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Part I Partiality, Spirituality and Character

1

The Insignificance of the Self: Partiality and Spirituality

Samantha Vice

The context of this paper is the relation between an impartial conception of morality and the domain of partial concerns, relationships and projects around which so much of a worthwhile life is built. It seems obvious to many that morality must in some way accommodate the special force of our partial concerns, that it cannot simply demand that we treat them as we would those of any other person, or lay them aside when moral principles require it. That it seems obvious has not prevented modern ethics from forgetting it, and we have the work of John Cottingham to thank for bringing its deep importance back to our attention. Here I am reminded of Iris Murdoch's remark that one of the movements of philosophy is back 'towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts',¹ and Cottingham's work is just such a return.

The return to the obvious is difficult given the impartiality of the modern moral tradition. As Adrian Piper writes, consequentialists and deontologists alike 'do not permit you to accord any special privilege to your personal requirements, merely in virtue of the fact that you are the agent whose behaviour you are evaluating'.² So morality apparently requires us to treat the interests of everyone concerned as having equal value, and not to favour anyone because he or she stands in a certain relationship to you – of friend, child, partner, member of your group, or yourself. The moral point of view is the point of view of a benevolent, disinterested, impartial spectator, and so we must strive to rid ourselves of the biases, ignorance and favouritism that lead to unfairness and injustice.

As attractive as this view is on the face of it – and any conception of morality must in some way incorporate these insights – it seems to ignore most of what we think makes our lives worthwhile: the commitment to and pursuit of projects that matter *to me*, as well as relationships of love, friendship and parenting. These are special *to me*, even if from

the point of view of Hare's Archangel or Firth's Ideal Observer, they are no more special than any one else's concerns.³ This varied realm of what I shall be calling 'partial concern' is both self-directed and other-directed; I can be as intensely attached to someone else's interests, for her own sake, as I am to mine. The domain of the partial is therefore large: it includes concern for my own self-interest, goals and projects – and these can be directed towards myself or others – and concern for the well-being of those I care about, *for their own sake*. What all these concerns have in common is, as Cottingham writes, that the description and reason for my favouring in all cases includes 'a non-eliminably particular, self-referential element'⁴ – that child is *my daughter*; it is *my* life-work or moral purity at stake. In currently fashionable parlance, the reasons or principles governing this realm are *agent-relative*: a full specification of an agent's favouritism must include a reference to that agent. Partiality is thus special concern for one's own projects, or the interests of people who have a certain relation to you – of parent, friend, self. As a contrast, think of the utilitarian principle of benevolence, which is *agent-neutral*: any agent – it doesn't matter who – has a reason to help others in need when she can, regardless of their relation to her.

This paper will not address the questions of whether morality is essentially or fundamentally impartial, or just how the apparently reasonable demands of some partial concerns should be incorporated; it will, however, assume that at least some moral demands are impartial. Instead, against the background of this debate, my aim is to explore the phenomenon of spirituality, which is plausibly thought of as a paradigmatic instance of the partial. Such an exploration brings together the two themes that have come to dominate John Cottingham's recent work: the relation between morality and partiality, and the spiritual dimension, to use the title of his latest monograph. I will argue for two main claims, one rather restricted, one more general: firstly, that despite appearances, certain conceptions of spirituality are not partial at all; and secondly, that the distinction between the partial and the impartial is ultimately unhelpful in understanding spirituality generally. If true, these rather specialised claims are important, I shall argue further, not only because they shed light on the relation between the self and the spiritual quest, but also because they encourage us to rethink a standard criticism of utilitarianism.

1. Spirituality

What, to begin with, is spirituality? I use the term 'spirituality' in a broad sense that incorporates both a religious and non-religious concern with

activities of self-reflection, contemplation and self-purification, and with moral progression governed by objective value. Spiritual aspirants generally also manifest suspicion towards the mundane world of commercial and social aspiration, and seek a deeper and more meaningful relation with some value beyond that world. Cottingham writes that the spiritual dimension covers 'forms of life that put a premium on certain kinds of intensely focused moral and aesthetic response, or on the search for deeper reflective awareness of the meaning of our lives and of our relationship to others and to the natural world'.⁵ In general, he continues, the label 'spiritual' refers to 'activities which aim to fill the creative and meditative space left over when science and technology have satisfied our material needs'.⁶ Using religious terms for a moment, it seeks both 'inner transformation' as well as 'outward saintliness'.⁷ The spiritual tradition characteristically takes self-directed, 'inward' attention to be at least instrumental in securing outward transformation and in reaching an end that is valuable independently of the agent. Spirituality is an ongoing project, and whatever its end, it requires some work that just is irreducibly self-directed. The end might be pure altruism or submergence of the will in God, self-forgetfulness or even self-annihilation, but at least instrumental self-concern or 'care' of the self is a prerequisite.⁸

In this sense, not just any forms of life that 'put a premium on' reflection and self-transformation will count as spiritual. It is true that sometimes the term can connote a concern with pure *authenticity*, with fashioning a unique way of being, whether or not that way is moral or even reasonable, a kind of aesthetic self-concern explored by Michel Foucault and Alexander Nehamas (after Nietzsche).⁹ As I will use it (following Cottingham), however, spirituality is concerned, firstly, with reaching what is (taken to be) really valuable and, secondly, with doing what is right and becoming a person of moral virtue. I will therefore assume that obviously immoral ends are already ruled out of the spiritual quest.¹⁰ So it is in this morally sensitive as well as value-sensitive sense, rather than in the ethically neutral 'aesthetic' sense, that I will usually use the term.¹¹

Now, in the context of the debate on partiality in ethics, what status does spirituality have? For those who undertake the activities of inner exploration and self-transformation, it is obviously an intensely important project that structures one's future and upon which one's assessment of the past depends. It is, furthermore, important as *my* attempted transformation, the work on *my* self; in fact, the redemption of my soul or the final verdict on my life depends on the success of this project. It is a project that only I can undertake and which matters precisely

because it is mine, so on the face of it, it is a paradigmatic instance of partial concern.

