

Ethics and the First Person Perspective

Matthew Boyle, University of Chicago

1. Introduction

It is sometimes claimed that each of us has a special “first person perspective” on his or her own life as a conscious being, and that understanding this perspective is crucial to understanding what a mind is. According to Sydney Shoemaker, for instance,

it is essential to a philosophical understanding of the mental that we appreciate that there is a first person perspective on it, a distinctive way mental states present themselves to the subjects whose states they are.

(Shoemaker 1996: 157)

It is also sometimes claimed that each of us confronts questions about what is valuable and what ought to be done from a distinctively “internal” or “agent-centered” standpoint, and that understanding this standpoint is crucial to understanding various salient features of our moral lives, such as our entitlement to give special weight to our own well-being and our obligation not to do certain kinds of things no matter how beneficial the consequences might be. Thus Thomas Nagel has suggested that

the key to understanding any of these moral intuitions is the distinction between the internal viewpoint of the agent or victim and the external, objective viewpoint... Reasons for action look different from the first two points of view than from the third. (Nagel 1986: 185)

Just as a third-personal, functionalist characterization of mental states is said to leave out a crucial, interior aspect of mentality, so a perspective-neutral, consequentialist valuation of states of affairs is said to leave out a crucial, agent-centered aspect of morality. In each case, it is claimed, the external perspective fails to acknowledge an irreducibly subjective dimension of the topic, a dimension we are familiar with primarily

from the first person case, in which we ourselves have a conscious experience or face a moral decision.

Both of these claims are controversial, of course, and there are philosophers who would deny each of them outright, but my aim here will be simply to explore some parallels between them. What resemblances are there between the roles played by the idea of a perspective or point of view in the two claims? How should we understand the notion of a distinctively subjective standpoint that is invoked in them? I want to suggest that the analogies between these claims are not just superficial, but point to the importance, in both cases, of a certain representational structure that sets so-called “first person” awareness apart from external or “third person” awareness. I will refer to this distinctive structure of representation as “representation as subject”. My project will be to bring out the distinctiveness of this structure (§§2-3), and to show its usefulness for clarifying some well-known claims about the importance of the agent’s standpoint in ethics (§§4-6). I will conclude with some brief remarks on how we might adjudicate the different claims of agential and objective standpoints in cases where they appear to be in tension with one another (§7).

2. Imagining as subject

To introduce the topic of representing as subject, it will help to consider a contrast between two kinds of imagining drawn by Zeno Vendler in his essay “Vicarious Experience”:

We are looking down upon the ocean from a cliff. The water is rough and cold, yet there are some swimmers riding the waves. ‘Just imagine swimming in that water’ says my friend, and I know what to do. ‘Brr!’ I say as I imagine the cold, the salty taste, the tug of the current, and so forth. Had he said ‘Just imagine yourself swimming in that water’, I could comply

in another way too: by picturing myself being tossed about, a scrawny body bobbing up and down in the foamy waste. (Vendler 1979: 161)

As further instances of the intended contrast, Vendler mentions the difference between (a) imagining eating a lemon (sour taste) and imagining yourself eating a lemon (pinched face) and (b) imagining being on the rack (agony) and imagining yourself being on the rack (distorted limbs). He refers to the contrast exemplified in these cases as the distinction between “subjective” and “objective” acts of imagination.

In subjective acts of imagination, we might say, a person imagines a given scenario “from the inside” or “from the first person perspective”. Or again, we might say – using the terminology I will employ in this essay – that she imagines the situation “as subject”. But these are clearly just sophisticated ways of marking a kind of imagining our basic understanding of which derives from our familiarity with the contrast between imagining such things as

(1a) being F

(1b) doing A

(1c) undergoing P

and imagining such things as

(2a) S’s being F

(2b) S’s doing A

(2c) S’s undergoing P

When we are called on to imagine things expressed with the kinds of subject-verb phrases exhibited in (2a)-(2c), we characteristically imagine a scene in which someone is, does, or undergoes something, whereas when we are called on to imagine something expressed with the kinds of subjectless gerundive phrases displayed in (1a)-(1c), we merely imagine what it would be like to be, to do, or to undergo something. In the latter sort of

imagining, one's "imaginative project" – to use Bernard Williams's (1973) felicitous phrase – does not on the face of it involve imagining a certain person at all.

