting most fundamentally of the rejection of moral solipsism, I shall begin there. My question will be: If we regard morality as being, first and foremost, the rejection of moral solipsism and the subsequent embracing of whatever follows from that rejection, then is there any coherent, rationally defensible morality other than IOC? Is there a well-motivated way to resist the seductive appeal of IOC once we have rejected moral solipsism and committed ourselves to embracing whatever follows from doing so?

II

It may be useful to begin by examining briefly Samuel Scheffler’s well-known attempt to answer much the same question.[[8]](#endnote-8) I believe that it is unsuccessful, but I suspect that the problems it encounters may tell us something important about how not to try to resist the seductive appeal of IOC.

Scheffler starts with the standard consequentialist framework in which an impartial moral preferability ranking of states of affairs defines what is ‘best’. Scheffler proposes, however, that a moral system might not require each person to adopt and act according to this impartial preferability ranking, but, instead, it might allow each person to adopt and act from a sort of hybrid preferability ranking. That hybrid ranking takes the impartial ranking as a starting point, but it assigns extra weight to the agent’s own deepest concerns and interests. The moral agent is then to be guided by an optimizing decision-procedure, but optimality will be determined by this hybrid, non-impartial, moral preferability ranking. The ‘bonus points’ that this hybrid ranking adds to the agent’s own needs and interests allows them at least sometimes to ‘win’ the competition with the typically much greater needs of others. In this way, Scheffler seeks to carve out from an otherwise consequentialist theory the kind of moral elbow room that most people believe exists.

Philosophers have raised a number of objections to Scheffler’s proposal. Rather than rehearsing them all, I want to illustrate the one that I think is most diagnostic of the problems with this approach to resisting the overwhelming demands of IOC. The problem I have in mind is easiest to see when we look at real-world examples. Here is one. At one time running was a fairly central project in my life: I ran not as a means, but as an end. I ran almost every day, and I defined myself in part as a runner. Now as life-defining projects go, running is not particularly expensive.[[9]](#endnote-9) Some decent shoes and a few extra clothes and laundry–an annual cost of $100 is in the ballpark. That does not seem to be too much for an agent–even one concerned about world hunger–to spend on a life-enriching, identity-defining meaning-creating project. Yet the annual cost of even this inexpensive project could buy enough tetracycline to cure about fifty cases of trachoma, a particularly nasty form of river blindness. Now by any reasonable impartial measure of goodness, eyesight beats running by quite a lot. Suppose (contrary to fact) that I was so fanatical about running that I cared about it half as much as most people care about their sight. Even if we ignore the considerable indirect benefits to society of preventing blindness, we find that each year I could do 100 times as much good by sending my running budget to buy tetracycline to prevent river blindness. So in order for a Scheffler-style ‘personal project adjustment’ to justify even this inexpensive project, it would have to be a factor of at least 100. However, giving the agent the option of granting her own interests and projects 100 times the importance that they would have from an impartial perspective seems to give her too much elbow room. Roughly speaking, it would mean that I could simply ignore anyone whose needs were less than 100 times as great as mine. Indeed, once we have adopted IOC as a background theory (so that a special reason must be given for departures from the impartial moral preferability ranking), it becomes difficult if not impossible to find the ‘right’ number of bonus points to free the agent from the mathematically overwhelming demands of the numerous very worst off without also ‘freeing’ her of any duty to aid. It is easy enough to see how this problem generalizes. Even the least materialistic among us affluent Westerners has projects, needs, and interests whose pursuit will almost always contribute far less to the aggregate satisfaction of the interests and needs of the set of all persons than could be contributed if the resources that they consume were used in other ways. The creation of any meaningful moral elbow room for people in affluent societies to decide sometimes to favor their own or their loved-ones’ needs and interests over the more numerous and more intense needs and interests of other people would require setting the Scheffler-style ‘personal project bonus’ implausibly high–so high in fact that we would seldom if ever be morally required to help anyone at all.

The problems that face Scheffler’s attempt to find and justify a ‘correct’ quantity of extra weight for an agent to give her own needs and interests (or those of her loved ones)–an amount of extra weight that will turn an otherwise impartial consequentialist moral theory into something approaching common sense limited morality–suggest that Scheffler has conceded too much to consequentialism at the outset. I suspect that if a less demanding moral theory can coherently express the rejection of moral solipsism, then it had better not start by adopting the impartial perspective as a ‘default’ moral preferability ranking, and then trying to tinker with it (and to justify the resulting adjustments). By then, I fear that the game is already lost. Instead, I propose a much ‘earlier’ point at which to begin to distinguish deontology from consequentialism.

It seems to me that consequentialism is off and running as soon as we adopt a distinctively quantitative conception of moral status. This conception of moral status is, I shall suggest, a kind of Trojan Horse. It seems innocent enough, but once we let it in, consequentialism sneaks out and over-runs the fortress. The door in the belly of the horse opens as soon as we ask the question ‘How much does each person matter?’ or the question ‘How much moral status does each person have?’ No answer seems so reasonable as the answer that all persons matter equally–that they all have the same quantity of moral status. Any other answer seems either a logically suspect failure to treat similar cases similarly, or a morally suspect unwillingness to attribute to others the same degree of moral mattering that one attributes to oneself. The first seems to be a failure of rational consistency, and the second seems to be a failure fully to reject moral solipsism. Thus unleashed, the consequentialist presupposition about the quantitative nature of moral status soon opens the gate to the rest of the components of IOC.

The idea that there can be quantities of moral status or degrees of mattering seems fairly natural, especially given a certain very plausible conception of what it means to have moral status or to be a being who matters. According to this conception, moral status is (among other things) what allows a person’s needs and interests to create moral reasons: A person’s needs and interests have moral status because the person herself has moral status. Her needs and interests matter because she matters. Now this conception of moral status need not be thought of in quantitative terms, but it can be. For we can very easily see moral status as a kind of variable-strength power or propensity that a person has, in virtue of which her needs and interests create moral reasons. On this view, the strength of the resulting moral reasons depends primarily on two factors: the intensity of the needs or interests on which they are based, and the strength of the power or propensity to create moral reasons that the person’s moral status gives her.[[10]](#endnote-10) Suppose, for instance, that person P1 has a need N1 with an intensity of I1. If P1 has any moral status, then this need creates a moral reason of some strength S1, where S1 is some function of I1. Thus, S1 = F(I1). Now the propensity of P1's needs to create reasons can be measured by the function that links I1 to S1. That is, the greater the propensity, the stronger the moral reason that results from a need of a given intensity.

So what happens when we ask how much of this power or propensity each person has? Presumably, the thing to say (assuming we want to break free from moral solipsism) is that each person has an equal amount of this power or propensity. Thus, if P1 and P2 have equal moral status, then their needs and interests have an equal propensity to generate moral reasons. That is, if the moral status of P1 is equal to that of P2, then for any need Ni of person P1 of intensity Ii and for any need Nj of person P2 of intensity Ij, if Ii = Ij, then Si = Sj. (Or, in plain English, equally intense needs give rise to equally strong moral reasons.) On the other hand, if the moral status of P1 had been, say, twice as great as that of P2, then if Ii = Ij, then Si = 2 (Sj). Or, more to the point, suppose that P1 and P2 have equal moral status, and that P1 has a need N1 of intensity I1, and P2 has a N2 of intensity I2; if it happens that I1 is twice that of I2, then S1 = 2 (S2). Thus, if two persons have an equal propensity or power to generate moral reasons from their needs and interests, then the relative strength of the resulting moral reasons will depend only on the intensity of the needs or interests from which they are created, regardless of whose needs or interests they are. This conclusion makes plausible the idea that the needs and interests of various persons are mathematically comparable, so that they can be weighted by intensity and added together to form an aggregate measure of the needs and interests of the set of all persons. It then becomes plausible to hold that the proper moral standard for an action is its (expected) net affect on this aggregate.