In a recent paper, Cottingham insists that ethical transformation is a 'legitimate moral undertaking' that 'by its very nature requires me to adopt a perspective that ... accords my own life a special importance, or centrality'.¹² This perspective he calls 'auto-tamieutic' (self-stewardship): the perspective

... from which I acknowledge the special and unique responsibility I have for understanding and properly developing my moral character, and the unique set of abilities that have been given to me. I am in an important sense steward of my own personal resources. This means, in the first place, that I am responsible for developing my own moral character and talents in a way I cannot be for anyone else's. ... In the second place ... the idea of self-stewardship means that I cannot and should not view the allocation of my time and energies in this respect as something that could be determined entirely from an impartial perspective. ... For my duty of self-discovery and self-perfectioning carries with it, as it were, an *automatically implied pre-assignment of time and energies*: the goods in question are ones that are achievable only by me, and by my investments of time and energy.¹³

From the auto-tamieutic perspective, in sum, 'each of us can discern a set of personal goals that are ethically immune to wholesale dissolution in the name of some externally defined goal'.¹⁴

Now, there are many questions we could ask: For example, is spirituality in any sense special in this regard, or is it just one of many partial concerns which imply such assumptions? Is it ever appropriate to lay aside the spiritual project for the sake of the demands of impartial morality? Although I shall return briefly to this second question, my focus is prior to such issues: Is it correct to think of spirituality *per se* as essentially partial at all?

2. Normative theories and the Good

Cottingham is correct, I think, that one must consider spirituality to carry a presumptive weight in one's relation to the same world one is hoping eventually to inhabit more deeply and afresh. The responsibility one has to oneself in this regard is distinctive and carries a weighting that is, in Samuel Scheffler's words, out of proportion to the 'weight of those concerns in an impersonal ranking of overall states of affairs'¹⁵

(in this it is like any partial concern which, from the ‘point of view of the universe’, is no more important than any other). But I think that there is a plausible conception of spirituality in which, ultimately, the notion of partiality is unimportant or drops out of the picture altogether. This is worth exploring, because while this may not be the case for any conception, spiritual self-concern seemed to be a central case of partiality. Furthermore, while spirituality is not much explored in the debate about partiality and morality, still, most of us think that if any personal project carries presumptive weight in the face of moral demands, it is the spiritual quest – especially in religious forms. This intuition then gives support to the claim that morality *can* legitimately be laid aside if at least some partial concerns require it.

We can start by recalling the assumption of objective value in the notion of spirituality that we began with. Spirituality is a project aimed at realising or approximating what is taken to be objectively valuable. That, at least, is a crucial dimension of the *phenomenology* of spirituality. The aspirant seeks to reorient his life around something of value, which precisely because it is independent of his life, has a force that can be motivating, justifying and meaning bestowing. There are different candidates for this value, ranging through some notion of an impersonal Good or self-transcendence, to religious conceptions of a benevolent and all-powerful God. I will use the term ‘the Good’ to refer, neutrally, to all these potentially spiritual ends.

Furthermore – and this important for my strategy in this paper – it is not entirely inappropriate to include in this context familiar values from normative theories: the welfare of the dedicated utilitarian, the rational humanity of the Kantian, or Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. We are used to the idea that Aristotelian virtue will require work on character, but becoming a dedicated and successful utilitarian or Kantian will also, I think, require the kind of ongoing work on the self and dedication to an end that is characteristic of spirituality. If spirituality can sensibly be thought to exist without belief in God, then it should be able to incorporate sincere attempts at fashioning a self into the ideal utilitarian, Kantian or *Phronimos*.¹⁶ Although applying the label to them might sound a bit strained, I hope to reach my claims about more core instances of spirituality through a familiar exploration of normative theories. Those who are unhappy with the label ‘spiritual’ in that domain can take my discussion as an analogy of what goes on in spirituality proper.

I want to put aside virtue ethics and focus on the Kantian and utilitarian – later I will narrow down further to utilitarianism. I am

assuming versions of both these normative theories that are realistic and subtle enough to consider self-directed work appropriate and, indeed, required. It is very difficult to imagine a utilitarian or Kantian becoming morally successful in her own terms without some pretty radical self-transformation.¹⁷ So consider a utilitarian or Kantian whose most fundamental commitment is to become the ideal moral agent and whose life is guided and structured by this commitment. Even if one is an 'indirect' utilitarian, or a Kantian who considers the Categorical Imperative a higher-order or 'limiting' condition on action rather than a first-order motivation for it,¹⁸ the self-directed activity must be structured around the commitment to moral perfection in the requisite sense. If the successful moral agent is one whose character steadily and reliably issues in right action, then the aspirant to right action has an incentive to take the spiritual path to personal change.

