‘ought’ implies ‘can’: 1. Motivation

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1. **Kant’s remark**

In the course of the first *Critique* Kant remarks in passing: ‘The action to which the “ought” applies must be possible under natural conditions’.\(^1\) He does not pause to explain the remark, though it needs it. On the one hand, if the remark is taken to claim that all actions that one ought to do one must be able to do, then it is false. If I promised to pay Black £50 by noon today, and also promised to pay White £50 by noon today, but now find that I can pay only one of them, none the less, since I promised, I still *ought* also to pay the other. The fact that I cannot makes no difference to that. On the other hand there are cases in which Kant’s remark seems right. If I spot a child teetering perilously on the parapet of a skyscraper, I might wish I could fly, Superman-like, and snatch the child from death. But one cannot correctly say that I *ought* to.

If the remark ““ought” implies “can”” is to be accorded the status of a principle, it can only be on a certain interpretation of it, still to be identified. As a first step towards identifying it, let us look in turn at the three words that make it up.
2. ‘Ought’

We can start by reminding ourselves of the wide variety of uses of the word ‘ought’: ²

1. You ought not to steal.
2. You ought to quit smoking.
3. When you add 17 to 34, you ought to get 51.
4. The train ought to be in now.
5. It ought to be sunny tomorrow.
6. You ought to have known; ignorance of the law is no excuse.
7. If you wanted to break in, you ought to have brought a jemmy.
8. The cricket pitch ought not to have behaved like that.
9. I ought to be at the meeting tonight, but I can’t manage it.
10. He ought, with his training, to be able to dismantle this simple engine.

Various philosophers have offered a semantic analysis of the word ‘ought’: namely, that we use the word to indicate the presence of some kind of reason, and that the word indicates different kinds of reason on different occasions — a moral reason, a prudential reason, an epistemic reason, and so on.³
But this analysis is not convincing. It may be the case that I have a reason to visit old Jones (he is bed-ridden and lonely), but that my connection to him is so slight and remote that it would be incorrect, because too strong, to say that I \textit{ought} to visit him.

A more successful semantic analysis is this: the word ‘ought’ is used when there is a standard or regularity in the background and what is said ought to be is what would accord with the standard or regularity. Behind the first example, the standard is moral: it is wrong to steal. Behind the second, the standard is prudential: smoking damages one’s health. Behind the third there is a mathematic standard of correctness: 17 plus 34 equals 51. Behind the fourth there could be various sorts of standards. You could say that the train ought to be in now, because that is what the timetable says. I could inform you that British trains are usually ten minutes late, and on the basis of that regularity you could say, after ten minutes had passed, ‘well, it ought to be in now’. If the station loudspeaker announces that the train has been delayed a further thirty minutes because of work on the tracks, then after half an hour you could correctly say again ‘it ought to be in now’. It is not that the announcement over the loud-speaker indicates a reason for you to believe or to expect that the train will arrive in thirty minutes; you might have decided that station announcements are pure

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fiction. None the less, the announcement sets a standard against which you can correctly say what ought to happen. Behind the fifth example there is a causal regularity: an area of high pressure generally brings sun. In most legal systems there is a rule requiring those subject to laws to acquaint themselves with them; that is why, as in the sixth example, you ought to have known that it was illegal. There is a rule of prudence: if you want a certain end you must want the necessary means to it; so, as the seventh example says, you ought to have brought a jemmy. I shall stop there: the same general form of explanation fits the remaining examples too, and fits them better than does the ‘reasons’ account.

3. ‘Implies’

The word ‘implies’ covers several different relations. In his discussion of ““ought” implies “can”” Walter Sinnott-Armstrong canvasses four possible relations that it might cover in the putative principle ““ought” implies “can””:¹

1. semantic entailment: semantic because it holds by virtue of the meanings of the terms or the truth conditions of judgements containing the terms; an entailment because, if
an agent cannot do such-and-such, it is \textit{false} that the agent ought to do it.

