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Who Is My Neighbour? Understanding Indifference as a Vice

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Abstract

Indifference is often described as a vice. Yet who is indifferent; to what; and in what way is poorly understood, and frequently subject to controversy and confusion. This paper proposes a framework for the interpretation and analysis of ethically problematic forms of indifference in terms of how different states of indifference can be either more or less dynamic, or more or less sensitive to the nature and state of their object.

1. Go and do likewise

In the *Gospel According to Luke* (10:25-37) Jesus is portrayed as telling a story about a 'good' Samaritan. A man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked by robbers, stripped of his clothes, beaten and left for dead. A priest walks by, notices the man, but passes by on the other side without helping. So too does a Levite. Then a Samaritan comes by, sees the man, and helps him. Having bandaged his wounds, the Samaritan puts the man on his donkey and takes him to an inn where he can recover. Before he leaves, the Samaritan gives the innkeeper two silver coins to cover the cost of caring for the injured man, offering to reimburse the innkeeper for any further cost on his next visit.

The story of the good Samaritan is an illustration of the dictum: 'You should love your neighbour as yourself' (*Matthew* 22:34-40). 'But who is my neighbour?', asks

Jesus's interlocutor, a local expert in the law. Jesus responds by asking another question. 'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?', he asks. 'The one who had mercy on him', the expert in the law replies. To which Jesus responds: 'Go and do likewise.'

One crucial assumption of this story is that the behaviour of the Samaritan was genuinely good, or virtuous. Beneficence is a virtue. Aiding those who are weak or needy is a good thing to do. Helping those who are the victims of the wrongdoing of others is right, or even obligatory. These claims are not only meant to include helping behaviour directed at family, friends, or members of our own social group. They are also meant to include helping behaviour directed at complete strangers; including strangers belonging to social groups with which we might regard ourselves as being in competition or conflict. The story of the good Samaritan is set in a historical context involving different groups of people who had sharply conflicting loyalties and different ethical and religious beliefs. For example, some historians describe the relationship between Samaritans and their neighbors as an uneasy one, some of these neighbours being said to have rejected the claim of Samaritans to descend from the ancient tribes of Israel. The fact that a Samaritan is singled out by Jesus as an exemplar of virtue might therefore be no accident.

Let’s accept for the sake or argument that acting like the good Samaritan would be right, good or virtuous, all else being equal. In actual circumstances, all other things are rarely, if ever, equal. What if the man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho had a history of murderous violence against the group to which the robbers belonged and was the victim of a revenge attack in a war of attrition among rival criminal gangs?

What if he was left for dead as bait while the robbers waited to pounce further down the road, and the Samaritan was just lucky that the robbers had given up waiting for more victims by the time he arrived? Or what if there happened to be a practice among robbers in the area of having one of their kind pretend to be dead for then to attack whoever was gullible enough to stop and help? And what about the innkeeper? Who is to say that he was not himself one of the robbers, or maybe one of their kin who stood to profit either from local highway robberies or the existence of naive Samaritans? These are only some of the many reasons why a potentially good Samaritan might stop short of helping someone in need without thereby expressing an impermissible, bad or vicious disposition. Of course they could be wrong. Even so, they could be non-culpably ignorant of the relevant facts. They could be reasonably suspicious. They could just be scared. Or perhaps they have made a judgement on the basis of good evidence that the potential beneficiary of aid is not a fitting object of their helping behaviour on that particular occasion. Thus, even if we agree that there is a kind of moral 'sainthood' that would involve helping others in need whatever the circumstances, we might also agree that a plausible ethics of beneficence should be contextually sensitive to the facts of the particular case.

There is extensive disagreement among legal scholars about the extent to which good Samaritanism should be legally, or otherwise institutionally, enforced.[1] In some

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[1] H. M. Malm, 'Bad samaritan law, and legal paternalism', *Ethics*, vol. 106, 1995, pp. 4-31; A. McIntyre, 'Guilty bystanders? On the legitimacy of duty to rescue statutes', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* , vol. 23, 1994, pp. 157-91; F. J. M. Feldbrugge, 'Good

European countries, certain forms of bad Samaritanism have been a criminal offence since the aftermath of the Second World War. In other countries, primarily in the Anglo-Saxon sphere of influence, some forms of bad Samaritanism continue to be regarded as an ethical issue beyond the reach of criminal law (the obvious exceptions being duties of care towards particular others, such as our children, with whom we stand in a ‘special’ relationship). One potential problem with legislating against bad Samaritans is the issue of contextual understanding and personal risk alluded to above. Another problem arises from the ‘liberal’ idea that the state should seek to avoid ‘the enforcement of altruism’ or ‘the legislation of morality’. Yet both the claim that a given state (liberal or otherwise) should legally enforce good Samaritanism, and the denial of that claim, are equally consistent with the idea that some forms of bad Samaritanism are ethically lacking, or expressive of vice. In what follows, I shall therefore largely ignore the wider debate that surrounds the issue of good Samaritan legislation.

