

## MORALITY AND PARTIALITY

Susan Wolf  
Johns Hopkins University

The great moral theories that have dominated moral philosophy for at least the last forty years have taken impartiality to be a core defining feature of morality. That is, they have identified morality with the idea of acting from a position that acknowledges and appreciates the fact that all persons (or even, on some views, all sentient beings) are in an important sense equal, and that, correspondingly, all are equally entitled to fundamental conditions of well-being and respect. Recently, however, many have called attention to the fact that relationships of friendship and love seem to call for the very opposite of an impartial perspective. Since such relationships unquestionably rank among the greatest goods of life, a conception of morality that is in tension with their maintenance and promotion is unacceptable.

Thus a debate has arisen between, as we may call them, the impartialists and the partialists. In defense of their position, the impartialists note that someone's being your friend or relative does not make her more morally deserving than anyone else, and they point to the grave moral dangers of moving that acknowledgment from the center of moral thought. Rather than allow our personal affections to compromise our commitments to justice and equality, they argue, we must shape our ideals of friendship and love to fit the demands of impartial morality. The partialists reply that this denigrates the value of special relationships to friends and loved ones, at best according them the status of acceptable extracurricular activities and at worst regarding them as a consequence of human nature to be warily tolerated.

For my own part, I am quite sympathetic to the partialists' concerns. But I think that they locate the problem in the wrong theoretical place. The problem is not that impartiality is too closely or centrally identified with morality, but that morality as a whole is being expected to do too much. I shall, then, defend a conception of morality that, in the context of the debate sketched above, might be labelled a moderate impartialism. But at least as

important as its location within the impartialist-partialist debate is its self-conscious acknowledgement of the limitations of that debate, and indeed of the limitations of morality itself in settling some of the most important questions of our lives.

### **Types of Impartialism**

The position that impartiality is a central and defining feature of a moral perspective is open to many interpretations. The most extreme, if also the most obvious interpretation directly identifies the moral point of view with the impartial point of view. According to Extreme Impartialism, a person is morally required to take each person's well-being, or alternatively each person's rights, as seriously as every other, to work equally hard to secure them, or to care equally much about them, or to grant them equal value in her practical deliberations. A person acts immorally, on such a view, if she fails either to do or to try to do what is best from a perspective that takes each person's interests, rights, or welfare as of equal importance to every other. Such an extreme form of impartialism seems to me patently absurd. For it is absurd to suggest that morality requires one to care, or to act as if one cares, no more about one's own child than about a stranger's, or that it is immoral to go to the movies with a friend whenever more good could be done by working at a soup kitchen. Only slightly less absurd, though much more popular, is a view that permits partisan emotions and behavior, as long as in fact they promote nonpartisan goals. For the acceptability of coaching one's daughter's soccer team, or taking one's friend to dinner on her birthday does not rest on the fortuitous coincidence that this action, or even the way of life that gives rise to it, is the one that will maximize human welfare or equal respect all around.

The grip that such views have on moral theory, despite their apparent absurdity, comes, I think, from the fact that they seem able to claim for themselves a special kind of objectivity. For it is an objective truth that my daughter is no more deserving than anyone else just for being mine. If one's aim in acting (or in forming one's values) is first and foremost to *reflect* objective truth, then, the extreme impartialist perspective seems better than any alternative.<sup>1</sup>

But it is neither rationally nor morally required that this *be* one's first and foremost aim. If Italian food is objectively no better than Thai food, this surely does not impose a requirement that I consume equal quantities of each. If Botticelli is objectively no better a painter than Tintoretto, this does not oblige me to spend equal time looking at their paintings. Similarly, it would seem, in the absence of further argument, the fact that my daughter is no better

than some stranger does not require me to care about them equally or to act in a way that equally promotes their welfare. Unless one thinks that we are put on this earth for the sole purpose of serving it or its subjects, the idea that morality, much less rationality, requires us solely or dominantly to do so seems totally unjustified. We are, after all, subjects as well as objects, with interests of our own.