2. \textbf{semantic presupposition}: semantic as above; a presupposition because, if an agent cannot do such-and-such, it is \textit{neither true nor false} that the agent ought to do it (the inability asserted in the antecedent undermines the truth-value of the consequent.

3. \textbf{moral implication}: if an agent cannot do such-and-such, it would be morally wrong (e.g. unfair), and \textit{false}, to assert that the agent ought to do it.

4. \textbf{conversational implication}: not semantic implication but pragmatic, having to do with the intended or actual effect of an utterance; if an agent cannot do such-and-such, it is \textit{pointless} to assert that the agent ought to do it.

The first three relations are, Sinnott-Armstrong says, universal: they claim that \textit{all} ‘oughts’ imply ‘cans’. The first two are universal because semantic; they depend upon the meaning of ‘ought’ and ‘can’, whenever they are asserted. The third depends upon an assumed universal moral principle: if ‘cannot’, it would be wrong (e.g. unfair) to assert ‘ought’. The assertion of a universal relation can be refuted, of course, by a particular negative, and, as I said at the start, there do
seem to be counter-examples to “ought” implies “can”. The only one of these four relations that Sinnott-Armstrong thinks holds is the last. But it is, as he points out, weak. That it may be pointless to say ‘ought’ to an agent who ‘cannot’ does not mean that it would be meaningless or false to say it. Therefore, he rejects the principle.

But Sinnott-Armstrong’s four interpretations are not exhaustive. The most plausible claims that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, I should say, are not any of the ones he canvasses. The idea that the word ‘implies’, as it appears in the claims, implies some form of universality should be resisted. It is likely that only some sorts of ‘cannot’ defeat ‘ought’.

4. ‘Can’

If “ought” implies “can” is to be accepted as a principle, the ‘ought’ must be taken to be restricted to agents, and the ‘can’ as referring to the ability of agents. What are called ‘probability “oughts”’ (e.g. ‘it ought to be sunny tomorrow’) are clearly not the sort of use of the word covered by the principle. Does the principle cover only moral ‘oughts’? That would be too narrow. The principle also covers some prudential ‘oughts’ (‘you ought to quit smoking’) and some epistemic ‘oughts’ (‘you ought to have got 51 as the sum) and perhaps other sorts as well.
The putative principle must also be taken to cover a variety of ‘cans’. It seems clearly to cover inabilities present in all human beings in all natural circumstances — e.g. flying Superman-like to snatch the child from death. Such abilities are the stuff not of nature but of fantasy. It may also cover behaviour that is beyond the capacity of all but the rarest human beings — all but, say, saints and heroes. At least, that is a venerable doctrine. It may also cover ordinary people facing extraordinary sacrifice. Again, it is a long and widely held intuition that one does not have to save a drowning child at the considerable risk of one’s own life. The intuition in this case may be that saving the child in those circumstances is more than morality demands even if one could manage it, or that it is more than morality demands simply because ordinary human beings cannot manage it.

The principle may also cover sacrifices less great than life. It may cover most of the everyday life of ordinary people. Human beings quite naturally form relations of love and affection. They also quite naturally form conceptions of a worthwhile life. These relationships to particular persons and commitments to certain causes or projects are central to their living a good life. But these relationships and commitments may render them incapable of meeting certain demands — for example, demands to be completely impartial. Again, it is a

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common and strong intuition that we ordinary human beings have a domain of permitted partiality, and that the domain includes much of our ordinary life.

Then, as we saw, there are cases that the principle seems not to cover: for example, my promising to pay both Black and White £50 by noon today.

This gives us the rough sketch of a spectrum that extends from inabilities that the principle seems comfortably to cover, to inabilities that it may well cover, to inabilities that it seems clearly not to cover. But all of this is on the level of impression, and we must dig deeper.