The upshot of all of this is that if we think of moral status in this quantitative way, then it becomes difficult to resist the idea that equally intense needs or interests give rise to equally strong moral reasons, regardless of whose needs or interests they are. And if this is so, then it appears that the most sensible way to respond to the equal status of all persons is to simply aggregate the reasons generated by all of their various needs and interests into one impartial moral preferability ranking. Such a ranking seems uniquely suited to do maximal justice to the commitment to the equal quantity of moral status possessed by each person. For it simply ‘factors out’ the distinctions between persons and puts all needs and interests (weighted for intensity) into one impartial aggregate. Once we have identified this ranking as the moral perspective, it becomes difficult to give a moral defense of any policy that it deems sub-optimal.

The lesson here, it seems to me, is that once we entertain the question, ‘How much does each person matter?’ it looks as though we are well on the way to IOC. This very question presupposes the quantitative conception of moral status that, as we have seen, seems to lead pretty directly to IOC. However, if we can avoid thinking of the equal mattering of each person in a way that implies an equal ‘quantity’ of moral status, then perhaps we can avoid taking this path. Such a strategy for resisting the seductive appeal of IOC will only make sense if we can develop a plausible non-quantitative conception of moral status–one that does not lead to the conclusion that recognizing the equal moral status of persons requires us to adopt the impartial moral preferability ranking.

III

This may seem like a tall order. After all, we are accustomed to thinking of predicates like ‘matters’ or ‘has moral status’ in quantitative terms. In addition, many everyday properties are also quantitative. Take warmth for example: I can speak of one lake being more or less warm than another. However, some everyday properties do not seem to be quantitative in this way. Take squareness for example: either something is square, or it is not.[[11]](#endnote-11) Now the comparative ‘equally \_\_\_\_’ can apply to properties of either kind. To say that two lakes are equally warm is to say that they have the same quantity of warm-ness (or, as we would be more likely to say, heat). On the other hand, to say that two signs are equally square is just to say that it is equally true of each that it is square. Two square things are equally square, not because they possess equal quantities of some thing, but rather because each is an instantiation of the same property.

I suggest that we think of ‘mattering’–or, if you prefer, ‘having fundamental intrinsic moral status’ as a non-quantitative property akin to squareness rather than a quantitative property akin to warm-ness. If such a non-quantitative conception of moral status or mattering can be developed, it may provide an alternative to the consequentialist way of understanding the commitment to see each person as equally a being-who-matters. Thus, it may allow us to construct a coherent response to the rejection of moral solipsism that does not commit us to equating the moral point of view with the impartial perspective.

Let us begin by noting that the mere recognition that other persons matter in a fundamental way that is independent of my own ends and goals does not in itself seem to require me to quantify the ‘amount’ of the mattering or moral status that I am attributing to others. I could simply say that it is equally true of each person that she matters in a way that is evaluatively fundamental, and that all persons have this same fundamental status as beings-who-matter in a way that non-persons do not. In short, simply claiming that all persons are equally beings-who-matter does not commit us to saying that they all have equal quantities of something (moral status) that allows their needs and interests to produce reasons of equal relative strength that can simply be aggregated to form an impartial preferability ranking.

IV

I think that Kant’s remarks about rational beings having a ‘dignity’ (which seems non-quantitative) rather than a ‘price’ (which seems quantitative) suggest that he may have been proposing something very much like what I am calling a non-quantitative conception of mattering.[[12]](#endnote-12) Although Kant’s ideas certainly suggest the kind of account I am developing here, I will not argue that the view I am developing was in fact Kant’s actual view.[[13]](#endnote-13) Thus, I will call it a ‘Kantian Alternative’ rather than ‘Kant’s Alternative’. For the record, my own feeling is that the view that I will develop here is in fact a plausible reading of Kant, and one that helps us to see why, contra R.M. Hare and David Cummiskey, the key doctrines in Kant’s ethics really do lead to deontology rather than consequentialism.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nevertheless, I will not defend any exegetical claims here, although I will draw on some distinctively Kantian ideas in developing a strategy for resisting IOC’s seductive appeal. The most important Kantian idea on which I will draw is the idea that we treat something as having intrinsic, fundamental value by regarding it as an ultimate end.[[15]](#endnote-15) I will also follow Kant in claiming that treating a person as an ultimate end involves promoting or protecting the person herself, and promoting, helping her promote, or at least respecting her (morally permissible) goals.[[16]](#endnote-16)

My suggestion is that we may be able to construct a viable Kantian alternative to IOC around the claim that we adequately express our rejection of moral solipsism by treating other persons as ultimate ends. (I will use the terms ‘ends’ and ‘goals’ interchangeably.) On this view, the agent can fully reject moral solipsism and become a moral agent by adding (all) other persons to her pre-existing list of ultimate ends. Doing so requires her to see other persons as ends just as ultimate as any other ultimate ends she may have. Thus, the agent becomes a moral agent by modifying–though not completely surrendering–her original point of view and preference ranking. The modifications necessary for this will be of two kinds. The first will be to add other persons to her original list of ultimate ends. The second will be to remove any ends from her original list that are incompatible with seeing other persons as ultimate ends. By adopting a perspective that has been modified in this way, the agent expresses her commitment to the fundamental mattering of other persons.

Thus, the Kantian alternative suggests that an agent may achieve the transition from moral solipsism to morality simply by ‘moralizing’ her system of ends, mainly through the addition of ultimate ends-that-are-persons. Impartially optimizing consequentialism also achieves a transition from moral solipsism to morality, but in a very different way and with a very different result: It requires us to discard our original list of ultimate ends and replace it with the impartial moral preferability ranking. Thus, the Kantian alternative differs from IOC in how it constructs a moral point of view, the adoption of which constitutes a reasonable and coherent response to the rejection of moral solipsism. Instead of trading in our systems of ends for the impartial moral preferability ranking, we are simply to add other persons to our own lists of ultimate ends (and subtract any ends that are incompatible with doing this). Moralizing one’s perspective in this way is a coherent response to the rejection of moral solipsism because treating something as an ultimate end is a coherent way of recognizing that it matters fundamentally, that is, for its own sake and not as a mere means to something else that matters in some more fundamental way. If a coherent moral perspective is one that recognizes the fundamental mattering of all persons, then a moral perspective that includes each other person on its list of ultimate ends would seem to count as a coherent moral perspective–one that adequately expresses the rejection of moral solipsism.

V

A person whose moral perspective is formed by the addition of other persons to her original system of ultimate ends would seem to be governed by a decision procedure far different from the simple injunction to maximize the aggregate good. Maximizing procedures seem appropriate for situations in which all goods, goals, or values can be reduced to one, the maximization of which then becomes a single ultimate goal. However, without a single ultimate good, value, or goal, a simple maximization procedure is inappropriate. Because the Kantian alternative recognizes the mattering of persons by granting each of them the status of ultimate ends, the proper model for its moral decision procedure will be provided by whatever decision procedure is appropriate for a person who is faced with multiple ultimate goals.