The idea that impartiality is part of the core of morality admits of more moderate interpretations than this, however. If we refer to the claim that all persons are equally deserving of well-being and respect as the Impartialist Insight, then we may characterize impartialism generally as the position that a moral person is one who recognizes and appreciates the Impartialist Insight and integrates it into her life. Understanding impartialism this way allows us to see the variety of views that may fairly be called impartialist. For integrating the Impartialist Insight into one's life need not mean letting it absolutely take over. There are both formal and substantive ways of shaping one's life so as to reflect people's basic moral equality which fall far short of identifying morality with living, as it were, from the impartial point of view. The familiar idea that morality requires one to act only in ways that one thinks any reasonable person would accept is one formal and more moderate interpretation of impartialism. The notion that one must hold oneself to whatever standards one expects of others is another. The first counts as impartialism because it treats all persons as equally deserving of a say in setting the moral standards. The second counts as impartialism because, although one sets the standards oneself, one sets them in such a way as expressly to avoid granting oneself (or one's friends) special privilege. These forms are more moderate because the standards thus set are apt unconditionally to allow a good deal of partiality in one's psychology and behavior. One would not expect or demand a stranger to take one's own interests as seriously as the interests of her loved ones, nor would a stranger expect or demand this of oneself.

What would, or what ought strangers (or enemies) expect of each other in the way of concern and respect? A defect of the formal characterizations of morality above is that they do not say. But the spirit of impartialism obviously urges something more than indifference to others. Rather than try to derive this something more from the formal requirements mentioned above, we may directly and explicitly add a more substantive, though still indeterminate requirement to the interpretation of moderate impartialism. What I have in mind is simply the idea that reflection on the fact that everyone is equally morally deserving should in itself move one some way in the direction of universal benevolence. Thus, for example, people (like us) who live, with their friends and their children, in relative luxury, must, if they

are moral, realize that others, no less deserving, are starving, homeless, abused. The substantive element of moderate impartialism insists that appreciating and integrating this fact into one's life must have some practical effect—on one's politics, on one's activities, on one's choice of how to spend one's money.

I shall defend Moderate Impartialism, understood as a conception of morality that endorses all three of the less extreme interpretations of impartialism mentioned above. A moral person, on this view, does act only in ways that she believes any reasonable person would allow. She does hold herself to the same standards that she expects of others. And she is moved to practical effect by the thought that others—all others—are as deserving of the fundamental conditions of well-being and respect as are she and her circle of friends and loved ones.

### **Moderate Impartialism and the Status of Friendship and Love**

Since this view gives impartiality a much more limited role in morality than Extreme Impartialism, some may regard Moderate Impartialism as itself a conciliatory view. After all, few, if any, critics of impartialism meant to deny that impartiality had any role in morals at all. The issue dividing the parties of the debate is about the size, or centrality, or ubiquity of that role. Extreme Impartialism makes impartiality loom very large in moral thought. Moderate Impartialism gives it a distinctly less intrusive position. Still, I mean to understand this position in a way that gives impartiality not just a place, or even a very important place in moral thinking, but also a special, and especially absolute place. Moderate Impartialism, as I understand it, is still a form of impartialism because, insofar as impartiality does generate any requirements of us, these requirements are morally absolute. They cannot be traded off or balanced by other considerations. Indeed, this is the point of endorsing the formal characterizations of morality mentioned above. This endorsement implies that anyone who acts in a way that reasonable others would not allow, or anyone who violates standards that she would expect others to uphold acts immorally. Anyone who knows that her action cannot be justified to others but who chooses to act despite this, thereby defies morality—and does so whether she is motivated by self-interest or by friendship or love.

Moderate Impartialism, like Extreme Impartialism, then, conceives of morality as fundamentally and absolutely connected to the Impartialist Insight that all persons have a kind of moral equality. Let us now see what implications this has for the moral status of friendship and love and for the moral evaluation of acts that are performed in their contexts. To see how

far such a conception of morality goes in the direction of positively accommodating and valuing such relationships, at least four points should be made.

First, and most obviously, Moderate Impartialism allows the existence of deep friendships and love without apology. Consequently, many, if not all, of the preferences for loved ones most of us express in our daily lives will turn out to be unequivocally permissible. Since Moderate Impartialism never asks a person to value every human or sentient being as much as every other, there is no problem about coaching *one's own* daughter's soccer team or taking *one's own* friend out to dinner, or loving *one's own* spouse more than the equally deserving but much less interesting man across the street.