Now, it has been argued persuasively that because impartial morality¹⁹ can be integrated into subjects' motivational and value structure, its demands needn't be felt as 'destructively intrusive'.²⁰ Morality can matter personally and be felt as part of people's identity, contrary to what its critics often assume. This is quite correct but still, the commitment to spiritual progression is ultimately for the sake of a conception of moral perfection given by the theory. And both these theories are impartial, permitting and justifying from the impartial perspective the partiality inherent in spirituality. The spiritual project is valuable *insofar as it leads one to moral value*, and it is justified by that moral value. Here we have an instance of a familiar move in the impartiality debate: the justification of a partial commitment from an impartial perspective.²¹ One needn't, however, think that spirituality is *only* instrumentally valuable in these conceptions; the kinds of activities required to become morally good might in themselves constitute what it is to be good. The sensitivity required to notice who is in need and to know how best to meet it; the knowledge of when one's proposed actions need testing via the Categorical Imperative procedure – these skills are both causally required to become moral and a constitutive feature of the moral agent herself. So we can note two things: firstly, that the spiritual process is justified by an impartial theory; and secondly, that spiritual activities and growth are instrumentally valuable for, as well as constitutive of, what it is to be a successful moral agent. Neither should sound surprising.

We can now ask further: What is the role of the agent in this pursuit and what relation does she have to the process and its end? Here, it seems that the theories can in principle part company. The Kantian's spiritual

concern is to become a person of good will, who is characterised by a fundamental commitment to doing what duty requires. While having the advantage of allowing agent-centred principles, the Kantian picture has, however, also been criticised for displaying an obsessive concern with one's own purity – what matters is that *my* will be good, though disaster be all around. I'm not now going to investigate whether this is correct (though I happen to think the criticism misplaced);²² what is relevant is that it is at least a possibility. Because of the complexity of Kantianism on this point, however, I will from now on focus on utilitarianism, where my concerns are better brought out.²³

Whether appropriate to the Kantian or not, the utilitarian certainly cannot be criticised for moral self-indulgence: her concern just is to be the kind of person who will promote good states of affairs, and this – notoriously – need have nothing to do with the agent's own well-being, purity or lingering (non-utilitarian) scruples. The notion of the autotamieutic perspective reminds us that spirituality, so to speak, begins at home – that one must set one's own house in order before rearranging the world's furniture – but that it must remain there is a thought that hard-nosed utilitarians will find morally repugnant. The perfected utilitarian has left behind any concern for *her* self besides that of becoming the kind of self that would be the perfect utilitarian. Attention to the particular self may be a necessary starting point, but it is not the end and may have to be transcended if one is to realise the utilitarian goal. It really cannot matter that it be *I* who brings about the best state of affairs or that it be *my* soul that stays unsullied. This is just the kind of self-centredness, say these utilitarians, that prevents deontologists from being prepared to perform one bad action to prevent more bad actions of the same kind – and this is a stance that deontologists have found notoriously difficult to defend. Agent-centred restrictions, in Scheffler's terms, can, from the lofty purity of consequentialism, appear to be mere self-indulgence or squeamishness.²⁴ From the other point of view, of course, this purity is usually criticised because it seems to view people as 'mere conduits' of value, whose particularity and relations have no fundamental moral significance.

I have used this excursion into familiar terrain primarily in order to get to a notion of spirituality that might be considered rather too alien to merit discussion. If we understand and feel the force of utilitarian self-effacement, that should help us to understand the notion that I shall now explore. At the end of this paper, however, I shall return to the debate over utilitarianism.

3. Impersonal spirituality

So let us put aside normative theories of the right for the moment, and think about spirituality in a more ordinary sense, as the intensely personal quest for the Good. The suggestion that I want to explore is that one version of this project shares utilitarianism's disregard for the self. This element, commonly used against utilitarianism, is in fact integral to certain reasonable conceptions that belong firmly in the spiritual tradition. It follows from this, I shall argue, that the description of spiritual success in these conceptions will not contain the essential reference to the agent that marks the partial realm.

At this point it is worth remembering what the person undertaking the spiritual journey (any spiritual journey now) is in danger of: a sterile, idle 'fingering of the self', in Montaigne's nice phrase, or the morbid fascination with one's own faults that Iris Murdoch diagnosed so perspicuously.²⁵ This danger reminds us that the 'inward turn' to care of the self that exemplifies spirituality is in the service of an ultimate outward turn, to a value independent of oneself – whether God or morality or the Good.²⁶ It is this aspect of spirituality that prevents it from becoming immured in the fantasies and intrigues of the self. Murdoch, for instance, writes that the 'argument for looking outward at Christ and not inward at Reason is that self is such a dazzling object that if one looks *there* one may see nothing else'.²⁷ And she speaks in detail of 'techniques for purification and reorientation of an energy that is naturally selfish',²⁸ techniques which require a 'just and loving' *attention*²⁹ towards a reality outside of one. We can be helped in the moral quest 'by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps the idea of goodness itself'.³⁰

Now this, I submit, is a perfectly conceivable task, and one that fits most accounts of spirituality. The person who has achieved spiritual success *is* one who knows a reality beyond herself, whose concern and attention is directed outward and who considers the self on which her attention was originally bestowed to be no more important than any other. However, the picture I am interested in takes this familiar thought further: the self is now consumed entirely by the outward attention towards the Good. There is a purity, a transparency from motive to end, and an impersonality that is familiar already from utilitarianism, and that we find elsewhere too – in Plato and the Stoics, and, more to the point here, some Christian conceptions of goodness. Simone Weil, for instance, writes:

Joy within God. Perfect and infinite joy really exists within God. My participation can add nothing to it, my non-participation can take

nothing from the reality of this perfect and infinite joy. Of what importance is it then whether I am to share in it or not? Of no importance whatever.³¹

On this conception, the self seems to have evolved out of the picture.