Thus, to develop the Kantian alternative, we must examine in some detail what decision procedures are appropriate for dealing with a number of ultimate ends. Let us begin at the beginning. For an agent to have an end or goal of any sort is for her to be willing to expend her resources to promote it, and to avoid expending her resources to thwart it. (When I say ‘thwart’ here and elsewhere, I mean, roughly, the deliberate expending of resources with the intention of bringing about of a non-temporary net setback to the goal, that is, a setback that the agent does not intend as a means to a greater furthering of that same goal at some other time. Thus, taking one step back in order to take two steps forward toward the same goal does not count as thwarting the goal in the sense that I mean here.) An agent does not willingly expend her resources to thwart her goal without some special reason, such as the need to promote some other goal or to prevent another of her goals from being set back.

With this understanding of a goal (and an agent’s relation to it), we can characterize an ultimate goal in the following way: An agent will not willingly expend her resources to thwart her ultimate goals under any (normal) circumstances and for any (normal) reason. What separates an ultimate goal from a non-ultimate goal is that an agent will not be willing to thwart an ultimate goal in order to further some other goal (or to prevent it from being set back), even if that other goal is also ultimate.[[17]](#endnote-17) To expend resources willingly to produce a non-temporary net setback to goal G1 in order to promote G2 is to treat G1 as a mere means to furthering G2 rather than as an ultimate goal in its own right. The deliberate expending of resources in such a way as to set back an ultimate goal can only be justified by a compensating promotion of that same goal at some other time. Under normal circumstances, an agent will not willingly thwart an ultimate goal in order to obtain resources for promoting other goals, even if they too are ultimate.

The term ‘willingly’ is important here. There are, of course, forced trades and tragic choices, which a person may have to make between ultimate ends. That is, circumstances or other people may conspire to force an agent to choose between thwarting or abandoning one ultimate goal or thwarting or abandoning one or more other ultimate goals. This fact does not count against the general thesis that a person will not willingly sacrifice one ultimate end in order to promote another end (even another ultimate end). Sophie’s forced choice between her own children does not show that she ‘really did’ value one child more than the other, despite what the sadistic guard and the guilt-ridden Sophie may have concluded.[[18]](#endnote-18) The fact that we may be forced to choose between ultimate ends does not mean that we really do see the one not chosen as any less ultimate than the other. Indeed, if we did, then such choices, while perhaps unfortunate, would not be tragic in the way that Sophie’s choice was.

Thus, under normal, non-tragic circumstances, if an agent is willing to expend resources to produce a net, non-temporary setback to some goal, then it is not her ultimate goal. However, an agent’s failure to promote a goal on a given occasion (even if she has appropriate resources available) does not by itself seem to falsify the claim that it is one of her ultimate goals. Why not? First, notice that it is often impossible for me to promote a certain goal at a certain time. Yet, at such times I do not necessarily cease to have that goal. For example, the fact that I cannot promote my goal of hiking in the Canadian Rockies while I am teaching my moral theory course in Michigan in January does not mean that I have ceased to have that goal.[[19]](#endnote-19) The fact that goals can exist at times when the agent is not currently expending resources to promote them suggests that they can best be seen as dispositions on the part of an agent to expend resources to promote them under some possible conditions but not necessarily all conditions. If ordinary goals are dispositions of this sort, then it seems plausible to claim that ultimate goals are dispositional in much the same way. This suggests that an agent does not cease to have an ultimate goal simply because she is not promoting it at some particular time.

Next, notice that nothing in the concept of an ultimate goal precludes an agent from having more than one ultimate goal at any given time. Suppose, then, that I have a set of ultimate goals at some time. We noted above that my inability to promote an ultimate goal at a time does not seem to preclude it from being my ultimate goal at that time. This implies that I can have a set of ultimate goals even if, at that time, I cannot promote each of the ultimate goals in that set. That is, it can still be true that I have a set of ultimate goals even if I cannot, at that time, promote each member of the set. This remains true even if, at that time, I could promote any one (or any proper subset) of these goals, but not all of them. Now this will be a fairly common state of affairs: Often, an available resource could be used to promote any one of several ultimate goals, but not all of them at the same time. When this happens, an agent must choose which of her ultimate goals to promote with the resource. Since the concept of an ultimate goal seems to allow an agent to have an ultimate goal even in situations in which it is impossible for her to promote it, it seems reasonable to hold that she can have a set of ultimate goals despite the fact that in a given situation it may be impossible for her to promote every member of that set. If this is correct, then when an agent makes a resource-allocation decision about which of her ultimate goals to promote with a given resource, the goals that she does not then promote do not cease to be ultimate goals. Thus, the ordinary concept of an ultimate goal seems to allow an agent to allocate resources to some ultimate goals rather than others without thereby abandoning those ultimate goals that she does not then promote.

The claim that an agent can have an ultimate goal without promoting it on a particular occasion suggests that she can give a certain kind of priority to one ultimate goal over another ultimate goal. Suppose that I have a resource that could be used to promote either of two ultimate goals. Suppose that I use the resource to promote the first goal rather than the second. Finally, suppose that, while I do make this decision not to promote the second goal on this occasion, I would nevertheless refuse to thwart or abandon the second goal in order to promote the first. In this case, I have given what I will call non-subordinating priority to the first goal over the second. I have given priority to the first goal in the sense that I have chosen to promote it rather than the second. However, I have not made the second goal truly subordinate to the first. For I would not thwart or abandon the second goal just to promote the first; I would not treat it as a mere resource to be ‘expended’. If I refuse to treat thwarting or abandoning the second goal as a means to promoting the first goal, yet I use resources that could be used to promote either goal disproportionately to promote the first, then I have given the first goal non-subordinating priority over the second.

In contrast, to give subordinating priority to one goal over a second goal is to be willing to thwart or abandon the second in order to promote the first. Assigning subordinating priority to one goal over a second goal is a way of treating the second goal as a expendable means to promoting the first goal. From what we have seen so far, it appears that an ultimate goal can take non-subordinating priority over another ultimate goal. However, nothing can take subordinating priority over an ultimate goal, except, perhaps, in tragic circumstances such as coercion by other persons or the conspiracy of circumstance.

The idea that one ultimate goal can take non-subordinating priority over another suggests that a distinction between thwarting and failing to promote is inherent in the concept of an ultimate goal. As we have noted, it seems that an agent may fail to expend her resources to promote an ultimate goal on some occasion without it ceasing to be her ultimate goal. However, she cannot willingly expend resources with the sole intention of thwarting anything that she regards as an ultimate goal (except, perhaps, in tragic circumstances). If she does, then either she is mistaken about what ultimate goals she has, or she is behaving irrationally.

Although an agent’s failure to advance a goal on a particular occasion seems consistent with that goal still being ultimate for her, an agent’s complete lack of any disposition ever to further a goal is not consistent with it being ultimate for her. If there are no circumstances under which an agent would choose to expend resources to promote a goal, or if she would not be any more disposed to promote that goal no matter how much her resources and/or opportunities increased, then it is not her ultimate goal.[[20]](#endnote-20) Apparently, however, so long as she remains willing to consider expending resources to promote a goal on some possible occasion, no isolated failure to promote it falsifies the claim that it is her ultimate goal.

Given this characterization of the nature of an ultimate goal, then, an agent will not normally choose to sacrifice or abandon one ultimate goal for another, but she may choose how to allocate her resources among multiple ultimate goals. She may, at her own discretion, choose to give non-subordinating priority to some of them without abandoning or thwarting the others. One’s ultimate goals may thus exert differential pulls on one’s limited resources. I may find that some ultimate goals loom larger than others on my ‘practical radar’, as it were, but they are all still on the radar screen in the sense that I regard them all as things to be noticed–as things that matter.