5. An ability behind the inability

Look again at cases in which we cannot do such-and-such though the ‘cannot’ seems not to defeat the correlative ‘ought’. I cannot pay both Black and White by noon today, but I could have avoided getting myself in that impossible situation. Avoiding such situations is well within human capacity. So there is a general relevant ability behind the specific inability. A drug addict may be so addicted that we do not blame him for going on taking the drug, but we may still say, and he himself may say, that he ought to stop. We are sympathetic with him because of the strength of his addiction, but we still know, and he may

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know too, that some ordinary persons, neither saints nor heroes, have managed to stop. Again, there is an ordinary level human ability behind this ability. And a judge in a finely balanced case might reach a faultless judgement of guilt (no one could have done better), but then later, when new evidence comes to light, discover that he had been mistaken. He might rightly say: ‘I ought not to have convicted’, despite the fact that he justifiably believed at the time that he could not have done otherwise. But it is, in general, within human capacity to collect evidence, know the law, and to reach correct decisions. Again, there are general human abilities behind the judge’s inability to succeed in this particular case. The background ability, I believe, explains why, in these cases, the ‘cannot’ does not defeat the ‘ought’.

But in the intermediate cases — cases in which our intuitions suggest that the ‘cannot’ does defeat the ‘ought’ — there is no background ability. Does this explain why here the ‘cannot’ does indeed defeat the ‘ought’? We should look more closely at these cases.

6. The limits of human motivation

Prudential deliberation, I have suggested elsewhere, ends up with a list of values, such as enjoyment, understanding, accomplishment, deep personal relations, autonomy, and liberty. A

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striking feature of many items on the list is their long-term, life-structuring character. To have deep attachments to particular persons is to acquire motives that shape much of one’s life and carry on through most of it. To accomplish something with one’s life requires dedication to particular activities that typically narrow and absorb one’s attention. Many prudential values involve commitments — to particular persons, institutions, causes, and careers. One cannot live a prudentially good life, one cannot fully flourish, without becoming in large measure partial. That partiality then becomes part of one; it is not something that one can psychologically enter into and exit from at will. It involves becoming a certain kind of person. Even short-term pleasures have finally to be judged in a fairly long-term, character-fixing way, because a person has to decide how much place to give to living for day-to-day pleasures seen up against competing ways of life.

On this view of prudence, one should become deeply partial. That partiality is, I think, bound to be in some tension with the moral point of view. I doubt that we shall ever find a way to dispel totally the tension between prudence and morality, even if there is, as I think there is, considerable interpenetration between the two.

One might hope that the tension could be reduced if, say, we made impartial benevolence our central project; then one could
accomplish something with one’s life (a prudential value) by behaving impartially (a moral ideal). But this would be merely to realize one prudential value at the expense of many others — at the expense, say, of deep personal relations, of many forms of enjoyment, and, if this project takes much of one’s time, of a lot of understanding. The tension arises even within the aim of impartially maximizing the good. A world in which everyone’s life was as good as possible would be a world in which people were full of commitments. The impartial ideal, then, would be a world populated by agents who may be incapable of promoting the impartial ideal. And what one comes to see as one’s own individual form of flourishing becomes a large part of what one is; it combines many of the strands of one’s personal identity. One’s concern for one’s own flourishing is not separate from one’s concern for the survival of one’s individual self. That is why Bernard Williams sees in the demands of impartial maximization of good a threat to a person’s ‘integrity’, which, if the person lets it go far, becomes tantamount to ‘suicide’. It is also why, in his autobiography, John Updike says: ‘We are social creatures but, unlike ants and bees, not just that; there is something intrinsically and individually vital which must be defended against the claims even of virtue.’ Somewhere, these two parts of ethics, the demands of others and the goal of individual

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flourishing, must be rendered, if not entirely harmonious, at least combinable in one normative point of view, and in one human personality.

Moral rules must mesh with human motivation. This brings us up against an empirical question on which most of our ethical beliefs rest, but which we largely ignore: What are the limits of human motivation?

Evolution has planted in us both crude self-interest and limited altruism. We, like other animal species, defend ourselves with a tenacity that we do not display over many others. Our form of consciousness itself reflects the primacy of self-interest: our perceptions of our own pleasure and pain have a unique vividness to our minds and privileged link to our motivation; our own everyday concerns fill our field of attention, the concerns of most others appearing, if at all, faintly at the periphery. It is true that there is genetic bonding to a few others. Many species, *homo sapiens* among them, are capable of great self-sacrifice, especially to protect offspring. But how can we expect beings like that, profoundly self-interested and of very limited altruism, to be capable of complete impartiality, counting everybody for one and nobody for more than one?