Writing in a different context, Antony Duff gives us a portrait of the spiritually flourishing person we are interested in. The attention of this person 'is focused not on himself and his benefit but on the Good. Nor does this Good consist in his own virtue, for that is egocentricity'.³² Fundamentally, 'what is important is the Good, not his own moral perfection; *he* matters, if at all, only as an agent of the Good'.³³ Caring that *I* have achieved the good is an instance of 'egocentric service of the Good', a phrase he takes from Kiekegaard. Here is the passage from which Duff cites:

Suppose a man wills the Good simply in order that *he* may score the victory, then he wills the good for the sake of reward, and his double-mindedness is obvious. ... Actually he does not care to serve the Good, but to have the advantage of regarding it as a fruit of conquest. When, on the contrary, a man desires that the Good shall be victorious, when he will not call the outcome of the battle 'victory', if *he* wins, but only when the Good is victorious: can he then, in any sense, be called and be double-minded?³⁴

In more technical terms, the agent-centred demands of spiritual progression seem to have changed into the agent-neutral demand that anyone do what is required by the Good, and do it simply because it is required by the Good. This is not just from the point of view of the agent, nor is it a claim only about the phenomenology of self-forgetfulness. Rather, it is that a complete description and reason for this person's spiritual pursuit does not include a reference to her being the one to undertake the project and achieve the end – from any point of view. We have come, again, to a familiar idea: that of being a *conduit* or vehicle for value. The spiritual aspirant offers himself to the Good as a tool or a vehicle through whom it may be manifested or may fulfil its purpose. Standardly used to criticise utilitarianism, here we see it in the guise of spirituality where it seems to be more comfortable, and, in fact, entirely appropriate.

Two things are important for my point: firstly, the spiritual undertaking is (if things go well) one of continuous *progression*; one moves from a less perfect spiritual state to a more perfect state and it makes sense to talk of one's desiring to reach perfection. However, fallible human

beings – even saints – only reach a state of perfection relative to their character, abilities and intelligence. Only the Good is perfect absolutely.³⁵ Borrowing a phrase from Martha Nussbaum, there is an ‘ascent to the Good’,³⁶ as one grows emotionally and volitionally, and acquires a deeper understanding of the final end. In this conception of ascent to perfection, the concern with one’s own self is certainly the starting point and a necessary concern if one is to progress. However, one’s attention does not remain on the self because what is of final and absolute value is the Good, not *one’s own attainment of the Good*. As one ascends, partiality towards the self and its own self-referring projects must be left behind, as are all of one’s earthly attachments. So it is important that this view of spirituality *begins* with partiality – otherwise in my claim that partiality disappears, I would simply be changing the subject.

Secondly, it is not just that an impartial Good allows or requires partial concern for one’s spiritual state and justifies one embarking on the spiritual path. This would, again, be the familiar defusing strategy of incorporating partiality from the perspective of a higher-order impartial theory. Rather, the claim is that in both the full description and the justification of the spiritual project, the irreducibly personal, agent-centred element slips out of the picture. Admittedly, this is difficult to imagine if the thought that the agent remains the instrument and logical subject of change takes up all the space. However, something can happen *through* one, without the success being in any ethically significant way related to the self at all: ‘There is music’, says the conductor; not, ‘There is music *through my agency*’. The music, the art, is the end, and it is enough. One’s causal relation to its existence or success is not ethically relevant or relevant to how one feels upon achieving it or reflecting later upon it. It is not essential to a complete explanation; in fact it might make the explanation false if it were included. What is important and desired is that ‘God was made manifest’, not that ‘God appeared *to me*’. This partly explains the uncomfortable, alien purity of certain paradigmatically spiritual figures: Socrates’ utter disinterest in the mundane world and his own death, the self-forgetfulness of saints, Gandhi’s singleness of purpose. Their vision is transparent: what they see directly, unclouded by the self, just is the Good.

None of this means that one cannot have self-directed thoughts during moments of insight or reflection into one’s spiritual status – for example, feeling grateful that one has been chosen or knowing that one has, through grace, been granted a privileged experience.

The *phenomenology* of spirituality need not, and probably couldn't without madness, retain at every moment the fierce purity that characterises moments of contemplative insight, union with God or self-transcendence. What it does mean, again, is that at the level of justification and description, this kind of spiritual success makes no essential reference to the particular self. One's end is to live in a deeper, more clairvoyant relation to the Good; what structures, provides the impetus and justifies the attention one turns on one's own development is just this end. Of course self-concern is important in the sense that it is through one's own agency and progressing consciousness that the goal is achieved; it is important that one become the kind of person who has the desired relation to the value – because there is no other person one could be. So self-concern will be essential as a starting point to the journey. But what really matters is that the Good be realised in the world, and this is the thought that generated the project to begin with and justified the inward turn. Saying 'what is to be achieved' or 'when one is successful' brings in a subject *logically*, as does any talk of experiencing anything: there is one who is successful or one who has achieved or experienced the desired end. But this self-referentiality is not how spiritual aspirants experience it, nor how they have to explain the project.