In the rest of the paper, I will assume that this conception of an ultimate goal and of the rational agent’s relation to it is defensible (readers who are not yet convinced may take this as a provisional assumption), and I will stipulate that the Kantian alternative is committed to it.[[21]](#endnote-21) Now notice that this conception of an ultimate goal gives an agent who has multiple ultimate goals a significant degree of practical elbow room to make her own resource-allocation decisions, free from any rational mandate to optimize the outcome as defined in terms of some single, over-arching goal. Since the Kantian alternative to IOC recognizes the mattering of persons by incorporating them as multiple ultimate ends into the moral agent’s evaluative framework, it transforms this practical elbow room into moral elbow room. For if there is no general prudential requirement to allocate one's resources in any particular manner among one's own ultimate ends, then there would be no moral requirement to divide one’s resources in any particular manner among one’s new, moralized set of ultimate ends. If it is up to me how to divide my time and energy and other resources among my ultimate ends, then this fact does not appear to change once I moralize my personal point of view by adding other persons to my list of ultimate ends. According to the Kantian alternative, then, the moral agentwould retain her prerogative to grant non-subordinating priority to some of the members of her new moralized set of ultimate ends–a set which consists of both other persons and at least some of the agent’s original pre-moral ultimate goals.

Thus, the Kantian alternative implies the existence of the kind of moral options sought by opponents of consequentialism. It claims that the moral agent retains the prerogative to decide how much of her own resources to devote to promoting any of her ultimate ends. If we ‘promote’ an end-that-is-a-person by benefiting her, then under the Kantian alternative, this prerogative becomes the moral option to decide how much of one’s resources to devote to benefiting other persons. There are, however, limits to this prerogative (and therefore to the corresponding moral option). If I completely lack any disposition ever to promote a goal, then it is false to say that I regard it as an ultimate goal. Translating this fact about ultimate goals into the moral realm, the Kantian alternative claims that while a moral agent may give non-subordinating priority to some of her own ground projects, she must not adopt a blanket refusal to benefit other persons. If we do not adopt at least some disposition to benefit other persons under at least some possible conditions, then we are not treating other persons as ultimate ends, and thus we have not truly embraced the commitment to regard other persons as beings-who-matter. Thus, the Kantian alternative imposes no moral obligation to devote any particular amount of my resources to aiding any particular other person, but it does require that I not be completely indifferent to her needs and interests.

In addition, the Kantian alternative places strict limits on how a moral agent may treat other persons. Consider again the relationship of an agent to some ultimate goal of hers: While a mere failure to promote it on a given occasion provides little if any reason to doubt that it is her ultimate goal, any willingness to thwart it would be strong evidence that she fails to regard it as her ultimate goal. If we ‘thwart’ an end-that-is-a-person by harming her, then we can see that the Kantian alternative implies that a moral agent must not willingly harm other persons. Because it claims that, at least under normal conditions, it is irrational to thwart one’s ultimate goal to secure gains to other goals, the Kantian alternative will not allow us to harm one person in order to benefit another. So while seeing persons as ultimate ends does not tell us how to divide our time, energy, and other resources among them, it does set certain limits on how we may treat them. In short, the Kantian alternative recognizes both moral options (or agent-centered prerogatives) as well as moral constraints (or agent-centered restrictions).

In this way, the Kantian alternative offers us an account of a moral perspective that expresses the rejection of moral solipsism while offering us much of what we want from ordinary morality. It offers us a rationale for an option to decide how much of our resources to devote to benefiting others, with the proviso that we must not adopt a blanket refusal to benefit them. In addition, it offers us a rationale for the strong prohibition against harming persons (except, perhaps, under tragic circumstances). Obviously, this comes quite close to how Kant’s distinction between imperfect and perfect duties has been commonly understood.[[22]](#endnote-22)

VI

While the Kantian alternative leaves the specifics of how an agent should allocate her resources among her ultimate ends (including other persons) up to the agent herself, two kinds of cases do seem to call for an almost mandatory response from an agent truly committed to regarding other persons as ultimate ends. In ‘emergency cases’ an agent has available to her an action that will prevent a great harm to someone else while producing only a very small drain on her own resources. In ‘golden opportunity’ cases, an agent has available to her an action that will produce a great benefit to someone else while producing only a very small drain on her own resources. Routinely ignoring either sort of case seems inconsistent with treating other persons as ultimate ends. For in both kinds of cases, it is to the point to challenge the agent in the following way: ‘You profess to see other persons as ultimate ends, and yet you refuse to aid them in a case like this. You are certainly free to decide when and how to promote any of your ultimate ends, but if not now, then when?’

Of course, in the present sorry state of the world, such cases abound. The Kantian alternative requires agents to take this fact seriously. While it does not require the individual to give up or betray her own deepest concerns or her attachments to those persons nearest and dearest to her, it does require her to be willing to make a significant commitment to using some of her resources to respond to these great needs. In particular, the Kantian alternative seems to condemn agents when they fritter away resources by devoting them to goals that they themselves regard as inconsequential. While devoting our resources disproportionately to an important life-defining project may be compatible with taking all persons to be ultimate ends, wasting resources on frivolous pursuits when they could be used to produce a great benefit or prevent a great harm to others is not. This suggests that the Kantian alternative will condemn much of the wasteful lifestyle of those of us living in affluent societies. In that sense, it holds forth a moral ideal that few Westerners have yet to achieve (and one that may be rather more demanding than the moral ideal commonly associated with ordinary morality, at least as it is commonly conceived). Neverthless, the moral ideal implied by the Kantian alternative remains far less demanding than that of IOC. For it does allow an agent to devote her resources disproportionately to projects and persons that give meaning and purpose to her life, even as it condemns the waste of resources on things that the agent herself can see to be frivolous, and even as it encourages us to find less expensive ways of pursuing those projects that we do adopt, with the goal of increasing the amount of resources that we have available to devote to other persons. So the Kantian alternative to IOC may not require us to become impartial and tireless ‘moral saints’, although it does appear to require us to become considerably more saintly than most of us are.

This difference between the demands of IOC and the more limited demands of the Kantian alternative raises the question of how the Kantian alternative can integrate a non-quantitative conception of mattering with moral questions that seem irreducibly quantitative, such as, ‘How much of our resources we should devote to others?’[[23]](#endnote-23) The claim that the moral status of persons is non-quantitative does not entail the claim that all moral questions are non–quantitative. The Kantian alternative need not, therefore, deny that many of the moral questions that face us are questions that require quantitative answers. How, then, can a non-quantitative theory deliver quantitative answers to such questions? Notice that IOC can answer such questions very simply: Since mattering is quantitative, there is a linear ‘conversion factor’ between facts about the needs and interests of persons involved in any given situation and the proper quantity of resources to be devoted to that situation. The Kantian alternative, with its non–quantitative conception of moral status, lacks any mandatory linear ‘conversion factor’ of this sort. It implies no mandatory mapping from facts about the needs and interests of the persons involved in a situation to the morally proper amount of resources to be devoted to it. However, the fact that no such mapping is morally mandatory does not mean that it is somehow impossible to decide how much of one’s resources to devote to a given situation. Indeed, this is just the application of the idea of non-subordinating priority: it is up to the agent to determine how much of her resources to devote to the various multiple ultimate goals that she has and that can be advanced at a given time.