One obvious answer is that we can increase people’s knowledge; we can make them appreciate far more fully and vividly the plight of

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It is the approach of charities. We know how one photograph of a starving child can make tens of thousands reach for their cheque-books. Still, I doubt that the problem could be just a deficit in knowledge. Well-intentioned famine-relief workers, whose field of vision is filled with starving victims, no doubt make great sacrifices to help them, but do not generally sacrifice themselves to the point where their marginal loss equals the others’ marginal gain. And the explanation cannot just be that anyone who helps others must keep healthy or wealthy enough to go on helping. It is true that there are often good impartial-maximizing reasons for those aiding to have more than those aided, but relief workers generally do not sacrifice themselves to that point either. And I find it hard to think that it is because their knowledge is still somehow incomplete or faint. To see the problem as simply one of knowledge does not take the full measure of its difficulty.

A more hard-headed answer is to impose some stiff behaviour modification. We should not mistake limitations that arise merely from social conditioning for genuine limitations in human nature. Anyway, human nature is not itself unmalleable. We are naturally partial; but so are we naturally aggressive and carnivorous, and no one suggests that those two features of human nature are not proper subjects for drastic
moral demands. It is the approach of armies. In time of war, hundreds of thousands of perfectly ordinary people go off to defend their country at the risk of their lives. If military training can motivate them to go into battle, could not a well-conducted moral training do something comparable for us? In most cases, though, soldiers can be brought to accept great potential danger, I suspect, out of fear of the sergeant-major or a court martial or of being shamed in front of their mates. This suggests that we could, similarly, institute a kind of neighbourhood Red Guard to train us as children and to keep us up to moral scratch thereafter. It would be a terrible price to pay. We are willing to pay a comparable price in an emergency such as war, because of the exceptional importance of what is at stake. But perhaps we ought to think that what is at stake in morality is equally important.

But there are two different sorts of doubts about that whole Red Guard enterprise. First, to produce moral action by fear denies an agent autonomy, and loss of autonomy is the loss of an essential component of morality, at least as most of us now conceive or morality. Can we, in the name of morality, so substantially undermine morality? Anyway, second, the Red Guard approach would not work. Think what forces are gathered on the other side. Our propensity to form bonds of love and affection are vastly stronger than our propensity to
eat meat. We think that our personal relations and our commitments to certain causes are central to a good life. These beliefs are not only common, but also, I should say, sound. And some sound ethical beliefs are, simply because they are sound, very likely to be persistent and recurrent, especially now that societies are much harder to isolate from one another. And these are attachments that cannot be entered into and exited from at will. We could, of course, try to suppress these commitments or alter these beliefs about the good life, but we are unlikely to succeed for long. The Red Guard enterprise aims at an unsustainable state. Many Chinese children who were model products of the Cultural Revolution turned up in the tents in Tiananmen Square.

Yet another answer is that, besides increasing knowledge and remoulding agents, we should give them a more inspiring goal. This is religion’s answer. It is also, I take it, Iris Murdoch’s answer. Modern moral philosophy, she thinks, is unambitious. It sets modest goals; it assumes that our psychological capacities are puny. But goals and capacities are causally connected. Noble aims can turn egoism into something approaching altruism. The good, she says, is ‘what makes a man act unselfishly in a concentration camp’.

Are there any such transforming goals? If I thought that I was created by God, that my bodily life was an illusory passage to eternal

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bliss, that my flourishing consisted in the extinction of my own ego, and if I had the psychological support of a community of believers living the same sort of life, then I could probably make sacrifices that I cannot now make. I might also hope for some transformation of my will through divine grace. But I do not, nor do many religious believers, think that. My, and their, conception of human flourishing is nothing like that. Murdoch’s own view of the goal of moral life is something like Plato’s Form of the Good, and she sees it as having a magnetic power akin to many religious conceptions. Perhaps it is best to see what she calls the ‘sovereignty’ of good as something not unlike selflessness or impartiality. But that goal, though inspiring, is not inspiring enough to transform motivation in the necessary way (at least, that is what I concluded a moment ago). The goals that might transform it I see no reason to adopt; and the goals that I see reason to adopt do not transform it.