The phenomenology might be analogous – in a shadowy, inadequate way – to the more familiar experience of 'flow': experiences in which 'you lose yourself in an activity or a line of thought', where there is no sense of self at all.³⁷ Joel Kupperman, who discusses the centrality of such experiences to subjective well-being, writes that 'one reason why it is claimed that many saints and mystics experience joy' is, paradoxically, the felt *loss of self* in such experiences.³⁸ This reminds us, once again, that this is not an impossible experience, even though it might sound alien to us.³⁹

What of the auto-tamieutic perspective, which appeared so intuitively attractive? It seemed correct to say that we have a unique responsibility for cultivating our own talents and refining our own moral sensibility. From this point of view, we are stewards of ourselves and must assign resources to the project of self-development. There is no one else who could do it, and no one else we could be. In fact, the core sense of 'stewardship' reminds us, as does Cottingham himself, that our talents and moral journey are not entirely autonomous, created *ex nihilo* from an untrammelled will. Whether given to us by nature, upbringing or God, we find ourselves with abilities for which we then become responsible.

However, what I will call 'impersonal spirituality' is consistent with this notion of stewardship. Part of my strategy in this paper was to take

as the natural starting point of spirituality a partial concern for one's own development. As a spiritual apprentice, it *does* matter that one's own talents and character be worked on and perfected, and one is justified in concentrating on this task. But stewardship can also allow that one makes oneself a suitable vessel for the Good to work through, and this might require extensive personal work before one is morally and epistemically prepared. What one is preparing for then, however, is that '*the Good be realised*', rather than that '*I experience the Good*'.

I am not arguing that this is the only view of the spiritual end. Earlier, I put aside aesthetic models of spirituality, which would probably not be impersonal. Someone purely interested in ridding herself of psychic tangles and personal unhappiness, someone interested fundamentally in forging a distinctive self-creation, might not experience this transparency, nor, accurately, describe the project in those terms. And as I discuss in the final section, besides these aesthetic or psychological conceptions, spirituality in the Aristotelian tradition and in some Christian traditions might also formally lack transparency (though I shall also suggest that insisting upon the terms 'partial' and 'impartial' is still apt to mislead). What I am describing is a particular kind of spirituality, one that is firmly embedded in the spiritual tradition and that puts pressure on the label 'partial'. However overwhelming the work on the self required, however deep the acknowledgement that this self requires radical transformation, this self-concern is, on the impersonal conception of spirituality, merely a starting point and a camouflage for the real enterprise.

What, now, is the relation between the demands of spirituality and impartial moral demands (assuming, reasonably, that there are some)? This, after all, is one of the questions Cottingham addresses in his discussion of the *partial* credentials of spirituality. Well, it depends on the content of one's spiritual end. If forms of utilitarianism or Kantianism, for instance, can be understood as spiritual, then the perfected agent will be the ideal utilitarian or Kantian. There can be no tension because the values of the theory and the aims of the spiritual quest are the same. For the substantial goals of impersonal spirituality, on the other hand, there may be a difference between the spiritual end and the moral end, although, if I am on track, it will not be felt as a tension between the partial and impartial. At certain heightened levels of achievement, when it is no longer important that it be oneself who is in those airy regions, one might be aware of a tension between conventional impartial morality and one's own vision and certainties. But this will be between different *impartial* commands on one, not between an impartial moral

command and a partial value. In this kind of conflict, it is very difficult to see how this person, who has reached what she takes to be the ultimate truth and reality, *could* give up the spiritual end for the moral value. She will feel it as not just unreasonable, but in all respects the worst thing that could be done. And given that her judgement comes after long and intense work and self-abnegation, it would be very difficult for morality to insist upon it, especially as so often much of this quest is thought of in moral terms. We have here a clash between different conceptions of ultimate value, both impartial. But in fact, given the previous discussion, it is just not that helpful to keep the distinction between the partial and impartial here. Humility seems a fitting response when one has grasped ultimate reality in the Good. Whether or not it is *I* who has grasped this impartial good is just not important in describing the experience, even though *I* would, of course, be radically changed by it.

What we see here is that intensely personal and self-directed projects need not remain partial, despite their starting point having this character. While the auto-tamieutic perspective rightly insists on one's own responsibility for one's projects, success in those projects need not be related, either ethically or descriptively, to the particular self. What is important is the nature and functioning of the values towards which one strives. These can demand from one a project to change one's life; they can structure the verdict on one's own life and demand that one spend energy and time on it. Yet, they might not be ultimately a matter of one's own life at all. Their influence on us may display all the markers of partiality without the principles or reasons they give us being partial.

I want now, in the final section, to suggest how partiality might remain within the spiritual project, and to indicate why this exploration of spirituality is important – in part by taking another look at the criticism that utilitarianism makes us mere conduits for the good.

4. Conclusion: partial spirituality and the case against utilitarianism

There are at least two ways that spirituality could remain partial.⁴⁰ Firstly, if, with utilitarianism and Kantianism, we can think of *Aristotelian* self-progression as spiritual, then we'll have a good example of a spiritual self-concern that remains partial 'all the way down'. As Cottingham argued in a series of influential papers,⁴¹ Aristotelianism gives a secure place for partial preferences because it does not take morality itself to be

essentially impartial, and because it begins with the thought that a plausible ethics must give each person prudential reason to strive for virtue. A quest to become fully virtuous might then remain partial all the way to the end (though, of course, whether one is successful or not is partly out of one's control).