The question that the individual who follows the Kantian alternative must answer, then, is this: What is the proper balance for the individual moral agent to strike between devoting her resources to her own goals and devoting those same resources to other persons? Since the agent who follows the Kantian alternative accepts non-quantitative mattering, she is free to resist the consequentialist suggestion to ‘take a vote’ in which her own ground projects and loved ones get out-voted by the multitude of other persons whom her resources could benefit. Yet surely there must be some point at which we could say that she has not devoted sufficient resources to others. Otherwise, the Kantian alternative may cease to be a convincing expression of the genuine rejection of moral solipsism. The answer implicit in the Kantian alternative is that the balance between self-interest and altruism must properly reflect the agent’s genuine acceptance of the ultimate mattering of other persons. This requirement would seem to suggest that the more dire the needs of others, the more able the agent is to help them, and the more her own needs are already met (and the more her own ultimate goals are being promoted or at least not set back), the more the balance should be tilted toward devotion of her resources to the needs and interests of others. This means that the proper level of altruism will vary according to many of the same factors as it would under IOC, but the difference is that under the Kantian alternative, the relation is not determined by a simple impartial aggregation of need.

Of course this is only a sketch of what a Kantian alternative to IOC might look like. However, I hope that it shows how a more reasonable, non-impartial morality might be an equally coherent response to many of the same basic moral insights that make IOC so compelling.

VII

At this point (if not before) skeptics might question whether the decision procedure developed here and claimed to be appropriate for choice in the face of multiple ultimate goals really does constitute a distinct and coherent alternative to the maximizing decision procedure that characterizes IOC. Some might question this claim by noting that resource-allocation decisions between any pair of ultimate goals imply the existence of a trade-off schedule between the promotion of one ultimate goal and the promotion of the other. It might then be claimed that at least in principle the agent could be gotten to choose how she would allocate resources between the promotion of any pair of ultimate goals. Finally, it might be claimed that these choices can be collected into a trade-off schedule, which, in turn, can be aggregated into a utility function. The skeptic might conclude that it is the maximization of utility, as defined by this function, that really governs--or at least should govern–the agent’s choices, even when she seems to have multiple ultimate goals. If this is correct, then it would seem to undercut the suggestion that the Kantian alternative allows us to adopt a moral decision procedure that is very different from the one that IOC requires.

The problem with this line of argument is that it makes an unwarranted assumption about the relationship between the agent’s resource-allocation decisions and the trade-off schedule that describes them. While the agent’s resource-allocation decisions can be collected and represented ex post facto as an indifference curve on a trade-off schedule that plots acceptable allocations between pairs of ultimate goal promotings, the Kantian alternative claims that the agent’s resource-allocation decisions dictate this curve, and not vice versa. The Kantian alternative must, of course, admit that a trade-off schedule can be created (and an indifference curve plotted) to track the agent’s resource-allocation decisions, but it denies that the trade-off schedule mandates those decisions. Or, to put the point more carefully, it is a different and substantive claim–one that the Kantian alternative sees as an unwarranted assumption–to say that an agent’s choices of how to allocate resources among the promotion of multiple ultimate goals should be dictated by a trade-off schedule that is independent of and prior to those very choices. This further claim is not, as far as I can see, implied by the notion of an ultimate goal, and absent some compelling argument, it is an assumption that the Kantian alternative is free to reject.

The Kantian alternative, in effect, distinguishes two kinds of trade-off schedules. Trade-off schedules between ultimate goal promotings are simply records of the agent’s resource-allocation decisions–decisions that are not rationally mandatory given the nature of an ultimate goal (so long as she gives only non-subordinating priority to any one ultimate goal over any other ultimate goal and avoids adopting a policy of never allocating resources to either one of them). On the other hand, trade-offs between two non-ultimate goals that are comparable in terms of a single ‘covering value’, such as utility, can be rationally mandatory.[[24]](#endnote-24) In this second kind of case, each increment of the promotion of the non-ultimate goal makes an independently definable contribution to the promotion of a more ultimate goal. In such a case, the facts about which resource allocation will maximize the acquisition or promotion of the covering value will determine which resource allocation is rationally mandatory. An indifference curve of this sort would not simply represent the agent’s resource-allocation decisions; it would dictate which of them are rational. However, accepting that this kind of case can exist when the goals being promoted are non-ultimate does not preclude the Kantian alternative from claiming that when both of the two goals are truly ultimate, resource-allocation decisions are left up to discretion of the agent, so long as she does not abandon or thwart one of them merely to promote the other, and so long as she rejects any blanket policy of never promoting one or the other of them.

VIII

So far, I have not claimed that IOC is incorrect or inferior to the Kantian alternative. I have claimed only that the Kantian alternative is a genuine alternative to IOC, even if we begin with the compelling story that it can tell about the heart of morality being the rejection of moral solipsism. The defender of IOC, however, may well be less ‘ecumenical’ and attempt to argue that the Kantian alternative represents a rationally or morally inferior way to express the rejection of moral solipsism.

Initially, the proponent of IOC might be tempted to ask: ‘Given that persons matter, why not produce those outcomes that are best for the set of all persons?’ Although this challenge packs considerable rhetorical punch, apart from the insinuation that its target should feel ashamed for her reluctance to do more than she could, it offers no real argument that an agent is under any moral or rational requirement to do so. For notice that the term ‘best’ in the context of this question can only really mean ‘best from the impartial perspective’. Hence, the question is simply trivial: ‘Wouldn’t it be best from the impartial perspective to do what is best from the impartial perspective?’ Absent a compelling argument for adopting the impartial perspective, rhetorical questions about how much better it would be from the impartial perspective to do what is best from the impartial perspective are simply invitations to the deontologist to join in begging the question against her own theory.

A more sophisticated objection to the Kantian alternative might focus on the issue of objectivity. Some consequentialists suggest that the impartial perspective represents a uniquely objective and thus uniquely rational perspective. Although such arguments are too complex to do them full justice in a short space, they generally trade on the idea that deviations between one’s own preferences and the preferences one would have if one had a perfectly impartial evaluative perspective are analogous to deviations between one’s beliefs and those beliefs one would have if one occupied a perfectly objective epistemic standpoint. The problem with this line of thought is that the analogy is based on the unwarranted–and I think rather dubious–assumption that the impartial preference structure represents a privileged statement of the evaluative ‘facts’ about what matters. Whether or not deviations from the impartial evaluative perspective constitute an evaluative bias that a rational agent should overcome depends on whether there is any rational requirement to adopt the impartial evaluative perspective in the first place. And that is exactly the question at issue.

Indeed, the analogy between clearly desirable epistemic objectivity on the one hand, and evaluative objectivity on the other, seems dubious at best. Objectivity is a plausible epistemic ideal precisely because (most of us believe) there is such a thing as the way (macro-level) things are, independent of any epistemic standpoint. Since any person’s subjective epistemic standpoint is only a biased, partial view of how things are, the more objective one’s epistemic standpoint, the more accurately one would apprehend this mind-independent reality. However, evaluations are manifestly unlike observations, and so we may not simply assume that the standards of rationally defensible observations apply to evaluations. It is not at all clear that we should be looking for maximal evaluative objectivity--an evaluative view from nowhere. For it is unclear that such a perspective could even be an evaluative standpoint at all. As Nagel points out, the paradigm for a maximally objective standpoint is the standpoint of physics, but the standpoint of physics can only include values if they are the quasi-Platonic natural normative facts that few of us believe in.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Someone might accept Nagel’s point about the dangers of maximal evaluative objectivity, but claim that morality must embody the most objective perspective consistent with the existence of values. Thus, it might be claimed that we should move toward maximal objectivity until just before the point at which value disappears entirely. Arguably, by this point, agent-relative values will have disappeared from our picture of ‘evaluative reality ‘, and we would evaluate states of affairs from the impartial perspective. But why accept the premise on which this exercize is based? Why think that morality should embody themost objective perspective consistent with the existence of any values? Why not say that morality must embody only the minimum degree of objectivity necessary for the rejection of moral solipsism? Notice that the answer cannot be that more objectivity is better than less, since maximal objectivity leads to the value-less world described by pure physics. It is unclear why we should prefer just that exact level of evaluative objectivity that makes IOC most plausible, unless we were already committed to IOC in the first place.