It is undeniable that some rare human beings sacrifice themselves for others. So they can. If they can, humans can. Does that mean that we can? If so, the question, Ought we? rises to challenge us. At Auschwitz Father Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to take the place of another prisoner in a punishment detail, and went to his death. But that Father Kolbe, with his religious beliefs, could sacrifice himself does

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not show that we with very different metaphysical beliefs, can too. In any case, we do not need to look to religious believers for cases of self-sacrifice. Hundred of students in Tiananmen Square autonomously went on hunger-strike, and were prepared to die ‘to fight for the life that’s worth living’. But they were in special circumstances. They saw their lives as blighted, as not worth living. They saw an opportunity to change things, even if at a great cost to themselves, and when they gave up hope of change, they gave up the hunger-strike too. Certainly people in exceptional circumstances can do exceptional things. Some mothers, when their children are threatened, can raise themselves to such emotional intensity that they acquire powers that they do not normally have. The hunger-strikers had despair over their lives, hope that they could make a breakthrough, and the electric atmosphere of Tiananmen Square. But I doubt that we can use what people are capable of at the pitch of excitement as evidence of what they are capable of day in, day out, which is what a moral life needs. One special circumstance would be impending disaster. We expect great sacrifices if the alternative is dire enough: I ought, I think, to accept my own death to stop a lunatic getting to the nuclear button. That the threat is so appalling should make motivation follow more naturally.

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These intermediate cases, as I have called them, do not have, as
the earlier cases had, an ordinary ability behind, and greatly qualifying
the inability. The great mass of ordinary human beings ‘cannot’; only
the rare saint or hero ‘can’. For this reason common-sense ethics does
not assert that in these cases we ‘ought’. It does not assert it not
because, though we ‘ought’, there would be no point in bothering to
say so. On the contrary, common-sense ethics has taken the less-
demanding form it has, not because human societies reflected on the
limits of human motivation and consequently pitched its demands at
this more modest level, but because it never thought in the first place
that ordinary human beings ‘could’. The claim I make here is
empirical; it is also not easily assessed, though I find it likely. Still,
that something is a feature of common-sense ethics does not make it
right. The argument is not over.

Our predecessors made common-sense ethics self-servingly
undemanding, clearly too undemanding, for example, in the case of
what the well-off should do to help the destitute. But there is plainly
no inference from ‘do not’ to ‘cannot’. There is no inference, either,
from ‘will not’ to ‘cannot’. That is, a society might formally recognize
and proclaim what are, compared to present standards, more stringent
demands on the well-off to help the destitute, yet find that people will

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not meet them. But there is no clear inference from such a ‘will not’ either to ‘cannot’ or to ‘not the case that one ought’. Is there an inference from ‘cannot’, as used in these intermediate cases, to ‘not the case that one ought’? Is the content of moral demands simply not constrained by facts about human ability?

What is more, there is the point that impossible ideals may, despite the fact that we ‘cannot’, still have a role to play in guiding action. If so, that role has to be accommodated.

7. ‘Cannot’ or ‘will not’?

Have I so far not distinguished sharply enough ‘cannot’ and ‘will not’? Flying, Superman-like, to the top of the skyscraper to snatch the teetering child from death is clearly beyond human powers; it is excluded by the laws of nature. But most of the actions that concern us here are not, at least not clearly, beyond our powers in that strong sense. Perhaps if I had been taken in hand early enough, and trained rigorously, I could have been turned into that exceedingly rare thing, a fully impartial person. It is by no means clear that I could have been, but let us suppose so. Suppose also that, though the rigorous training would have to start early, it could start after I had reached the age of practical rationality, and that I refused to be trained. At the time of my