In the following sections, I distinguish four different states the behaviour of a bad Samaritan could express. I refer to these as 'apathetic indifference'; 'blinkered indifference'; ‘exclusionary indifference’; and 'negating indifference', respectively. I do not claim that these are the only forms that vicious indifference can take. Nor do I claim that these forms of indifference are easily distinguishable in practice. (Indeed, more than one of them could be present in the same subject at the same time.) Even so, it can be useful to think about different states of indifference in something like their

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and bad Samaritans: a comparative study of criminal law provisions concerning failure to rescue’, *The American Journal of Comparative Law*, vol. 14, 1965, p. 652.

pure form, in order to exhibit their ethically distinctive features. I focus on the four kinds of indifference mentioned above for two reasons. First, because each of them exemplifies one specific feature of indifference as a vice that is has historically been thought of as ethically problematic. Second, because the analysis of indifference as a vice in terms of this fourfold distinction helps to bring out the ethical significance of the fact that states of indifference can be either more or less dynamic, or more or less sensitive to the nature and state of their objects. In this way, the analysis of indifference as a vice proposed in this paper may serve to throw additional light on some of the core ambiguities in talk of indifference that have traditionally stood in the way of a clear understanding of its place in moral and political thought.

2. Apathetic indifference

Suppose the priest and the Levite were just too lazy to care about the dying man they passed on the road. If so, they might have been displaying a state of apathetic indifference.

Let's say that a 'subject' (e.g. a person) is indifferent to some 'object' (e.g. another person) when that subject displays some non-caring 'orientation' (e.g. a lack of response) to that object in a certain 'context' (e.g. as they pass them on the road).[2] Apathy is sometimes thought of as a state of a subject generally not caring, or not being interested in the world or what happens in it. Apathetic indifference, as I understand it here, involves a state of not caring about certain features of the world that are of genuine ethical significance. In this sense, a person can display apathetic indifference towards a narrow range of good or bad things, or towards a wider range. A subject displays apathetic indifference when they fail to cultivate or sustain an appropriate orientation of concern towards a range of ethically significant features of the world, where this failure does not express a substantial negative judgement of the object on its subject's part, nor does it play any significant strategic or otherwise instrumental role in the pursuit of either their own ends, or in the pursuit of the ends of any collective of which they are a natural part. To this extent, apathetic indifference is indifference without an aim or purpose.

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[2] This definition is subject to a number of qualifications that I pass over here. I discuss these further in my 'Who Cares? Understanding the Ethics of Indifference' (forthcoming).

A display of apathetic indifference could be subject to different explanations in different contexts. In some cases, a state of apathetic indifference could be characterized by an absence of interest or attention caused by ignorance, laziness, boredom, or fatigue. In other cases, apathetic indifference could be characterized by an absence of interest or attention caused by a personal or collective struggle in the face of adverse circumstances. In the latter case, a display of apathetic indifference could be a sign of internal trauma or conflict, and would thereby be motivated in some way. Yet in neither case would the state of apathetic indifference, as here defined, play the role of a means to an end with which its subject would reflectively identify, such as the bracketing of some ethically significant concern in the service of an end that is perceived to be of greater ethical importance. In this respect, the state in question is essentially non-dynamic. In another sense, a state of apathetic indifference could obviously play a dynamic role in the promotion of the purposes or ends of other subjects, and various collectives of which these other subjects are a natural part. I shall briefly return to the case of apathetic indifference of this kind later on in this section.

To the extent that someone's lack of concern for a range of objects is unrelated to what they take those objects to be like, or is otherwise a function of a lack of interest in their nature, their indifference essentially object insensitive. This does not mean, however, that coming to be in a state of apathetic indifference towards something could never involve an awareness of what it is like. Thus, if I fail to show any interest in how I dress, this could be because I have spent a lot of time trying to dress to impress; have constantly failed in my efforts; and have consequently given up on the whole 'dress thing'.

In some cases of apathetic indifference, it is not so much the absence of concern with some ethically relevant aspect of the world as such, but rather the unacceptable narrowness of those concerns, that might lead someone to negatively evaluate its subject's lack of concern. Thus, I might classify as apathetically indifferent a teenager who spends all of his or her time doing nothing else than lying in bed watching television. If genuine virtue involves having some kind of caring or otherwise productive relationship to a wide range of goods, a general state of apathetic indifference is the vice of being apathetically indifferent towards too many of these.

The subject of apathetic indifference is paradigmatically an individual person, or a collection thereof. Its object is a range of things or states of affairs that are actually worthy of interest, concern or attention. Its normal orientation is the absence of a range of attitudes or behaviours actually merited by its object in a certain context, from simple awareness to intentional action. To be apathetically indifferent is to be intellectually or practically detached from the realm of good and bad, right or wrong, in an ethically problematic way. The apathetically indifferent person might either not have acquired a virtuous state or disposition, or may effectively have given up on trying to be good in the relevant respect.[3]