The appeal to objectivity is one way that the proponents of IOC have attempted to argue for full impartiality against the partiality of deontological views like the Kantian alternative. However, some arguments for IOC attempt to motivate impartiality not by appeal to some putative rational requirement for maximal objectivity, but rather by appealing to the commitments that deontological views already make. Instead of charging a deontological view like the Kantian alternative with flouting some rational demand for objectivity, the defender of IOC might suggest that it represents an intellectually untenable compromise over the issue of impartiality. When we moralize the individual perspective in the way that deontological views like the Kantian alternative do, the resulting perspective is clearly an improvement, morally speaking, over moral solipsism. This improvement makes the perspective of deontological views like the Kantian alternative more impartial than that of moral solipsism, for it now recognizes the mattering of other persons and their status as a source of genuine moral reasons. This suggests that adding impartiality to a perspective counts as a moral improvement to that perspective. But then why stop at some wishy-washy position that falls short of full impartiality? Isn’t such a semi-impartial perspective inherently unstable?

This objection, of course, is based on a venerable argument that goes back to Sidgwick, and which has seen famous reincarnations in the work of Nagel and Parfit. The argument attempts to show that IOC is the proper conclusion from premises that the deontologist already accepts. In particular, it seeks to show that the deontologist is committed to the general thesis that impartiality makes an evaluative perspective a more adequate moral perspective.[[26]](#endnote-26) In its classic form, the argument starts ‘further back’ than the question of ‘inter-agent’ impartiality that separates deontologists from impartial consequentialists. Instead, it begins with the issue of ‘intra-agent’ partiality. Like most people, deontologists typically reject what we might call ‘egoism of the present moment’–that is, egoism that is unconcerned with one’s own future happiness or suffering. Instead, most deontologists, like most egoists, claim that it is rational to be more or less impartial between the needs and interests of one’s own present and those of one’s own future.[[27]](#endnote-27) This suggests that deontologists themselves accept the principle that adding temporal intra-agent impartiality to a perspective improves it.

The proponent of IOC then attempts to extrapolate this same reasoning from impartiality among temporal parts of a single agent to impartiality among separate agents. Just as temporal intra-agent partiality consists of partiality toward the present temporal part of a single person, inter-agent partiality consists of partiality toward one agent (typically oneself). Now while the deontologist typically embraces more or less full intra-agent impartiality, she rejects the full inter-agent impartialitythat characterizes IOC. But if the deontologist embraces one form of impartiality, then why not embrace the other form as well? What justification can there be for rejecting one form of partiality but accepting another?

Of course, in its classic form, this argument is directed primarily at showing that rational egoism’s commitment to temporal intra-agent impartiality is in tension with (or perhaps contradictory to) its rejection of inter-agent impartiality. The challenge, of course, is to assimilate temporal intra-agent impartiality to inter-agent impartiality. If the rational egoist can resist this assimilation, then she can resist the argument. However, the argument can also be turned against the deontologist, and there it seems to be even stronger. This is because the deontologist not only rejects intra-agent (temporal) partiality, but she also rejects at least the most extreme versions of inter-agent partiality. She rejects extreme inter-agent partiality in that she grants at least some weight to the needs and interests of other persons; her moral preferability ranking is affected by other persons in a way that the preferability ranking of the moral solipsist is not. Thus, in rejecting moral solipsism, the deontologist has already abandoned not only intra-agent partiality, but at least the most extreme form of inter-agent partiality as well. So not only has the deontologist taken a step toward IOC by embracing intra-agent (temporal) impartiality, but by recognizing other persons as self-sufficient sources of moral reasons, she has also taken an additional ‘half-step’ toward IOC by embracing some degree of inter-agent impartiality as well.

The proponent of IOC may see the deontologist’s move toward the ‘semi-impartial’ stance as a tacit acknowledgment of the deontologist’s own rejection of the extreme inter-agent partiality that characterizes moral solipsism. That is, the move away from moral solipsism seems to be predicated on the idea that there is something wrong–morally if not rationally–with extreme inter-agent partiality. But if the deontologist’s own rejection of moral solipsism is motivated by a rejection of extreme inter-agent partiality, then it invites the question: Why not go all the way? The deontologist’s unwillingness to go all the way to full inter-agent impartiality will seem to the consequentialist to be no more than an irrational unwillingness to face the fact that impartiality is key feature that separates a non-moral perspective from a moral one.

Arguments like these put the deontologist on the defensive and challenge her to defend the inclusion of some level of impartiality that falls short of complete impartiality. They attempt to portray deontology as an unstable middle ground between extreme inter-agent partiality of moral solipsism and full inter-agent impartiality of IOC. How can such a seemingly unstable middle position be defended?[[28]](#endnote-28)

The defender of IOC may suggest that the Kantian alternative accepts some impartiality because it, like IOC itself, is based on an underlying assumption that the moral project, so to speak, is to be identified with the drive toward impartiality, and that therefore the more impartial a perspective is, the more moral (and maybe even the more rational) it is. When you make a perspective a bit more impartial than moral solipsism, you have augmented its moral adequacy. Clearly, the Kantian alternative is more impartial than moral solipsism, but just as clearly, IOC is more impartial than the Kantian alternative. Given that the Kantian alternative is an improvement over moral solipsism, why isn’t IOC an improvement over the Kantian alternative? Doesn’t the Kantian’s acknowledgment that the extreme partiality of moral solipsism is what makes it morally defective demonstrate that the Kantian alternative does in fact recognize that the level of moral adequacy of a perspective is proportional to its level of impartiality?

Although this is a tempting way to think about the relation between impartiality and morality, I think that it is based on an assumption that the defender of the Kantian alternative can and should reject. When offered this challenge to defend its acceptance of ‘mere partial impartiality ‘, I think that the defender of the Kantian alternative should reply that it is not impartiality per se that is required for us to reject moral solipsism. Rather, it is the commitment to the non-instrumental mattering of each person. A moral perspective is simply one that transcends the egocentric predicament of moral solipsism in order to recognize the non-instrumental mattering of other persons. In this sense, it is clearly more impartial than a purely egocentric perspective, for it does recognize that others (and their needs and interests) matter. However, the mere fact that a perspective that rejects moral solipsism is more impartial than one that does not does not by itself entail that maximal impartiality is the presumptive aim of ethics. If we think that the basis of morality is the commitment to regard other persons as mattering, then whatever degree of impartiality this commitment requires is all the impartiality that morality really requires. If we can find a coherent way to embrace the insight that each person matters without adopting a fully impartial moral preferability ranking, then adopting any ‘additional’ impartiality would be purely optional.