Second, preferential actions on behalf of loved ones are sometimes not just permitted but positively required by (moderately) impartial morality. Thus, the common sense view that there are special obligations of friendship seems supported rather than contradicted by morality thus conceived. For relationships of friendship, and love, not to mention family ties, tend to give rise to special expectations in their participants and frequently put individuals in positions that make them uniquely capable of benefitting and protecting another. Even from a purely disinterested perspective, one can see how such expectations and circumstances may be thought to generate special duties. Thus, there will be many occasions on which a Moderate Impartialist will be able to say that acting on behalf of one's friend or loved one is not merely morally permissible, but morally good.

Third, a defender of Moderate Impartialism should acknowledge that even if impartiality plays a distinctive, unconditional role in moral thought, it is not always salient in moral evaluation. Morality is not just about treating people equally or fairly, but about treating them well. And in many, perhaps most, contexts where moral deliberation or evaluation is called for, issues about partiality and impartiality do not arise. Kindness and cruelty, sensitivity and thoughtlessness, honesty, deception, respect and manipulation can be noted and appropriately encouraged or condemned without any reference to the issue of partiality. Though impartiality is related to morality in a fundamental and unconditional way, it is not always useful to dwell on this or place it in the forefront of moral judgment.

Related to this is the fourth and final point that from a moderately impartialist moral point of view, there is abundant reason to encourage friendships and love and to be dedicated to structuring society so that such relationships can flourish. Of course, morality sets limits on what one can do in the context of a friendship or love relationship, but, for the most part, these relationships advance moral goals rather than threaten them. For in addition to being an immeasurable and profound source of human happiness—a moral

goal if ever there was one—such relationships provide by far the most natural and effective setting for the development of moral sentiments and virtues. Sympathy for a friend teaches and encourages one to have sympathy also for a stranger. Thinking about the feelings and interests of a loved one helps develop the habit of thinking about others more generally.

In light of all the positive things a moderately impartial moralist can say about partial relationships—in light of the wide room within morality in which friendships and love can develop and flourish and the sincere praise and encouragement that a moralist can offer to the participants of these relationships—is there anything left for a partialist to complain about?

At least some partialists think that there is. For even if the kind of impartial morality sketched above acknowledges a value to friendships and love, they think it is the wrong kind of value; even if impartial morality endorses these special relationships, they think it endorses them for the wrong reasons.

### **The Partialist Complaint**

To begin with, the partialists will point out, the primary impartialist attitude to friendship and love is that within limits, it is perfectly permissible. But what a weak and paltry thing that is to say about one of the most gratifying and meaningful forms of human activity! To put it in the class of the permissible is to rank it with such acceptable activities as stamp-collecting and golf. Surely, relationships with friends and family have a different and deeper kind of value. It is not just alright but positively good that a person goes hiking with a friend, that she help a neighbor start his car, that she bring her children presents, bake them cookies, teach them songs. More generally, it is not just alright but positively good that such relationships form part of a person's life.

The remarks made earlier make the impartialists' response to this easily predictable. The fact that friendships are like stamp-collecting in both being permissible carries no implication that these activities are comparable in kind or amount of value. Of course, it is positively morally good that one helps a neighbor, or brings joy to one's children. Helping people is always morally good, and one's children are hardly an exception. Besides, as has already been noted, one has special responsibilities to those in whom one has encouraged special expectations, and an obligation to take extraordinary measures for those whom one is in a unique or nearly unique position to help. For these reasons, the impartialist, like the partialist, will not only praise the person who does help her friends, but, on some occasions, morally criticize the person who fails to do so (even if she fulfills all her duties to treat them and others decently). And, at a more general level, the impartialist has plenty to say to support the partialist's point that friendships are immeasurably more

valuable than stamps. For one thing, they provide much more pleasure, and, lest pleasure seem too shallow a benefit, they provide further satisfactions, including a sense of purpose and meaningfulness. Moreover, they provide these benefits, not just to the agent who loves, but to the beloved as well. Thus, friendship and love are unusually efficient in being able to spread and intensify positive experience in ways solitary activities and interests cannot match. And finally, as we have already noted, people who are involved in warm special relationships are more likely to be or to become generally sympathetic and generous than are people without such relationships. For all these reasons, impartialists may be said to agree with the partialist statement that friendships and love are of positive moral value.