The criticism that virtue ethics is problematically egoistic is probably misplaced, and its defenders have argued that it can secure justice or fairness or benevolence quite adequately.⁴² However, Kant's central insight, that morality has *categorical force*, does not seem to be captured in virtue ethics. Philosophers attracted to the idea of the categorical are not going to be content and will think that virtue ethics gives the wrong kind of grounding to morality. They might also be more attracted to the kind of impersonal spirituality I have explored here, though of course, they needn't be. The thought is that if something entirely divorced from one's own interests is recognised and pursued as the final Good, one's own place in the project might strike one as being less important than in conceptions in which self-interest is fundamental.

Secondly, religious conceptions of a loving God might guarantee partiality as well (though they also needn't, if they can support impersonal spirituality, as earlier argued). The partiality could be grounded in God's love for each of His creatures, for each unique particularity. It matters to Him that each of us becomes as perfect as she can, given her limitations. As each person matters to God, so we should matter to ourselves; we must care for our spiritual state because that is God's will, given His love for us. Without this love, why each of us should ultimately matter to ourselves in the face of the immeasurably greater Good is more difficult to grasp. So here it is the *impartial* love of God that justifies the continuing self-concern of the spiritual quest. Relatedly, the spiritual quest might be conceived as the realising and perfecting *in and through a particular life* of God's plan for each person.⁴³ This might require the cultivation of properly partial projects and loves. Once again, the impartial love of God is the ground of such a plan, and it is therefore only a form of virtue ethics that can justify partial concern in its own (partial) terms.

Certainly, then, we can find a sense in which Aristotelian and Christian conceptions of spirituality may retain partiality formally, though they may differ in the ultimate justification for this partiality. Having said all this, however, for conceptions of value-dependent spirituality other than virtue ethics, the distinction between partiality and impartiality still seems unhelpful and ultimately unimportant. Why is this? Spiritual aspirants value something that is not made valuable

merely by (their own) fiat, which is independent of what they might think (and of course, this is also true for Aristotelians). This seems to be born out by a characteristic common to all spiritualities not in the 'aesthetic' mode – their self-forgetfulness, humility and outward attention. These traits can naturally develop into a purity of mind in which, really, the person doesn't matter much to herself, even though her project is to redeem her own soul or perfect her life. To the question, 'Do you want to be good for your own sake?' the answer could very well be 'yes', but equally, it could be that this isn't the point, that the point is to do as God wills, or simply to be good. And this seems reasonable. It is not clear how we could reject these as the real reasons and insist that the explanations must contain some hidden reference to the self, even if the phenomenology is otherwise and the person sincere in her reports. So at the limit of success, non-prudentially based spirituality is pushed naturally – and in a way that seems to be progress – away from the concern with the self that I have allowed to be formally retained.

Some personal accounts of spirituality, in which the boundaries between the self and the Good are very fluid and the sense of self-presence very complex, support the intuition that the distinction is unimportant. Thomas Merton for instance, writing of the self in contemplation, says: 'In such a world the true "I" remains both inarticulate and invisible, because it has altogether too much to say – not one word of which is about itself'.⁴⁴ Talk abounds of the necessary 'death' of the self, in order for a new self to emerge through Christ. But at the same time, 'It is now no longer I that live but Christ that lives in me'.⁴⁵ Contemplation 'is a deep resonance in the inmost centre of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One'.⁴⁶ So even a project which is premised on the knowledge of a loving God who cares for each person, and in which one's own salvation is one's responsibility, blurs the boundaries of the self and diminishes self-concern. As such, it is doubtful even on these conceptions whether spirituality is still usefully seen in terms of the partial concern for the self.

In fact, one can see how a stronger claim might seem attractive from this perspective: that spiritual quests seeking the attainment of an objective, non-prudential value (unlike Aristotelian virtue ethics) risk collapsing into an egoistic or aesthetic mode if they do not ultimately leave self-referentiality behind. Concern for fashioning the self, for being the one who is pure and perfect, too easily falls into an impure relation to what is ultimately important. It is once again here, in the realm of the spiritual, that familiar utilitarian complaints against

non-utilitarians become apposite. It is difficult to imagine any circumstance in which exclaiming, 'I did it!' or, 'Now I've got it!' when facing the Good or God would be appropriate or, more strongly, even be possible to experience. The horizon of one's experience would be wholly taken up with the terrible presence. We find this vision in the work of Simone Weil, who writes: 'Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy, for in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying "I"'.⁴⁷ This impersonality is a fundamental fact of one's relation to the ultimate value. Murdoch, deeply influenced by Weil, speaks of the need for *detachment*: we must learn that 'real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self'.⁴⁸ What is needed, on any conception of spirituality, is renunciation of the demands of the 'greedy self', and a natural progression of that, it might be thought, is a renunciation even of one's need to claim spiritual success as one's own. There is here, again, an echo of that purity of spiritual figures already mentioned, and André Comte-Sponville, influenced here by Weil, writes of this virtue: 'Nothing that can be owned is pure. Purity is poverty, dispossession, renunciation. It begins where the self ends, where the self does not venture, where it ceases to exit. Pure love is the opposite of self-love'.⁴⁹ It seems that a spirituality that remains personal cannot be pure, though it may have many other virtues.⁵⁰

Of course, concerns immediately arise about the effects of this kind of success on other things we value, especially within the partial realm. Does impersonal spiritual success, or the plausible movement to greater impersonality, not render relationships in the more mundane regions impossible? Does 'leaving the self behind' entail leaving friendship and love behind too? How could love for any particular limited person survive that kind of intense vision of ultimate value? Perhaps, then, the virtue of purity is attained at too great a price. If this is true, and the accounts of the personal lives of saints are hardly encouraging here, then we have a reason to reject such conceptions and to hinder the movement to greater impersonality that I suggested is internal to other modes of spirituality. Too much that is good would have to be sacrificed for this spirituality to be an aspiration for any but the truly, terrifyingly, saintly.