The vice of apathetic indifference is not just a matter of the intrinsic properties of an attitude or practical orientation and its object. It also depends on what explains that attitude or practical orientation in a given context, and the role it plays in a causal network of social and psychological events. In some cases, apathetic indifference will be the result of something being seriously amiss in the world, either internal or external to the indifferent subject.[4] The world itself can be an indifferent, cold or hostile place. Apathetic indifference can arise non-voluntarily as part of a series of events where a person's ability to pursue a range of goods is undermined or destroyed, whether by human or non-human causes. The failure of a life-plan or the loss of a loved one can have the debilitating effect of removing from view, at least for a time, the reasons that someone previously saw to care. The actions of other people, deliberate or otherwise, can have similar effects. Thus, a state of apathetic indifference is one possible consequence of a person's dignity being deliberately assaulted by the violence of others. If the priest and the Levite both come out of the story of the good Samaritan as legitimate objects of ethical criticism, this will be because none of the excusing conditions described above are assumed to apply. If they were just too lazy to care about the fate of the dying man, they had no excuse for failing to help. Absent some personal trauma, or some strategic or otherwise intelligible rationale, their behaviour was ethically lacking on account of their apathetic indifference.

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[3] C.f. T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1989, p. 365; A. Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 19; 42.

[4] M. Waltzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, New York: Basic Books 1984, p. 65; M. P. Golding, 'On the idea of moral pathology', in A. Rosenberg and G. E. Myers (eds.), *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988, p. 137; E. Wiesel, *Night*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006, p. 98; A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, New York: Harper

3. Blinkered indifference

Suppose the priest and the Levite were too concerned to reach their destination as quickly as possible to take any notice of the person left for dead on the road from

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Perennial Modern Classics, 2007, p. 396; A. Camus, *The Plague*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002.

Jerusalem to Jericho. If so, they might have been displaying a state of blinkered indifference.

Sometimes the explanation for why I don’t care about one thing is that I care about another and so fail to either notice or otherwise attend to the first thing. Thus, I might ignore the identity of the people I pass in the street because my attention is completely focused on not getting run over by a bicycle. Some such cases of indifference (this one potentially included) are ethically beyond reproach. Other cases of indifference of this kind are ethically problematic because the importance of the end fails to justify the relevant lack of concern. A subject displays blinkered indifference when they fail to either cultivate or sustain an appropriate orientation of concern towards some ethically significant feature of the world; where this failure plays a strategic or otherwise instrumental role in the pursuit of either their own ends, or in the pursuit of the ends of some collective or group of which that subject is a natural part. In this sense, blinkered indifference is indifference with a purpose, and therefore essentially dynamic.

A state of blinkered indifference may or may not be object sensitive in the sense that an awareness of its object is involved in the state of excluding it from some relevant range of concern. Thus, you could decide to ignore the injury of the person sitting next to you as you prepare for a job interview for the simple reason that you don’t think it will help you promote that end. Alternatively, you could just ignore it in your pursuit of that end. Yet a pure state of blinkered indifference is not object sensitive in the further sense that the nature of its object itself (as in ‘that feature of the world someone is indifferent to’) plays a significant role in the pursuit of the end to which the state of indifference is a means. Thus, if you ignore the injury of the person sitting next to you because their injury will put them at a competitive disadvantage in their job interview, your state of indifference will be multiply object sensitive in a way that goes beyond a state of blinkered indifference as I define it here. I shall return to this kind of multiply object sensitive indifference in the section on exclusionary indifference below. Nor does a state of blinkered indifference need to involve a negative evaluation of its object on its own terms. Thus, you could have decided to ignore the injury of the person sitting next to you in order to prepare for your job interview either with, or without, weighing their relative importance and concluding that your own preparation for the interview is the only thing that really matters. I shall return to this kind of object sensitive indifference in the section on negating indifference below.

The subject of blinkered indifference could be an individual, a collective, an institution, or a social practice or structure. Its object could be any ethically significant entity, a feature of an entity, or a state of affairs. Its orientation could vary from the absence of a feeling or attitude (such as empathy or attention) to a pattern of action or absence thereof (as in the failure to help someone in need). The standard context of blinkered indifference is the individual, collective or institutional promotion of ends the actual pursuit of which is ethically problematic in a way that undermines the ethical status of that pursuit.