But this perfectly illustrates the partialist complaint—that although the impartialist values these relationships, she values them in the wrong way, for the wrong reasons.

Thus, the impartialists say that you ought to make special efforts for your friends—but not because they are your friends and you love them. Rather it is because you have encouraged special expectations on their part, or because you are in a unique position to help. This explanation of obligations of friendship likens such obligations to contractual or professional duties, or to the duty to respond to emergency situations that chance happens to throw in one's path. This seems a cold and detached way to respond to a friend, hardly representative of the kind of psychology the partialists want to praise. And though the impartialists support friendship and love more generally, they support these relationships as means to another end—to the production of pleasure or meaningfulness, to the development of a more generalized altruism. The partialists want to insist that friendship and love are valuable *in themselves*, independently of their contribution to these other goals. Even if, as sometimes happens, a friendship leads to more sorrow than joy, and even if it makes no contribution to the more generalized moral virtues of those involved, the relationship enhances rather than detracts from the participants' lives.

The partialists seem to me right to note the coldness of impartial morality's support of special relationships and the actions they urge on us; they seem to me right in pointing out that on this conception of morality, love and friendship are not moral ends in themselves. What does not seem right is the further thought that these facts count against an impartialist conception of morality. This issue depends on how complete and perfect a guide to life morality can be expected to be.

### **Tensions between Impartiality and Personal Ties: Reasonable Disagreement**

It is time to look at the practical concerns to which these issues abstractly refer, to take note of the problems in ordinary life that the tension between impartial morality and discriminating love create. I shall focus on the most discussed controversy—namely, that concerning how much one *may* do for friends and loved ones. Within this realm, two different sorts of issues arise.

First there is an issue about how much of one's time, money, and effort one may direct towards the benefit of those one specially cares about in light of the greater and more pressing needs of people not part of one's circle. May one buy one's child a Nintendo game even though other children don't even have coats to keep them warm? What about private school? Summer camp? Psychotherapy? One's multimillion dollar estate? Moderate Impartialism as such offers no determinate answer to these questions. Rather, it recognizes an imperfect duty to give some attention to others, independent of any special ties to you. How much and what kind of attention, and what one gives up in order to meet this demand, will vary with one's resources and the other morally significant claims upon one. Presumably, partialists will want to recognize such an imperfect duty themselves. They are rarely so callous as to suggest we have no obligation to care about strangers. In this area of moral life, then, the abstract debate about partiality and impartiality might engender no substantive disagreement. Still, the tone of impartialism might lead one to assume that the impartialists want to draw the line of permissible expenditures for loved ones somewhat closer than their opponents.

More interesting, theoretically, are issues concerning apparently perfect duties. When, if ever, may one break the rules (or bend them) for a friend or relative? May one lend a friend one's apartment, knowing she wants it for an adulterous affair? Is one allowed to commit perjury for a friend, or hide her from the police? May one vote for a friend's tenure, knowing that one would have voted against it if there had been no special relationship? May one let a friend sneak through the turnstile as one collects tickets for a Bruce Springsteen concert? Traditionally, impartialisms of the more moderate type have been interpreted as answering no to all these questions, presumably on the grounds that if an impartial perspective demands the laying down of a rule, it demands that the rule be obeyed absolutely. But Moderate Impartialism as I have sketched it contains no such theoretical commitment. Moderate Impartialism requires that one ask what standards any reasonable person would set for everyone to follow. What would you demand of others, it urges you to ask, and what may others reasonably demand of you? Taking myself as an example of a reasonable person, I can only report that I would



not take it amiss if a ticket-taker let a friend slip into a Springsteen concert, even bearing in mind that some people who camped out in front of a ticket booth all one cold, rainy night, had to be turned away. As I see it, these are matters where luck acceptably—even sometimes, delightfully—plays its part. Some people are unlucky in being just ten places too far back in line; a few are fortunate enough to have a friend at the turnstile. And I can imagine a morally virtuous individual deciding to take advantage of her position to give a friend—who is seriously into Springsteen—the peak experience of seeing this concert which she would otherwise be unable to afford.