This is a deeply difficult area which cries out for the kind of subtle and complex moral psychology that Murdoch tried to deliver.⁵¹ Just what is it like to be someone whose self is extinguished in pursuit of the Good? What happens to the commitments of everyday loves and lives? While this is a deeply obscure region, a few things can be said. To begin with,

impersonality or self-forgetfulness does not, as far as I can see, entail that no other person can be cherished as special. *My* friends or children or husband can be special even though success at cherishing them will not refer to *me*. Partialists have always rightly insisted that partiality is not selfishness and that one's partial projects can concern the well-being of others for their own sake. This is equally true for impersonal spirituality. For all that has been said, the content given to the notion of the Good *could* be caring or intense engagement with the lives of certain, special people. The projects that matter intensely to one could be the welfare of particular others. The worry that impersonal spirituality is inimical to the goods of special relationships is only apposite if one thinks it *impossible* to care for particular people without a reference or attachment to the self that cares. But this does not seem obvious.

So it is by no means clear that impersonal spirituality must be barred from special relationships. That said, however, impersonal spirituality is probably restricted to certain substantive conceptions of the Good and is less comfortable with others, and to admire it is not to say that everyone should pursue it. Even if it is true that special relationships sit uncomfortably with impersonal spirituality, it is not clear that a person should be denigrated for not having such relationships, if she is in other respects admirable. *Agape* or universal love, for instance, which might be more easily associated with impersonal spirituality, is not obviously less valuable because only a few can achieve it.

Why does all this matter? There are at least two reasons that give this discussion a rather wider significance. The first returns us to the old criticism against utilitarianism – that the particular, unique identity of each person is made morally irrelevant because we are viewed essentially as mere 'vehicles of the Good'. If impersonal conceptions of spirituality are coherent and reasonable, then there is nothing in the idea itself of being a conduit for the Good that is distasteful. Critics of utilitarianism have tended implicitly towards this view, I think, but the criticism is probably better restated in a way that takes different contexts of being such a conduit into consideration. It is not, in the abstract, being a conduit for the Good that is morally problematic, but considerations like the following: first, how we ought to think of our own agency in relation to others. The utilitarian commands us to treat others as if they were mere conduits for one's own production of the Good – that is, that one ought to, *by one's own agency*, produce good through the medium of other welfare-desiring, welfare-producing creatures and see the moral significance of persons in these terms. Here one regards oneself in relation to others as a good-maximiser and sees

people as instrumentally rather than intrinsically valuable. A second consideration, closer to the debate about the space of partiality in morality, is raised by the psychological and ethical difficulties of seeing loved ones only as (i.e. in no other way than) conduits for the production of the good. These worries have to do with the autonomy and individuality of agents and the conditions for loving relationships. A third relevant fact is the content given to the utilitarian notion of the good and the maximisation condition that on most accounts, at any rate, is deemed essential to consequentialism. If the Good is the welfare that must be promoted through one's actions, then one is left with the rather unpleasant prospect of diligently producing, in an impartial way, a good that can only attach to particular people. And, furthermore, one is to do this with no clear idea of how other goods are to be incorporated and weighed in ways that recognise their own apparent intrinsic value.

However, if these problematic commitments are set aside, the very idea of the Good working through a person or being desired by a person in the impersonal way I have explored does not in itself seem repugnant, at least without further substantiation of the nature of the Good. All three of the considerations that may be taken as problematic are, for instance, silent about one's own personal orientation to the Good and so are neutral regarding the attractiveness of allowing oneself to be a conduit to the Good, or conceiving of that as one's ultimate ethical end. And if this is correct, then it is not the notion of an impartial relation to the Good and its impartial normative work that is the issue between utilitarians and their critics. It is, rather, the way in which a particular conception of the impartial Good is connected to how each one of us ought to treat and respond to *others*, and this connection can be cashed out in very different ways.

The second reason for finding the notion of an impersonal spirituality of wider importance is this: it seems to me that we have less of a grip on the terms 'impartial' and 'partial' than the debate supposes. In certain areas, the distinction is clear enough. We have a fairly reliable sense of when bias, self-interest or undue favouring mark a decision or a choice of principles in the public sphere. We know clearly that *our* children, friends and projects matter to *us*, without thereby insisting that they matter more from some impersonal or impartial perspective. However, in one of the most intensely felt and ethically important of projects, the distinction is unhelpful. Spirituality may begin as a partial project without clearly remaining one, and even if it retains partiality in its formal description, the development of humility and outward focus

makes it unhelpful to insist upon the term. The relation of the self to the Good is complex, and in the face of at least some conceptions of ultimate value, maintaining a distinct regard for the self and its success is deeply misguided. Responsibly orienting one's life around an impartial Good can take one beyond oneself to something that has nothing at all to do with the self. Here, the self which mattered enough at the start to care for, by the end, no longer matters much at all.⁵²