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decision, I would have to admit that, though I refused to become fully impartial, it was not that I could not. And the distinction here between ‘will not’ and ‘cannot’, it might be thought, should not be blurred. But the ‘cannot’ here is, as I said, strong: beyond empirical possibility. On this strong standard of ‘cannot’ one would have to say about the intermediate cases that the agent ‘can’ but ‘will not’.13

But should the ‘cannot’ in the principle “ought” implies “can” be taken to be as strong as that? Should it not also include, for instance, what we cannot rationally believe and do? In particular, should it not include it despite the fact that there is a psychological or pharmacological or whatever method of getting us to do what we decided for conclusive reason not to do?

At an early stage in life, a person forms beliefs, some of them very probably sound, above what makes an individual life good. At an early stage, a person also forms beliefs, some of them very probably sound, about what one must do for, and must not do to, others. These self-referential and other-referential beliefs can conflict, and sometimes it is not clear how to, or whether one can, reconcile the conflicts. Despite the difficulty of resolution, we quite rightly give weight to both sorts of beliefs. Our beliefs about what makes an individual life go well shape our aims, dispositions, and actions. Some
of our prudential dispositions probably have innate components. So nearly all of us end up living lives in which we accept and follow certain demands of strict impartiality but also accept and follow the special demands made on us by those we love and by the pursuits that give our lives point.

This line of thought raises a new question: can one choose to deny or to forget or to erase from one’s mind a category of values — prudential values — that one knows to be sound? If one stays on the level of rational action, one obstacle to doing so is that one has no reason to do so. To say that a person can but will not be fully impartial suggests that the person recognizes the ethical reason to do so but, none the less, chooses not to. But if one’s belief that certain forms of life are prudentially valuable leads, as it naturally will, to one’s adopting certain aims, acquiring certain dispositions, and acting in certain ways, it is likely that a causally necessary condition of acting fully impartially is getting rid of, or preventing the formation of, these rational beliefs. But it cannot be ethics that demands that we suppress, or not acquire, a whole category of ethical value. And there is a further difficulty arising on the ethical level: to make, or to keep, a person ignorant of prudential values is to limit the person’s autonomy.

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For these reasons, what one cannot do and still remain an ethical agent should also be included in what, in the relevant sense, one ‘cannot’ do — a weaker sense of ‘cannot’. If we insist on using only the strong concept of ‘cannot’, we greatly oversimplify the question whether ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. One cannot be fully impartial because one cannot, without denying important values, without undermining autonomy — without, in short, degrading ethical life — avoid motivational constraints.

8. The role of impossible ideals

To those who doubted the practical relevance of impossible ideals Leo Tolstoy replied: ethics has two parts.\textsuperscript{14} There is an ethics of rules with which we are expected to, and can comply. But there is also an ethics of ideals, such as the one Jesus set us: ‘Be ye therefore perfect, as your Lord God is perfect’.\textsuperscript{15} Of course, we cannot be perfect, certainly not as perfect as God. But, none the less, this ideal, Tolstoy maintains, has an obvious role in life: we are to strive to come as close to it as we can.

My example of an impossible ideal comes from one religion, Christianity. I am interested in secular ethics. Is there anything comparable to this Christian ideal in secular ethics? Well, there is the

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widely held belief that the ethical ideal is complete impartiality between persons. Impartiality can be understood in several different ways, but let me continue for a little longer using the utilitarian interpretation: everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one.

As we just saw, there are problems with adopting perfection, so understood, as a goal. The impartial ideal would be a world of agents incapable of promoting the impartial ideal. And one gets no help by amending the ideal to trying to promote the impartial ideal. One cannot try to do what one knows one cannot do. I know I cannot jump a mile straight up into the air without mechanical aid. If a lunatic put a pistol to my head and demanded that I do just that, I could not even try to do it, though I could try to look as if I were trying in order to placate the lunatic.