Thus, the defender of the Kantian alternative can plausibly deny that the overriding goal of the project of constructing a rationally coherent moral perspective is to maximize its level of impartiality. Rather, she can claim that the goal of the ‘moral project’ is to create a perspective that recognizes the non-instrumental mattering of each person. If that goal does not require, in and of itself, maximal impartiality, then the fact that we need some impartiality to accomplish the goal does not entail that we should really be seeking maximal impartiality. For the fact that something must be somewhat F to achieve some purpose does not imply that it would better achieve that purpose if it were maximally F. Therefore the mere fact that the rejection of moral solipsism requires some impartiality does not demonstrate the existence of even a prima facie or pro tanto reason to accept maximal impartiality. This suggests that it is not necessary to regard the move away from moral solipsism toward semi-impartiality as the first stage of the real moral project of moving to full impartiality. The drive away from moral solipsism is simply a drive toward the recognition of the mattering of each person, and if that recognition does not require full impartiality, then the rejection of moral solipsism gives us no reason–not even a prima facie or pro tanto reason–to go all the way to full impartiality.

If it is coherent, the Kantian alternative offers us a way to recognize the non-instrumental mattering of each person without adopting the (fully) impartial perspective. If we can do this, then we need not try to find or invent some special reason in favor of partiality, which can provide an excuse for acting in ways that are sub-optimal from the impartial perspective. We would be free to deny that the moral impulse is an impulse pushing us toward impartiality per se, and could simply see it as an impulse pushing us away from moral solipsism. Buying into enough impartiality to get us out of the egocentric predicament would not commit us–not even in a prima face or pro tanto way–to buying it all.

IX

At no point so far have I claimed that there is anything irrational about IOC’s way of expressing the rejection of moral solipsism. Instead, I have attempted merely to construct an alternative response to the rejection of moral solipsism. If this response is coherent, then on what basis should we choose between it and IOC?

I would suggest that familiar considerations about integrity and the nature of human agency are an appropriate basis on which to break what may well be a ‘tie’ between two equally coherent responses to the rejection of moral solipsism. According to the Kantian alternative, the rejection of moral solipsism does not require the agent to relinquish her own locus of practical agency, her own ability to ‘set herself an end’,[[29]](#endnote-29) by trading her own unique preferability ranking for that of the impartial observer. Rather, it treats her as an agent in her own right by allowing her to retain her own individual preferability ranking, so long as she is willing to add other persons to the same ranking that contains the ultimate ends that are the focus of her own most basic personal concern. The resulting moralized perspective remains agent-relative in the sense that some of the values it contains are not filtered through the impartial aggregate, but instead arise directly from the agent’s own original (pre-moral) evaluative perspective. This allows the agent to invest some of her ends and attachments with such importance for her that they help to make her who she is and give meaning and purpose to her life. She is free to give non-subordinating priority to her deepest concerns; the moral permission to pursue them is not held hostage to their place in the impartial moral preferability ranking. Such a moral perspective is far more harmonious with the facts about human nature and the nature of human agency.[[30]](#endnote-30)

I wish to be clear that the present argument is not that these familiar considerations about agency and integrity are, by themselves, sufficient to outweigh a genuine requirement to take up an impartial perspective, if there is such a requirement. For I have already argued that there is no compelling reason to believe that such a requirement follows logically from the rejection of moral solipsism. I offer considerations of integrity and agency at this point only to show that, in the absence of a free-standing reason that pushes us all the way to full impartiality, there is in fact plenty of reason not to ‘go there on our own power’, so to speak. Such considerations need not be seen as providing excuses for ignoring morality’s otherwise overwhelming demands, or as defeating a requirement to go all the way to full impartiality, or as overcoming a Kagan-style pro tanto reason to make one’s largest possible contribution to the (impartially-defined) good.[[31]](#endnote-31) For we need not accept the existence of any of these things as a consequence of rejecting moral solipsism.

If that is right, then the Kantian alternative–or something very much like it–may well offer us a coherent, intellectually defensible alternative to IOC, one that sets high moral standards that condemn the wasteful life-style most of us live, while offering us an alternative that we can perhaps see as more livable than the life IOC would have us live. If such an alternative to IOC is tenable, then the idea that we must defend a limited (but still robust) morality as a balance or compromise between an actual moral reason to go all the way to full impartiality and non-moral considerations about integrity and human agency concedes too much to the proponent of IOC. For such suggestions assume that any limited morality is in effect a necessary evil, a compromise–in the pejorative sense–with the demands created by the rejection of moral solipsism. If I am right, then a limited morality is, in one sense, not limited at all. For it is not less than it must be to express coherently our rejection of moral solipsism.[[32]](#endnote-32)