But, of course, when it comes to taking special advantage, one must draw the line. It is one thing to let one friend into one concert without a ticket, another to let thirty friends in every week. Or to get one's friend's daughter into medical school, even though her record is not as good as other applicants', or to drop criminal charges against one's ex-roommate for old times' sake. The point is that Moderate Impartialism *as such* is as indeterminate about these matters as about those mentioned earlier. It is, in both instances, a matter of where to draw the line.<sup>2</sup>

Though one cannot literally derive substantive disagreements about specific practical issues from the theoretical debate about impartialism, however, one can expect such concrete disagreements to accompany the more abstract one. By imagining and explaining the trains of thought some possible concrete disagreements might provoke, we can gain insight into some implicit assumptions operating in the background of both parties of the partialist/impartialist debate.

Consider the case of the woman who is moved to vote for a friend's promotion to a tenured position, conscious that in the absence of the friendship she may have been inclined to vote against him. We may assume that the impartialist would judge that morality requires her, at the very least, to withdraw herself from the vote. The partialist, on the other hand, thinks this shows insufficient appreciation of the pull of loyalty and mutual commitment, and so accuses her opponent of taking the impartial point of view too seriously. Who is right?

In dealing with this controversy, the natural tendency is to try to defend one's initial position by deepening one's characterization of it and drawing out the negative implications one suspects to develop from the opposing view. One can imagine the debate getting ugly, with the impartialist painting the partialist (at least, the one that we imagine actually does vote for her friend) as totally unscrupulous and the partialist painting the impartialist as smugly self-righteous and cold.

In fact, however, I would guess that nine times out of ten this tendency leads us astray. The right thing to do for both parties of the debate is, es-

entially, to accommodate the other. To be sure, the impartialist's *first* reaction to the case is to think that in tenure cases one must put friendship to one side. (For the record, this is my first reaction.) But after listening to the partialist, and perhaps to added details that are plausibly claimed to be relevant, it may be more appropriate simply to accept that this is a case where reasonable people disagree. Moreover, this concession should be enough to satisfy the partialist, unless she thinks that it is positively immoral for someone to refuse to compromise her professional standards for her friend.

Earlier I said that whether one is a partialist or an impartialist, the question of what and how much one can do on behalf of a friend or loved one must be a question of where to draw the line. Acknowledging the possibility of reasonable moral disagreement, however, suggests a modification of that claim. For, strictly speaking, it seems, one need not draw a line. One may instead shade an area, encompassing a range of behavior patterns of varying degrees of moral tone.

In contexts where nonmoral values are at issue, we are ordinarily quite ready to acknowledge that our preferences, even our judgments of what is best, may legitimately differ from others. We may have different tastes—within reason—in music, movies, and men, without any of us being irrational or obtuse. There is no reason—though no doubt there is an explanation—why we shouldn't be similarly tolerant about some moral issues. Disputes about the limits of permissible partiality seem to me to be connected with just such an issue.

Accepting the existence of reasonable disagreement in this area does, however, complicate the version of Moderate Impartialism that I have proposed. Specifically, it creates difficulties in interpreting the condition of morality that requires one to act in accordance with standards that all reasonable others would accept. This condition appears to require that our behavior conform to the *strictest* standards of impartiality that fall within the reasonable range, for to do anything less would fail to be in accord with what *all* reasonable others would accept. At the same time, the acknowledgment that some reasonable people have more lenient views about the degree to which impartial concerns should prevail ought to incline those who are initially drawn to strictness to loosen up on what they think morality universally requires.

Ideally, conscientious and imaginative reflection on the range of reasonable moral views in this area will lead in the long run to more consensus as well as more tolerance. Those who tend initially to set more lenient standards will pull themselves up to conform to the standards of others they respect, and those who tend toward strictness will take a less moralistic and condemnatory attitude towards those they come to see as falling within the

reasonable, if less demanding, range. That there should still remain borderline cases in which it is unclear what counts as reasonable and correspondingly what counts as morally required does not, I think, constitute a significant objection to this view.