Tolstoy’s ideal, however, is to be as perfect as one can, and surely there is no impossibility in that. In a secular ethics, however, one would have to have a fairly rich conception of perfection to draw on. If it were the utilitarian conception of a world consisting of agents impartially maximizing well-being, one would run into the problem that high levels of impartiality are incompatible with many of the highest forms of well-being. The very idea of the perfect balance between impartiality and the forms of well-being that require partiality

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is unclear. The utilitarian interpretation of impartiality leaves entirely unarticulated what such a life would look like and what sorts of policies and personalities would be most likely to realize it; the job of describing decent human behaviour would remain. For example, some people articulate the moral point of view itself with the formula: everyone is due equal respect. This basic principle of equal respect need not be — should not be, I would say, — interpreted in the utilitarian way. But even if it is not, a tension between equaling of respect and partiality remains. Even non-utilitarianism forms of impartiality have to be balanced against the partialities at the centre of a prudentially good life.

Clearly we can be, and should be, less partial than most of us are now. We could favour our own children less without our loss in the value of our close relation to them, and consequently be able to favour needy strangers more. And our capacity for wider concern often varies with age: in the midst of child-rearing our concern for our own families can be intense, but in youth and old age, without entanglements, it is often less. But it is only less. Even then we do not become capable of strong forms of impartiality. The dispositions that best suit an adult for the variety of demands life is likely to make cannot be radically different from the dispositions of a teenager. Deep
attachments to people, commitment to work, ambition, and loyalty cannot just appear when one leaves adolescence. If they are not already established well before then, they will never appear. Many old people find them their sympathies widening quite naturally, but their psychological material is likely to be too firmly et by then for their behaviour to change radically. To make someone capable of total impartiality require taking drastic measures early.

Most of us have to be prepared to raise children, or at least to have successful relations with other people, and more generally to be loyal and co-operative members of a community, and to care enough about our work to be productive. A few people may turn out quite different from this; a very few of them, the ones who manage to salvage some sort of sanity, might even be capable of effective impartial concern for all. But what is in the accessible psychological repertoire of the minute exception may well not be in the repertoire of the vast majority of human beings. In any case, very few of us indeed would be willing to raise our children to be utterly impartial; we should want to raise them to be capable of love and affection for those around them — that is hard enough. We should not know how to produce someone emotionally detached to that extreme degree, yet

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sane. We are incapable of such fine-tuning. We should be too likely simply to produce an emotional wreck.

Ethics must call on fairly settled dispositions. The dispositions must suit one for the variety of demands that one’s life will make on one — for most of us, life in society. So ethics must presuppose a sustainable social order — sustainable given the material circumstances of our life and, especially, given what is most enduring in human nature.

There are, I conclude, cases of “ought” implies “can”, mainly to be found among what I called intermediate cases. Total impartiality is just not available to ordinary people aiming at a good life in a sustainable social order. For them, it is not in the normal human repertoire of possible ways of living. It is not, therefore, in the normal human repertoire of ethical principles. That is why we will not say that such a person ‘ought’ to live like that. Our balking at saying this does not arise from a moral principle. It arises from the semantics of the word ‘ought’. The part of the semantics relevant to voluntary human actions is what would meet a standard (of behaviour). Human cultures have never included total impartiality among their standards. My conclusion is that they are justified in this.
Notes

1 Critique of Pure Reason, A548/B576.


3 E.g. Sinnott-Armstrong, op. cit., pp. 6-7.


5 Value Judgement: Improving our Ethical Belief, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, ch. II. This section is a revised version of op. cit., ch. VI.


7 For the distinction between ‘crude’ and ‘educated’ self-interest, see my op. cit. ch. V. sect. 3.


11 See profile, *op. cit.*

12 The words are from a speech of Chai Ling, which became the manifesto of the hunger strikers: ‘[E]ven though death, to us, is too heavy a burden to bear, we have decided to take our leave … History demands this from us … We use courage that enables us to face death, to fight for the life that is worth living.’ Quoted in Li Lu, *Moving the Mountain*, London: Macmillan, 1990, pp. 131-2.


14 Leo Tolstoy,

15 Mark [?]

‘Ought’ implies ‘Can’: 1. Motivation — 26 June 08