Blinkered indifference can take different forms. In one of its forms, it is a manifestation of the 'division of labour' found in complex human societies.[5] In another form, it is a manifestation of a near-ubiquitous disposition to follow instructions or comply with authority.[6] Both forms of blinkered indifference are often associated with distinctively 'modern' forms of collective organization, such as contemporary nation states, public institutions, and large-scale bureaucracies. Some recent accounts of these 'technologies' of segregation, separation and obedience could be read so as to suggest that the sophisticated forms of rational organization embodied in modern institutions will inevitably produce a culture of blinkered indifference towards the harmful effects of institutional action.[7] On this view, the vice of blinkered indifference is an important symptom of our 'modern condition'. These and similar claims made by contemporary critics of 'modernity' frequently emphasize the way in which many large scale institutions often pay lip-service to the recognition of their harmful effects, either by explicitly celebrating individual beneficent actions (such as exceptional acts of rescue or charity), or by permitting individuals to excuse themselves from extreme acts of violence or destruction (such as exemptions from active military service on grounds of conscientious objection). The crucial point for these critics is that such acts of recognition are essentially the exception. Yet even considering the scope for exceptions to the rule granted by these and similar accounts of modern bureaucracy, there is room for being sceptical about sweeping generalizations according to which all bureaucratic, or otherwise 'modern', forms of social organization inevitably result in a dominant culture of blinkered indifference.[8] Modern bureaucracies are rarely entirely homogenous or monolithic functional systems. Nor are they universally resistant to ethical and other intelligent pressures over time. For example, in some modern bureaucracies it has recently become possible to have an intelligent conversation about how the rule of treating all applicants 'equally' should be understood in the context of employment practices that have historically tended to disproportionally favour one gender or ethnic group over another. Thus, any plausible account of indifference indifference as a vice in the context of modern forms of rational organization needs to take account of the central role that is often played by human agency in transforming an intrinsically innocent 'ethos of office' (in Weber's sense) into an instrument of bad, evil, or vice. The 'practices' of modern bureaucracy are not just a matter of forces, functions, structures and mechanisms. They also involve individual human agents, at least some of whom will decide whether or not to give, or obey, instructions or orders; and at least some of whom may decide not to.[9] Indeed, there is a vast number of ways in which people have historically responded to the demands of authority in the context of social and psychological pressures to participate in ethically problematic activities, including blind obedience; willing obedience; reluctant obedience, asking to be excused; questioning orders; registering disagreement; failing to act; refusing to act; acting contrary to authority; acting to subvert authority; acting to overthrow authority, running away; or (in some cases) suicide. Furthermore, the widespread existence of blinkered indifference in the context of modern institutions does not exclude the possibility that some forms of dynamic indifference exhibited by representatives of those institutions are actually ethically admirable, or virtuous. A university admissions tutor who pays no attention to the dietary preferences of different applicants might well not be doing anyone a favour. Yet nor is she thereby doing anything wrong. A state of blinkered indifference is a vice displayed when in their effort to pursue some end efficiently or to order, some relevant subject fails to adequately focus their concern on the ethically significant costs embodied in their pursuit of that end, as we can imagine the priest and the Levite to have done as they passed by on the other side without helping.

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[5] R. Johnson, *Death Work*: *A Study of the Modern Execution Process*, Belmont: Wadsworth, 1990; Z. Baumann, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000; S. Zizek, *Violence*, London: Profile Books, 2008, p. 11; R. C. Baum, 'Holocaust: moral indifference as *the* form of modern evil', in Rosenberg and Myers op. cit., p. 57; H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the banality of Evil*, London: Faber and Faber, 1963; Solzhenitsyn op. cit., p. 395; A. J. Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy and Judgement: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance*, University Park: Penn State Press, 1994, pp. 211-12; 271-9.

[6] S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, London: Tavistock, 1974; J. Doris, *Lack of Character*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Arendt op. cit., p. 212.

[7] C.f. Bauman op. cit.

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[8] C.f. P. du Gay, *In Defence of Bureaucracy: Weber, Organization, Ethics*, London: Sage, 2000. I discuss this further in my 'When Indifference is a Virtue' (forthcoming).

4. Exclusionary indifference

Suppose the priest and the Levite ignored the plight of the dying man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho because they noticed that he was a member of a different social group or religious community than them. If so, they might have been displaying a state of exclusionary indifference.

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[9] C.f. Arendt, op. cit. p. 212; J. Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sometimes we decide to not care about something in order to mark our difference or separation from that thing.[10] Thus, I might deliberately ignore the cruel words of the fans who chant in support of the opposing team in a conspicuous display of loyalty to my own. Some forms of indifference of this kind are ethically beyond reproach, either because the distinction in question is itself ethically important, or because making it will produce an ethically proportionate benefit. Other forms of indifference of this kind are ethically problematic because the distinction in question is ethically indefensible; because making the distinction causes disproportionate harm to those who are excluded from the range of concern; or because the harm in question is itself importantly entangled in the purpose the state of indifference serves.

A subject displays exclusionary indifference when they fail to either cultivate or sustain an appropriate orientation of concern towards some ethically significant feature of the world; where this failure plays a strategic or otherwise instrumental role in the pursuit of either their own ends, or in the pursuit of the ends of some collective of which they are a natural part; and where the nature of the object excluded plays a significant role in that pursuit. Thus, if I ignore your serious injury because the fact that you are injured gives me the chance to win a competition between us that would otherwise be evenly matched, my behaviour could display a form of exclusionary indifference. In the case of exclusionary indifference it is normally the indifferent person (and/or their social group) who stand to substantially benefit from the state of indifference in question. Normally, because it is possible to wrongly exclude someone from a range of concerns and benefit them at the same time (e.g. where a sexist corporate culture effectively protects the members of one gender from some of the more brutalizing aspects of professional life), or because those who are indifferent are themselves excluded from the benefits that their state of indifference serves.

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[10] E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959, p. 209 passim.

Exclusionary indifference is indifference with a purpose, and therefore essentially dynamic. Thus, if I systematically ignore the disappointment I cause you, but not the disappointment I cause another colleague, as a way of showing who my 'real' friends are, it is precisely by publicly displaying my exclusion of someone from a range of concern I extend to others that I am able to achieve this end. In this case, both your disappointment and my differential treatment of it are essential to my behaviour in a way it would not be if I were to ignore your disappointment as a consequence of caring so much about my other colleague that I forget about everything else. In this way, exclusionary indifference differs from the pure case of blinkered indifference, for which the state of its object is not in this way essential to the purpose that indifference serves. In contrast to blinkered indifference, exclusionary indifference is essentially object sensitive.