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NOTES

1. . I borrow this idea from Thomas Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pages 99-109, though I do not draw the same conclusions that Nagel draws there. (In fact, Nagel himself no longer draws quite those same conclusions; see The View from Nowhere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), page 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Readers who do not think that persons are the ‘centerpiece’ of morality can translate most of what I say here with fairly little loss by replacing ‘persons’ with ‘sentient beings.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . In this context, I mean ‘action’ and ‘course of action’ to apply broadly so as to include deliberate inactions as well as actions. Also, to make the text less cumbersome, I have for the most part suppressed the usual language that would need to be included to deal with cases of probable effects of a course of action on the net aggregate satisfaction of the aggregate needs and interests of the set of all persons. I will understand the relevant ‘expected contribution’ clauses to be tacitly included in the simpler formulations given in most of the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . I leave open the question whether such principles require direct application of the imperative to optimize one’s contribution to the net satisfaction of interests and needs, or whether they require adopting intermediate action-guiding rules that, when followed, will have this effect. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . There is some debate among consequentialists (particularly utilitarians) as to whether consequentialist theories are best seen as attributing moral status to persons primarily and deriving the moral status of utility from the status of persons, or as theories that see the moral status of utility as primary. Nothing here is meant to settle that issue one way or the other. All I claim here is that if we begin with the idea that all persons have an equally fundamental moral status, then there is still a very seductive line of thought the leads to some version of IOC. It is, of course, easier to get to utilitarianism from the claim that the value of utility is fundamental, but my point is simply that the appeal of consequentialist theories is still quite strong even if we begin with the idea that the value of persons is fundamental. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Consequentialists sometimes follow John Stuart Mill’s remarks (in Chapter 2 of Utilitarianism) in suggesting that it may be an empirical fact that an agent’s total contribution to the aggregate benefit of the set of all persons is often greatest when the agent devotes most of her time, attention, energy, and other resources to the benefit of a small number of other persons, generally herself and those closest to her. Although some consequentialists are fond of pointing out the difficulties of adding to the impartial good by making others happy, and the ease with which we can contribute to the impartial good by ‘taking care of our own’, it is not at all clear that such considerations can really carve out significant moral elbow room. After all, it does not take any great feat of sympathetic identification or call upon any superhuman epistemic resources to know that people who are sick and starving need medicine and food, and it takes no more than a credit card and a phone or an Internet connection to contribute to providing them. It strikes me as somewhat farfetched to claim that our ignorance of others is so great that the best we can do from a consequentialist perspective is to spend most of our time an energy looking after ourselves and our nearest and dearest. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . To aid readability, I will abbreviate ‘those of us living in affluent societies’ as ‘us’ and ‘we’ in the rest of the paper. In so doing, I do not, of course, mean to imply that those of us who are not living in such societies are ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ in any sense deeper than the fact that the paper’s author and most of its likely audience are a part of a relatively affluent subset of human beings. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . See Samuel Scheffler, The Rejection of Consequentialism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), especially pages 17-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . This use of the term ‘project’ follows that of Bernard Williams. See ‘Persons, Character, and Morality ‘, (in A. O. Rorty, ed., The Identities of Persons [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976]). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Depending on how one individuates reasons, needs, and interests, and how one counts the indirect effects of the satisfaction of needs and interests, one may need to understand ‘intensity’ here as a shorthand for ‘intensity and any indirect effects on the satisfaction of other needs and interests’. To make the text less cumbersome, I will omit such qualifications here and in the rest of the paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Of course something can be almost square, but almost square is not square. Unlike squareness, ‘almost-squareness’ does seem to admit of degrees, since something can fall short of being a square by a greater or lesser degree. Thus, a circle is less ‘almost-square’ than a non-square rhombus. But though we might say colloquially that the non-square rhombus is ‘more square’ than the circle, I take it that what we really mean is that it is closer to being a square. It is not as though the non-square rhombus has more of the property of squareness than the circle. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . See Immanuel Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (first published 1785, translated by James W. Ellington [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981]), page 435. (All references to Kant’s text are given in Prussian Academy pages.) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . However, see Kant, Groundwork, pages 424 and 428f. for passages that have inspired much of the thinking in this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . See R. M. Hare, ‘Could Kant have Been a Utilitarian?’ (Utilitas 5:1 [1993]) and David Cummiskey, ‘Kantian Consequentialism’ (Ethics 108:1 [1997]) and Kantian Consequentialism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . See Kant, Groundwork, page 428. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . See Kant, Groundwork, pages 430f., and the Doctrine of Virtue (part two of The Metaphysics of Morals, first published 1797, translated by Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Pres, 1996) 6: 387f. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . I will count expending resources to prevent a setback to a goal as a form of promoting that goal. The underlying idea is that to promote a goal is to expend one’s resources in such a way as to bring it about the goal is furthered relative to how it would be had the resources not been expended. When some outside factor will cause a setback to a goal unless the agent expends resources to prevent it, the expending of resources falls under this characterization of promoting the goal (since, ex hypothesi, the goal is furthered relative to the state it would have been in had the resources not been expended). In the rest of the paper I will generally omit explicit reference to this inclusion of preventing a setback to a goal in the same category as promoting it. Also, as a first approximation, I would say that an agent has expended resources if the agent’s resources have been expended, and if the agent was in a position to control whether those resources were expended. The distinction between expending resources and failing to expend resources may cut across the distinction between actions and omissions. For example: If I set up an automatic payroll deduction to pay for my parking permit, then every month I am expending resources, yet it is not clear that I am acting each month. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . For while Sophie may have been forced to make this choice, she would have chosen not to be in such a position in the first place. In fact, it was presumably the sadistic Nazi officer’s intention to make Sophie think that she really had commodified at least one of her children. To infer from the fact that we are sometimes forced to choose between ultimate ends that we really do measure them out in some kind of common currency is much like mistaking a hold-up for charity: We may choose to hand over the money, but that is no sign that we really do value giving up our money to some ruffian. One way to tell whether someone does treat two goals as ultimate is to ask whether she would try to avoid situations in which she must choose between the two. This account of a ‘willing’ versus an ‘unwilling’ trade parallels Gerald Dworkin’s account of choosing freely. See Gerald Dworkin, ‘Acting Freely ‘, Nous 4 (1970): 367-83. It is also indicative of a forced choice between ultimate ends that one is at a loss to know what to do, not simply because she does not know which ultimate goal is ‘more important’ but because she faces a genuine dilemma that cannot be resolved simply by acquiring more information or undergoing further reflection on her ultimate goals. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Similarly, if my goal of high-altitude hiking is gradually set back by spending most of the year in (the ironically named) Mount Pleasant, Michigan, elevation 230m., then it seems clear that I may retain the goal even though I am unable to prevent it from being set back at a certain time. This parallel between failing to promote a goal and failing to prevent it from being set back is additional evidence that they belong in the same category (see note 17 above). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Presumably if an agent had unlimited resources and opportunities, then it would be irrational for her to fail to promote any ultimate goal. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. .While I think that this conception of an ultimate goal is a plausible analysis of our ordinary concept of an ultimate goal, even if I am wrong about that, I would argue that the Kantian alternative is free to treat it as a theoretical construct. In that case, the criteria for its defensibility would include whether it is logically coherent and the overall cogency of the theory in which it is embedded rather than whether it matches up exactly with our pre-theoretic notion of an ultimate goal. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . See Kant, Doctrine of Virtue, pages 390f. and 393; for two important recent discussions of this distinction, with special attention to the question of the demandingness of morality, see chapter eight of Thomas Hill’s Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant’s Moral Theory (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) and chapter three of Marcia Baron’s Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . A distinct though somewhat related question concerns whether or not the fundamental moral status that the Kantian alternative attributes to persons might depend on features of persons that are matters of degree, and that might be acquired gradually rather than all at once. This question, which was raised by an anonymous reviewer for Utilitas, raises important issues about the nature of the concept of personhood. Views that define personhood in terms of the possession of properties that a human being acquires gradually during childhood must either claim that personhood is acquired gradually as these properties are acquired, or that it is acquired all at once, perhaps when some threshold is reached. Obviously the first option is likely to be unpalatable to those who, like me, want to maintain both that persons have a fundamental moral status that is a matter of kind rather than degree and that children are persons. It appears, then, that proponents of both the claim that children have the same basic moral status as adults are likely to need a theory of personhood that grants it all at once and at a low enough threshold for children to achieve it. Obviously, the presentation of such a theory would take me too far afield for this paper, but I have dealt with some of these issues in ‘Special Agents: Children’s Autonomy and Parental Authority’ (in David Archard and Colin MacLeod, eds., The Moral and Political Status of Children [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002]); see also Tamar Shapiro’s ‘What is a Child?’ (Ethics 109:4 [1999]) for a recent discussion of this issue specifically within the context of Kant’s theory. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . For more on the notion of a covering value, see Ruth Chang’s introduction toIncommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason, Ruth Chang, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere, pages 140-43. See also J. L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (New York: Penguin, 1977)*,* pages 38-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . By locutions such a s ‘more adequate moral perspective’ and ‘improved moral perspective’ here and elsewhere, I simply mean that the moral perspective is better according to whatever criteria are appropriate for judging moral perspectives qua moral perspectives. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Of course this is an approximation. In practice, some temporal partiality is probably consistent with prudence simply because the future is uncertain. Whether or not any temporal partiality over and above that justified by the fact that the future is uncertain is rational remains highly controversial. These controversies will not concern us here, and those who believe that some temporal partiality is justified are free to read ‘temporal impartiality’ as ‘temporal near impartiality.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. . This argument is similar in structure to the form of argument pursued in Shelly Kagan’s The Limits of Morality. My reconstruction of this part of the debate between the consequentialist and deontologist has been heavily influenced by Kagan’s work, as well as that of Thomas Nagel and Derek Parfit. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. . See Kant, Groundwork, page 437. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. . I explore the question of the proper relationship between morality and the facts about human nature, the nature of persons, and the nature of agency in ‘From the Nature of Persons to the Structure of Morality’(Canadian Journal of Philosophy 31: 4 [2001]). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. . For Kagan’s notion of a pro tanto reason to promote the good, see The Limits of Morality, 16-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. . An early version of this paper was presented at the University of Western Ontario’s philosophy department on 11 November 2000, and I am grateful to audience members, especially Samantha Brennan, for comments and questions. The penultimate draft was completed while I was on a leave sponsored by the CMU’s Research Professorship program, and I am grateful for that support. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)