Notes

1. Murdoch, 1970, p. 1. The other 'movement' is 'towards the building of elaborate theories'.
2. Piper, 1987, p. 105.
3. See Firth, 1952 and Hare, 1981, Ch. 2; also see Taylor, 1980.
4. Cottingham, 1986, p. 359.
5. Cottingham, 2005, p. 3.
6. Cottingham, 2005, p. 3.
7. Cottingham, forthcoming, 2008, p. 2.
8. I take the phrase 'care of the self' from Michel Foucault, 1984. He uses it to characterise the kind of work on the self that was accorded so much importance in ancient Greek philosophy. For a different – and better – interpretation of this, see Hadot, 1995.
9. Foucault's interpretation of the ancient injunction to 'care for the self' as aesthetic, is, I think, mistaken. See his 1984 article, and also Nehamas, 2000.
10. Of course, those on the spiritual path may very well be wrong about their ethical commitments, seeing value where there isn't any. This paper says nothing about how to know whether their axiological commitments are correct or not.
11. Cottingham ties his conception of spirituality and ethical formation to value in this way. Furthermore, we both agree that only a realist account of value can do the job, but this paper does not need that stronger claim. It is enough if those on the spiritual quest consider the value they are pursuing to be independent of them (that is, experience it as independent).
12. Cottingham, forthcoming, 2008, pp. 3 and 4.
13. Cottingham, forthcoming, 2008, p. 6.
14. Cottingham, forthcoming, 2008, p. 12. This paper refers to 'ethical formation', rather than 'spirituality', but it is clear that the notions are substantially the same. In *The Spiritual Dimension*, 'spirituality' is used probably because the concern is explicitly religious and the term is usually associated with religion.
15. Scheffler, 1994, p. 9.
16. Recent work on character-centred utilitarianism makes this sound less odd than it would have previously done. For example, see Railton, 2003, and Crisp, 1992. And new work by Sherman, 1997; Herman, 1993; Baron, 1997; and O'Neill, 1998, have shown the resources within Kantian ethics for developing conceptions of character.

17. See the papers by Railton and Crisp in note no. 16. We might also think of Susan Wolf's conceptions of the Kantian and consequentialist moral saint, in her 1982 article.
18. See 'sophisticated consequentialism', in Railton, 2003; for this conception of the Categorical Imperative, see Baron, 1984.
19. In what follows, when I refer to morality, I mean impartial morality, unless otherwise indicated.
20. Conly, 1985, p. 285; and see Piper, 1987.
21. This strategy of incorporating partial concerns from a 'higher-order' impartial perspective is standard in work on deontology and consequentialism. See for example, Baron, 1991, and Railton, 2003.
22. Hill's interpretation of the Good Will avoids this problem, see Hill, 2002.
23. Two different criticisms of Kantianism pull in different directions: Williams's 'one thought too many' criticism (1981) encourages us to think of Kantian ethics as disturbingly impersonal, ignoring what matters to oneself. On the other hand, the charge that the Kantian concern with the good will is a self-indulgent obsession with one's own purity pulls in an opposite direction, of being too concerned with what matters to the self.
24. In Bernard Williams's words – see Williams, 1973 and 1976. On agent-centred restrictions, see Scheffler, 1994.
25. Montaigne, 'On Practice', in 1580, II. 6, p. 426. Murdoch, 1970, for example, p. 68.
26. For an historical account of the 'inward turn', see Taylor, 1989, esp. Ch. 7.
27. Murdoch, 1970, p. 31.
28. Murdoch, 1970, p. 54.
29. Murdoch, 1970, p. 34.
30. Murdoch, 1970, p. 56.
31. Weil, 1947, p. 37.
32. Duff, 1976, p. 301. Duff argues that only on this conception of virtue can the good person conceivably be invulnerable to harm.
33. Duff, 1976, p. 303.
34. Kierkegaard, 1847, p. 87.
35. Thanks to Francis Williamson for clarifying this for me.
36. Nussbaum, 1994.
37. Joel Kupperman, 2006, p. 5.
38. Joel Kupperman, 2006, p. 5.
39. That it is very difficult to imagine is no obstacle to its being possibly true or valuable. As I have argued elsewhere, union with God or an intense relation to the Good *would* be utterly alien, difficult to render attractive and plausible. See Vice, 2005.
40. I am not qualified to speak of Eastern conceptions of philosophy, some of which seem to require a literal death of the self. Whether this is because the self is not important, or hinders attainment of what is important, or is really an illusion, would need to be clarified. Note that in this paper I have avoided ontological commitments about the nature of the self and what happens to it when it is 'left behind'. Whether or not the self really perishes or was only an illusion to begin with, were matters left aside.
41. For example, Cottingham, 1986, 1991 and 1998.
42. See, for example, Annas, 1993, Sect. 3.

43. Thanks to John Cottingham for reminding me of this.
44. Merton, 1972, p. 6.
45. Merton, 1972, p. 4.
46. Merton, 1972, p. 3.
47. Weil, 2002, p. 31.
48. 'On "God" and "Good"', in Murdoch, 1970, p. 65.
49. Compte-Sponville, 2001, p. 179.
50. This is not a conceptual claim about purity; if so, the claim would be trivially true. It is a substantial claim about the quality of one's attention and awareness in the light of pursuit of the Good.
51. And that Lawrence Blum (1988) calls for.
52. My thanks to Nafsika Athanassoulis, Pedro Tabensky and Francis Williamson for helpful comments.

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