The subject of exclusionary indifference is normally a person, a group of persons, or some organized system of social arrangements according to which people live. The object of exclusionary indifference is normally another person or some ethically significant aspect of some person the indifference in question serves to exclude from concern. The orientation of exclusionary indifference can vary, from a lack of sympathy towards members of an out-group, through individual failures of recognition or action, to systematic practices of discrimination; as when members of one ethnic community are constantly passed over in the distribution of privileges or benefits in favour of another. The normal context of exclusionary indifference is a heterogenous social world, divided along a range of potentially competing 'spheres' of value, distinction and loyalty; including familial relations, friendships, communal and professional roles, as well as religious, political and ethnic commitments.

Like blinkered indifference, exclusionary indifference has both intrapersonal and interpersonal manifestations. Thus, it is possible for one person to consciously cultivate an indifferent attitude towards the suffering of another in order to mark them out as a member of an out-group. Yet exclusionary indifference is also possible in contexts where its exclusionary aspect is hidden from subjective consciousness, either because the exclusionary purpose is non-conscious, or because it is a function of social forms the nature and workings of which lie beyond the horizon of subjective awareness. In the latter case, the member of an in-group could be indifferent to some ethically significant fact about members of an out-group while having no particular views about the ethical qualities of members of that out-group. She might consider her indifference to be a pure and virtuous expression of her ethically motivated commitment to her in-group. The exclusionary function of an otherwise innocent-seeming state of indifference could therefore come as a surprise to its subject, or could even be accompanied by explicit denial. Consider, for example, a child who has been taught never to speak to strangers of some particular kind. It would therefore not be surprising if people frequently disagreed about the attribution of exclusionary indifference to individuals and social groups, including themselves.

Alongside the notions of apathetic and blinkered indifference, the notion of exclusionary indifference may throw some light on what is sometimes at issue in historical debates about who is and who is not indifferent; to what; in what way; and why.[11] It may also go some way to render explicit some of the ways in which indifference can be a distinctively collective, as opposed to a personal, vice. Thus, a state of indifference to the plight of others that is motivated by an instinct of self-preservation will take the form of exclusionary indifference when the state in question is regulated in such a way as to make that plight (or the fact that it is some particular other's plight rather than one's own) play an essential role in the operation of that instinct. Some pursuits of self-preservation (or self-interest) will therefore provide further examples of the kind of exclusionary mechanism whereby someone fails to extend their concern to others on the basis of 'a denial of common substance'.[12] In this sense, a state of exclusionary indifference would be the ethically dark side of the virtues of prudence, loyalty and personal attachment. In the face of injustice, violence or atrocity, it would be the ethical perversion of what is in principle an intrinsically reasonable and practically indispensable form of partiality.

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[11] M. Hertzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992. Pp. 13, 32-3, 75, 159ff; Baumann op. cit. p. 206; D. J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, London: Abacus, 1997, pp. 385, 439-41; 493; I. Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 359, 372.

[12] Hertzfeld, op. cit. 177.

5. Negating indifference

Suppose the priest and the Levite both noticed the dying man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and they both decided to ignore him because they classified him as belonging to a social group the members of which are intrinsically unworthy of ethical concern. If so, their behaviour might have been a display of negating indifference.

Sometimes people fail to care about something because they regard it as being of no genuine importance. Thus, I might ignore the fate of the autumn leaves that I smother as I walk home in the rain, being confident that in so doing I am not thereby failing to show due respect to their intrinsic ethical significance. Some cases of indifference of this kind are ethically beyond reproach. Other cases of indifference of this kind are ethically lacking because their objects are ethically significant in precisely the way ruled out by the negative evaluation in question.

A subject displays negating indifference when they fail to either cultivate or sustain an appropriate orientation of concern towards some ethically significant feature of the world, where this failure involves the wrongful denial of some ethically significant status merited by that feature. So defined, all states of negating indifference are essentially object sensitive. Yet so defined, a state of negating indifference may or may not play a significant dynamic role in the pursuit of the ends of its subject, or in the pursuit of the ends of any collective of which the subject is a natural part. Where it does, and where the fact of negative evaluation plays an essential role in the pursuit of those ends, a state of negating indifference will exhibit the kind of dynamic features described in the section on exclusionary indifference above.[13] Thus, in a case where the bond of loyalty that ties me to members of my own social group is enhanced if I systematically ignore the suffering I cause to people outside that group, and where I justify my ignorance of that suffering by falsely claiming that the people whose suffering I ignore are not fully human, then my attitude will be a case of negating and exclusionary indifference. Yet both the negating and the exclusionary aspect of that state of indifference could in principle exist without the other, as in a case where the negating attitude in question does not play this kind of strategic role, or where the practice of exclusion takes place in the absence of any negative evaluation of what is excluded from concern.