### **Tensions Between Impersonal and Personal Ties: Radical Choice**

As I have suggested, many cases in which a tension between love and impartiality is a source of moral controversy can be explained and accounted for by recognizing a range of reasonable disagreement about what standards people should expect and require of each other. But there are some cases which cannot comfortably be interpreted in this way. What I have in mind are cases where there is no controversy about what reasonable people—and so, what impartial morality—may require, but where the pull of love and loyalty urge the agent to consider flouting those requirements nonetheless. What is such a person to do, and how are we to judge her? Impartial morality unequivocally instructs her to refrain, and issues a negative judgment on her if she does not (how negative, of course, depends on how serious her sin). But with sufficient imagination, one may paint such an agent in sympathetic colors—not only as one who deserves our sympathy but as one with whom we may be *in* sympathy. This may suggest that impartial morality is somehow wrong.

Consider the case of a woman whose son has committed a crime and who must decide whether to hide him from the police. He will suffer gravely should he be caught, but unless he is caught, another innocent man will be wrongly convicted for the crime and imprisoned. I shall take it as needing no argument that impartial morality forbids protecting one's son at the expense of another innocent man's suffering. Impartial morality forbids it—but we are talking about a woman and her son.

For many people, this case is unproblematic. The woman should turn in her son, and that's that. This view is perfectly compatible with feeling great sympathy for her, and even for excusing her, partially or wholly, if she cannot bring herself to do what she ought to do. But there are others who regard the dilemma in a different light, and whose view of the woman who protects her son is more positive than the one just depicted. To these others there is something positively reasonable (and not just understandable) about the woman who, having recognized that impartial morality instructs her to turn her son in, wonders whether to act according to impartial morality or not. After all, if the meaning of one's life and one's very identity is bound up with someone as deeply as a mother's life is characteristically tied to her son's, why should the dictates of impartial morality be regarded as decisive? One

can imagine a woman recognizing the dictates of impartial morality, and accepting without protest the judgment of others that she ought to turn in her son. She might believe that they have a right to disapprove, even to punish her for protecting her son, but nonetheless find that these considerations pale in significance beside thoughts of her child's welfare. "Do to me what you like," she may say, "Judge me as you will. I will go to hell if I have to, but my son is more important to me than my moral salvation." One may regard such a woman not just with sympathy, but with a kind of admiration and respect, perhaps as much admiration and respect as one regards the woman who, after equally tortured deliberations, makes the opposite choice.

The thought that there is nothing wrong with the woman who protects her son, or that, at any rate, nothing wrong with deciding in *some* contexts to act on behalf of a loved one despite the recognition that others fairly disapprove is perhaps the strongest motivating thought behind partialist morality. For if one thinks it is reasonable for a person to act a certain way, one is inclined to think that it must be moral, too. And so, one may think, it must be moral occasionally to choose to act one way despite the fact that even a moderately impartialist perspective forbids it. From this one concludes that even a moderately impartialist perspective is only a conditional, if typical, feature of morality, and that the bonds of love and friendship can reasonably compete with the demands of impartiality for moral priority.

As I have hunted throughout the paper, I believe that this line of reasoning is mistaken. Rather than interpret the woman's dilemma as one in which different sorts of moral concerns compete, I prefer to characterize it as a conflict *between* morality and the demands of love. It is morality itself, and not just an aspect or facet of it, that stands on one side of the dilemma. The problem the mother faces is not the problem of weighing different moral concerns against each other; it is rather the problem of whether to attend ultimately to moral concerns at all. In this sense, it is a problem of radical choice.

### **Conflicts Between Love and Morality**

Conceiving of the woman's problem in this way reveals a commitment to conceiving of morality as impartial morality, to regarding judgments of moral permissibility as completely and unconditionally bounded by impartialist constraints. Yet, because I have not assumed that rationality and reasonableness are completely and unconditionally bound by moral constraints, my evaluation of the mother's possible responses significantly coincide with the partialists' evaluation in this case. For, while I agree with other *im*-partialists that it would be immoral for the woman to hide her son from the

police, it seems to me that a willingness, in such special circumstances as these, to consider acting immorally, and even to act immorally, is compatible with the possession of a character worthy of respect and admiration.