The subject of negating indifference could be any individual, group, institution or structure describable as having attitudes of assigning or denying value to things. Its object can be any ethically significant feature of the world, including individuals, groups or states of affairs. Yet in terms of their characteristic orientation, states of negating indifference are quite distinctive, insofar as they essentially involve the subject's refusal (by means of will, attitude or judgement) to accord its object some specific form of ethical standing; whether it is the distinctive loyalty associated with friendship, the peculiar dignity commonly attributed to human persons, the ethical significance attributed to sentient beings, or the intrinsic value attributed to natural or artificial objects, or states of affairs. Accompanying this refusal on the part of the subject will be a corresponding absence of concern for the object by way of action, motivation, thought or feeling. In this way, negating indifference is importantly different both from the judgementally neutral absence of interest involved in some cases of apathetic indifference, and from the bracketing of interest involved in pure cases of blinkered indifference.

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[13] C.f. Z. Bauman and L. Donskis, *Moral Blindness: the Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

Negating indifference is an attitude taken towards another person when some strict ethical boundary is drawn and the other is regarded either as falling into a less favoured category of ethical concern, or is denied the status as ethically significant altogether. The discourse of racism is replete with descriptions, along these lines, of excluded others as vermin or other kinds of ‘sub-human’ life-form, the existence of which is insinuated to be either without value, or even intrinsically undesirable (in which case the natural accompanying attitude would be one of aversion or hostility, not indifference).[14] Other historical descriptions of discrimination, oppression and atrocity are equally saturated with examples of negating indifference, whether on the part of perpetrators or on the part of bystanders. In light of this fact, it might be tempting to claim that actual states of negating indifference will always include some evaluative element in the service of some instrumental function, and will therefore at bottom be essentially dynamic. I doubt whether this is necessarily the case. Yet even if it were, the fourfold analysis of indifference as a vice articulated above is consistent with this view.

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[14] C. Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003; P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, London: Abacus, 1989, p. 99. Cf. E. A. Johnson and K-H. Reuband (eds.), *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany*, New York: Basic Books, 2005, p. 135; c.f., pp. 17-18, 91; Milgram op. cit., p. 9; Hertzfeld op. cit., p. 1; Solzhenitsyn op. cit., p. 384.

Like hatred, hostility and other ethically problematic attitudes, negating indifference may have a tendency to generalize beyond the domain of its proper objects, and to slip from being directed towards one particular aspect of someone to being directed at virtually any aspect of that someone, and to other persons like him or her.[15] In some of its extreme manifestations, the object of negating indifference will extend beyond the domain of identifiable individuals to include groups of people, devalued as a kind regardless of the ethically distinguishing features of their particular members.[16] Thus, it is one thing to remain unmoved by the suffering of another individual against whom you have either a personal grievance or animus, or to whom you stand in some kind of direct relationship. It is quite another thing to remain unmoved by the suffering of an entire group of people merely because it includes one or more individuals against whom you have a personal grievance or animus, or to whom you stand in some kind of direct relationship. It is one thing to be indifferent to the suffering of someone because of something they have said or done. It is quite a different thing to be indifferent to the suffering of someone just because they happen to be a member of some (for relevant purposes) ethically arbitrary kind (a dark skinned person; an adoptee; a person whose parents were born in another country). The vice of negating indifference could be a potential manifestation of some, if not all, of these ethically deplorable attitudes.

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[15] C.f. Vetlesen, Op. Cit., 211-12.

[16] C.f. L. Thomas, ‘Forgiving the unforgiveable?’, in E. Gerrard and G. Scarre (eds.), *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2003, p. 205.

6. Indifference and complicity

Agents whose indifference is causally involved in harmful, violent, or otherwise ethically problematic practices are sometimes described as being complicit in those practices. Given the different forms that indifference can take and the different causal roles indifference can play in different circumstances, 'complicity' is a difficult term to apply in this context. The same applies to attributions of guilt with which talk of complicity is often connected.

On one common interpretation, to describe someone as complicit is to classify them as part of an action, event or process in which they are agreed to not be a main protagonist, but have nevertheless played an ethically significant part. Thus, on one standard way of defining ‘complicity’, it is a form of 'partnership in a crime or wrongdoing'.[17] For ease of exposition, let’s stipulate that a subject is complicit in some crime or wrongdoing if he or she is either aware of it or willfully unaware of it; has the ability to respond to it either by reporting, protesting or somehow intervening in it; but voluntarily stops short of doing so. Let’s also say that a person whose complicit behaviour makes the difference between some crime or wrongdoing occurring or not occurring is thereby an ‘accessory’ to that crime or wrongdoing.

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[17] *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Eighth Edition, R. E. Allen (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 233.

This definition of complicity targets a number of dimensions along which subjects described as viciously indifferent can differ, be they a primary protagonist; a secondary helper or facilitator; a loyal member of some perpetuating group; a dutiful but ethically blinkered subordinate; an unreflective fellow traveller; a passive beneficiary; an accidental bystander who ought to have intervened but didn't; or someone apparently unaware, but who ought to have known better.[18] To be complicitly indifferent is then to voluntarily fail to live up to the ethical significance of one’s situation in one or more of these, and other, ways.