At this point, the reader might well feel exasperated, wondering whose side I am really on, or even whether, in my effort to appreciate both sides of the debate, I manage to maintain a consistent position at all. For evidently I want to have it both ways: to claim, on the one hand, that the woman is morally required to turn in her son, and, on the other, that she may be reasonable, even admirable, if she refuses to turn him in. Since I understand morality as defined, at least in part, by what it is reasonable for people to demand of one another, this may appear self-contradictory. But it is not *quite* contradictory to believe both that it is reasonable to morally demand that the mother turn her son in and that it is reasonable for the mother to refuse to meet the demand. This would be contradictory if one understood, as part of the *meaning* of a moral demand that it be a demand that, all things considered, any reasonable, decent person should meet. But I believe there are strong reasons for understanding the meaning of “moral” differently, and thus for allowing that on rare occasions, a reasonable and decent person may find herself considering, and even deciding to defy morality.

Specifically, there are strong reasons for using “moral” to refer to whatever is dictated by an impartial perspective. For the impartial perspective, or, more precisely, the constraints on action that this perspective would urge have a uniquely important and distinctive role in our thought and in our lives. They are, first of all, constraints which, as members of the human community, we have a deep and abiding interest that people follow. But they are not just constraints that we *want* people to accept—they are constraints that we are justified in insisting that they accept. For these constraints offer a way of integrating into our lives an appreciation of an unassailable truth—the truth that you or I are ultimately no more deserving of having our interests satisfied or our point of view respected than any other human being. This is a truth, moreover, which, without some help, people are apt to neglect or ignore.

To return to the mother’s dilemma, it seems completely legitimate for us, as voices, if you will, of a reasonable humanity, to forbid—insofar as it is in our power—that she protect her son. For no matter how much she understandably values her son’s welfare, someone else’s son’s welfare is also at stake, and he is innocent. Given the history of our language, to say to her, or to ourselves, that turning her son in is the action that follows from the impartial perspective is hardly sufficient to express the urgency, the seriousness, or, what is perhaps most to the point, the finality of the judgment that is appropriate here. For these reasons, we want to use the words: morality requires it.

At the same time, once we have realized that a moral requirement just is a judgment about what kind of behavior is tolerable from an impartial perspective, it would be unrealistic and even perhaps undesirable to expect people to be committed to morality unconditionally. Even if, as one hopes, moral values reach to the very core of a person's identity, they are not, nor do we want them to be, the only values or attributes that comprise that core. So there is the possibility of conflict, and of reasonable, decent people, resolving the conflict in favor or against morality.

Moderate, as opposed to Extreme, Impartialism recognizes limits to the degree to which one can expect people to integrate and practically express the fact that all humans are equally deserving. People have their own lives to live, after all, they are not just servants to humanity. Moderate Impartialism sets moral standards with this limitation in mind. One who accepts this perspective, however, must also recognize the possibility that even these moderate standards may call for wrenching sacrifices, and that a person's commitment to upholding these standards, and to remaining, as it were, in good standing with reasonable humanity, might not hold its own against some other legitimately deep feature of that person's life. Recognizing this does not call for the conclusion that the standards were set unreasonably high after all: the mother who protects her son does act wrongly, and deserves whatever guilt and punishment flow from that judgment. At the same time, if she turns him in, she will irreparably alter a relationship that has, perhaps, been the most fulfilling thing in her life. She will suffer a huge loss either way.

To describe the woman's conflict as one *between* morality and the bonds of love seems to me to capture or preserve the split, almost schizophrenic reaction I think we ought to have to her dilemma. It allows a part of us to disapprove of the option of protecting her son, while allowing another part of us to withhold judgment. Though one wants as far as possible to avoid being torn, split, dis-integrated, the more unified alternatives in this case seem to me less reasonable. And, anyway, what would be accomplished, what message would be sent, and to whom by a more unified conclusion? It seems gratuitously vindictive to insist that a moral judgment against the woman who protects her son is the last, or the only, word on her. Yet it seems disturbingly smug, as well as morally lax, to say that, on the contrary her act was morally all right. In any event, *she* had reached a point where the issue of moral approval had ceased to be decisive.

### **Conclusion: Morality's Job**

Earlier I suggested that the debate between partialists and impartialists, insofar as it was not built upon confusion, betrayed what I take to be un-

reasonable expectations for morality, on the parts of both sides. It is unreasonable, first, to expect morality to have determinate answers to every question, to expect morality always to be able to draw a line on which everyone can agree. It is also unreasonable to expect that once morality has drawn a line, one's practical deliberations must be over. It is sometimes hard to say whether an action is morally justified. It may also be hard to say, on occasion, whether, or at least how much, it matters.

Still, it is to be expected that occasions of this latter sort will be rare. In ordinary circumstances, a well-meaning person will have integrated the minimal constraints of (impartial) morality in such a way that the question of whether to violate them will simply not arise for her. One does not even consider robbing or cheating or hurting innocent people even to confer some very great benefit on one's child. And, if all goes well, one's children do not consider such options either, thus allowing most of us to avoid such dilemmas as the unfortunate woman in our example faces.

In light of all the concessions to the importance and value of personal relationships that I have urged, both within and without the framework of impartialist morality itself, it is hard to imagine a substantive reason for rejecting an impartialist conception of morality. However, one source of dissatisfaction for the partialist may remain. Specifically, my support of an impartialist conception of morality has relied heavily on the way such a conception generates moral *requirements* and *constraints*. Throughout this discussion, I have concentrated on questions about what is morally permissible, what forbidden. Someone initially sympathetic to a partialist conception of morality might object to this. In particular, she might point out that the tendency to focus on questions of permissibility and prohibition is itself symptomatic of the coldness and distance inherent in impartialist morality. This, she might note, is part of what generated the partialist critique in the first place.

To think in terms of what one may do, what one must do (what one has to do), is to express and reinforce a sense of dichotomy between oneself and those represented by morality. It reflects or engenders a sense of isolation from others, even in the attempt to secure a certain kind of minimal attention to others. It may be that for those who are afflicted with this sense of isolation, an impartialist conception of morality offers the best advice available for how to cope with the inescapable social world. But, the defender of partialist morality will go on, it would be better to avoid the sense of isolation in the first place. By loosening the connection between impartialist thinking and moral thinking, by according love and commitment to specifiable others to have fundamental intrinsic moral worth, we can offer a happier, more harmonious vision of the moral life and encourage people, not to grudgingly

overcome their selfish instincts in favor of what they perceive to be their duty, but rather to replace these instincts, or perhaps expand their conception of their selves so as to embrace and identify with a larger social community. Thus, we can avoid the need to think in terms of duty altogether.

This objection contains considerable truth. In particular, it is true that by focusing on questions of obligation and duty, of permissibility and prohibition, we focus on the persons or on the situations in which a person's interests are *in tension* with the interests of society at large. To ask what one may do, and what one has to do, is to express a reluctance to help or to respect the wills of others. When the voice of morality comes down in answer to these questions, it is like the voice of an umpire settling a controversy between opponents.

To be sure, we do not for the most part want people to think about their neighbors, much less their children, in these terms. But is it the job, or the place of morality to see to it that they do not?

There are so many reasons to love your children and even to help out your neighbors. Some reasons are grounded in natural sympathy; others are grounded in self-interest. And in the case of *my* children, there is their objective—albeit nonmoral—superiority to all other living creatures. There is no need for morality to tell you to love your children and have friends. Moreover, it seems inappropriate for morality to condemn those who, whether for psychological or geographical reasons, are unable to have friends or children to love.

At the same time, we must acknowledge the existence of people who have no love, or even sympathy, for others, and the existence of the much larger group who love some others but who care not a jot for the rest. Further, we must acknowledge that all of us are sometimes faced with conflicts between our own interests and the interests of strangers, between the interests of loved ones and the interests of strangers, even between our own interests and the interests of those we deeply love. We need some way of dealing with these people and these conflicts, some way of thinking about them that will set a minimum standard of tolerable behavior. It is a tough job, but somebody has to do it. Specifically, morality has to do it. And for this job, an impartialist conception of morality works best.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. Even so, this perspective has problems of its own. For acknowledging that my daughter is no more deserving than anyone else leaves open the question of whether anyone is deserving of anything at all.
2. Among contemporary moral theories, the one defended in Bernard Gert's *Morality. A Defense of the Moral Rules* is especially good in appreciating this.



3. In thinking about these issues and in correcting some of the errors of previous drafts, I have greatly benefitted from discussions with Evelyn Barker, Lawrence Blum, Don Garrett, Shelly Kagan, and audiences at Connecticut College, Northwestern University, Temple University, and the University of Utah