There are situations in which the complicity of indifference is beyond reasonable doubt. These include cases where complaints of 'I didn't know', or ‘There was nothing I could do about it’ ring hollow to anyone except the willfully deluded.[19] Yet even though they overlap, the categories of complicity and vicious indifference cut across each other, insofar as complicity implies some form of (explicit or implicit) grasp of the ethically relevant facts (if only the awareness necessary to be willfully ignorant). Many cases of vicious indifference do involve a grasp of the ethically relevant facts, such as the blinkered indifference of a professional ‘death worker’ or the exclusionary indifference of a contemporary sexist bureaucrat. Some forms of vicious indifference therefore imply complicity, as I have defined it here - in some cases a kind of complicity that amounts to being an accessory to a crime. Yet not all forms of vicious indifference obviously involve a grasp of the ethically relevant facts, such as the exclusionary indifference of an obedient but ignorant child, the blinkered indifference of an economically under-informed sweat shop worker, or the apathetic indifference of a prisoner dying from exhaustion. It follows that even though the ethics of indifference as a vice is intimately connected to the ethics of complicity, the two are logically distinct.

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[18] C.f. V. J. Barnett, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999, p. 123.

[19] C.f. Johnson and Reuband op. cit., p. 118; 150.

The fact that not all forms of vicious indifference imply complicity in the sense just defined raises the further question whether non-complicit indifference absolves its subject of moral responsibility.[20] On the one hand, the development of complex forms of social organization and technologies of communication, industry, trade and conflict make individuals inextricably connected to the fate of ethically significant others in a ways that have been taken to challenge traditional conceptions of responsible agency.[21] The ethically decisive features of an indifferent attitude or orientation could be ones that some of the individuals involved are either unaware of; would explicitly reject; or might even be unable to adequately appreciate under the ethically decisive mode of description. Thus, a case of apathetic indifference involving someone whose economic behaviour takes no notice of their carbon footprint could reasonably seem like a sensible case of neutrality in the face of uncertainty about who to trust. A case of blinkered indifference involving someone whose business decisions are exclusively driven by thoughts about the ‘bottom line’ could reasonably seem like a rational case of self-protection in a ‘cut-throat’ professional environment. A case of exclusionary indifference involving a group of neighbours aiming to make the neighborhood safe from clandestine immigrants could reasonably seem like a virtuous case of solidarity in the face of unknown danger. A case of negating indifference involving the brutal slaughter of animals on an industrial scale could reasonably seem like the genuine recognition of intrinsic ethical difference. In each case, what is potentially an ethically problematic orientation could appear to its subject as being either ethically neutral, or even virtuous. Furthermore, the social framework in which the relevant practical orientation is embedded could be such that its subject is unable to see any responsible alternative but to willingly participate in, or even publicly endorse, it. In at least some cases of this kind, the question of responsibility, or guilt, could be moot.

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[20] C.f. K. Jaspers, *Basic Philosophical Writings,* E. Ehrlich, L. H. Ehrlich, and G. B. Pepper (eds.), Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986, p. 399 passim.

[21] C.f. Laidlaw op. cit.

On the other hand, it is impossible to fully disentangle the agency of members of contemporary societies from the negative effects produced by the institutions that govern and operate within those societies. Thus, in some contexts where the actions of more than one individual are involved, after-the-event justifications of indifference will amount to little more than an ethically pernicious dialogue of irresponsibility. Individuals directly involved in the implementation of ethically problematic practices may be tempted to detach themselves from the destructive effects of actions that are means to institutional ends that these individuals have either not set themselves, have had no say in setting, or which benefit them in ways it is not convenient to think about. (‘Nothing to do with me’.) The people in charge of these practices may be tempted to detach themselves from the destructive effects of the harmful activities they involve because they themselves are not the ones to actually give, or implement, any particular orders in practice. (‘Not my problem’.) In this way, it might be tempting to draw the conclusion that few, if any, of the people involved in either planning, ordering or performing these harmful activities need to take any personal responsibility for them. As tempting and convenient as it may be, this conclusion is clearly as dangerous as it is mistaken.

It is natural, therefore, to look for principles (e.g. about the ethical relevance of proximity, or about our individual ability to make a difference) to capture the conditions when we should, or should not, take personal responsibility for the harms or suffering with which our behaviour is somehow entangled. It is not the aim of this paper to argue for or against any such principles. Instead, I will briefly remark on the challenges involved in thinking about these issues in abstraction from the particulars of contingent social and psychological fact. To take one frequently discussed example, it is widely accepted that ‘well-off’ people, communities and states owe some positive duties to aid, some negative duties not to harm (or not to harm any further), or some duties to compensate for past injustices to less ‘well-off’ people, communities or states, regardless of proximity, provided they can do so at comparatively little cost to themselves.[22] Campaigns to highlight these duties are often targeted at what is perceived to be the apathetic, or blinkered, indifference of its target audience. The hope is that the vivid presentation of the suffering of others will provoke increasing levels of concern in proportion to the perceived proximity of its object. This is one of the standard tools adopted by the televised campaigns of charitable organizations, whose fundraising strategies may involve such personalized invitations as to save child A for x numbers of pounds, or to 'sponsor' child B for y numbers of pounds, and so on. One crucial assumption behind this strategy (and clearly an effective one in many cases) is that the indifferent or insufficiently caring orientation hitherto exhibited by members of the target audience is less likely to survive the experience of having distant human suffering 'brought home' to them in a way that is vivid, familiar or personal. (In some cases, the strategy may also involve an indication that the target audience is somehow complicit in the relevant suffering, although this is by not generally the case.)

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[22] C.f. Peter Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence and Morality’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, 1972, pp. 229-43.

One crucial assumption embodied in such presentations of harm and suffering is that it can be made vivid, familiar or personal without producing a conflicting attitude of indifference or hostility on the part of its target audience. To the extent that it works, this kind of targeted humanitarianism is premised on the fact that a significant number of people are actually capable of seeing beyond conventional divisions between 'them' and 'us' when considering whether, and how far, to extend their range of concern. Yet even if we may be grateful that this assumption is often correct, it is not one that can be universally taken for granted. As the discussion of exclusionary and negating indifference shows, indifference to the fate of another is by no means incompatible with its presentation being in many ways vivid, familiar or personal. The psychological detachment of excluding another from a relevant 'us' will do, in particular if the 'us' in question is perceived (however absurdly) to be somehow in danger, 'invaded', subverted, or otherwise under threat.

Nor is the perception of danger, invasion or threat a necessary condition for someone to exclude the proximate need or suffering of another from the domain of ethical concern. On the contrary, this combination of detachment and proximity is a ubiquitous feature of much social life even in the absence of danger, invasion, threat, or indeed any other kind of perceived vulnerability on the part of its subjects. Thus, the psychological obstacles to helping someone in need could be as great, if not greater, if that someone is a physically ‘unpresentable’ person outside one’s apartment block or a destitute family that has just moved into a vacant space nearby, as opposed to a ‘human face’ in a far away country whose existence we only know about because of the televised advert of a charitable organization (and the ‘saving’ of whom would not generally entail that they will come to live anywhere near us). This and similar examples show that there are many ‘ordinary’ situations in which the potential for displays of ethically problematic forms of indifference is actually less pressing when there is a certain distance, whether physical or psychological, between its potential subjects and objects. It is therefore too simplistic to think of the ethical challenges of large-scale indifference to the suffering of others as being strictly proportionate to the degree of physical or psychological distance that currently exists between ‘them’ and ‘us’. Partly for this reason, it is also too simplistic to think that the recipe for addressing such suffering must always be to cultivate an unqualified disposition to ‘care more’. Some forms of vicious indifference are more effectively addressed by means of the very forms of social and psychological distancing mechanism that too frequently produce them. The point is not that physical and psychological proximity is something towards which people are mistaken to aspire. Nor is it that a generalized state of physical or psychological detachment should be thought of as a neglected virtue, or ideal. The point is rather that calls to ‘care more’ about some ethically pressing issue, such as the harms and suffering of another human being, need not be thought of as always requiring us to care about it in a way that presupposes the kind of vivid, direct, familiar, or personal engagement that is often embodied in common descriptions of indifference as a vice. Our effectiveness in addressing the harm or suffering of another is not a simple function of our personal proximity to that other.

7. Who is my Neighbour?

The story of the good Samaritan has another twist. The conversation between Jesus and the legal expert begins with the question: 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' This could make it look as if what Jesus is offering his interlocutor is a piece of narrowly prudential advice: ‘If you want eternal life, then you had better love your neighbour as yourself!’ This claim turns on its head a familiar claim from the history of modern philosophy, namely that by showing genuine concern for your own interests you can thereby also promote the interests of others. What the advice offered by Jesus to his interlocutor adds to this thought is that by showing genuine concern for the interests of others you can thereby also promote your own.

Perhaps there is something initially puzzling about the idea that you might set out to genuinely love another person out of a concern for your own interests, and thereby as a means to an end. If that were the end you set yourself, how could you genuinely love them? At the same time, it is obviously possible to genuinely love someone and also gain from it personally. So the state of mind described in the conversation between Jesus and his interlocutor is not incoherent, or even unrealistic. One possible thought is that you could realize what is essentially a self-regarding end by not aiming at it directly, but instead by way of aiming at other, subsidiary, ends. A more interesting thought is that you might have to renounce the self-regarding end altogether as a necessary condition of seeing it realized.[23] Either way, much ethical advice undoubtedly takes a narrowly prudential form, whether in the context of organized religion or as a part of secular debate. In this paper I have proceeded on the assumption that not all forms of helping, or otherwise humane, behaviour is an expression of purely self-regarding concern, and that people sometimes help others out of a non-instrumental concern for those people's interests, or out of a sincere appreciation for their non-instrumental ethical significance. I have not attempted to defend these assumptions here. What I have attempted to do is describe some of the ways in which the display of a sincere appreciation for the non-instrumental ethical significance of others is compatible with the manifestation of indifference as a vice.[24]

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[23] C.f. R. H. Frank, *Passions within Reason: the Strategic Role of the Emotions*, London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988.

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