This absence of a subject from one's imaginative project comes out not only in the naturalness of using a subjectless verb phrase to express the object of such imagining, but also in the outward-directedness of what is imagined. In an objective act of imagining, I might imagine myself swimming in the ocean, as seen from a vantage point high above on the cliff; but when I perform the subjective act of imagining swimming in the ocean, what I imagine is not myself but only certain things I might experience: the chill of the water, the salty taste, the tug of the current, etc. Such experiences must, of course, have a subject, so when I imagine having them, what I imagine in some sense presupposes the existence of a subject; but no such subject falls within the scope of what is imagined. This is evident if we ask ourselves what attributes the subject who has these experiences is imagined to have.¹ The difficulty we face in answering this question is not just that the relevant subject is imagined hazily; the problem is that we simply draw a blank, except insofar as imagining the subject to have certain attributes (e.g., a waterproof wristwatch visible on his right wrist) belongs to the project of imagining the experience of swimming itself. Setting such complications aside, we may say that what is imagined in subjective acts of imagination is imagined as subject, but not as having a particular subject. This is not to say that one imagines these experiences to occur subjectlessly, of course. One simply does not undertake to imagine any subject who has them, not even oneself.

An important consequence of this distinction between subjective and objective acts of imagination is that it allows us to recognize an ambiguity in talk of imagining "myself doing A" (etc.). On one reading, to speak of imagining "myself swimming" is to speak of an objective act of imagination in which I myself am the person imagined as swimming:

¹ It is also evident from the fact that I can imagine "from inside" the experiences of another person.

we have a case of this in Vendler's example of imagining seeing myself down there bobbing on the waves. On another reading, however, the "myself" in "imagining myself swimming" simply emphasizes the contrast between imagining a scene in which some determinate person swims and imagining the activity of swimming "from within". Here what is at issue is a subjective act of imagination: one in which swimming is imagined "as subject", but no particular person is imagined as the swimmer. This distinction between two different perspectives on oneself, one immanent and another transcendent, will prove to be of crucial importance to our inquiry.

3. Representing as subject in general

Vendler focuses on the contrast between subjective and objective acts of imagination, but I want to suggest that this is just one case of a more general contrast. To see the generality of the topic, consider the contrasts between

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| (3a) anticipating becoming F | (3b) anticipating that S will become F |
| (4a) wanting to do A | (4b) wanting it to be the case that S does A |
| (5a) being afraid of suffering P | (5b) being afraid that S will suffer P |

In each of these pairs, we find a contrast between a "subjective" and an "objective" topic of representation. In the objective cases, the topic is a possible state of affairs involving some individual's being, doing, or undergoing something (where I myself may be the relevant individual). In the subjective cases, by contrast, the topic appears to be, not a state of affairs, but a mode of being, doing, or undergoing conceived "from the inside". When I anticipate growing old, for instance, what I anticipate is not primarily the state of affairs in which I grow old, but the lived experience of growing old: the increasing stiffness, the changing perspective on life and other people, or whatever. Similarly, when I fear suffering pain, what I primarily fear is not that a certain person, namely I myself, will

feel pain, but the experience of pain. The fact that I am the person who will feel the pain, though true, is not the focus of my concern.

These examples suggest that Vendler's contrast between subjective and objective acts of imagination is a special case of a more general distinction. In objective acts of anticipating, wanting, or fearing, one considers the relevant case of being, doing, or undergoing as having a certain subject. In the corresponding subjective acts, the relevant being, doing, or undergoing certainly must have a subject, but the identity of this subject is not the theme of one's "attitudinal project" (to generalize Williams's phrase). To clarify the nature of this contrast, it will help to consider a particular case of it in greater depth.

Suppose I want to learn to play clarinet: how does this differ from wanting it to be the case that I learn to play clarinet? A natural first characterization of the difference is again that these two desires take contrasting perspectives on their topic: the former immanent, the latter transcendent. If I want it to be the case that I learn to play clarinet, I want a certain fact to hold true of myself; but if I want to learn to play, the primary object of my desire is not that something should hold true of me – though of course, if my desire is fulfilled, it will be true that I learn to play clarinet. Still, the primary object of my desire is: to learn to play clarinet. This is not a state of affairs consisting of someone's doing something, but an action, something that might be done by any number of people. Wanting to learn to play clarinet will involve seeing this action as attractive, and what makes it attractive need not show my learning to play to be a desirable state of affairs. My reason for wanting to learn to play the clarinet might be, for instance, that the instrument has a beautiful and expressive tone, or that it can be played in the casual and delightful manner of Benny Goodman. These are reasons why it would be desirable to be able to play this instrument, not reasons why it would be desirable that I be able to play it. The clarinet will have a beautiful and expressive tone whether I learn to play it or not, and the world hardly needs one more pale imitator Benny Goodman, so it is not per se

desirable that I become such a person. But when it is a question of whether to learn to play clarinet, the desirability of my being a clarinet player is not the issue: the issue is of the desirability of this type of thing to do, and of course there is a lot to be said for it. We may sum this up by saying that, in contrast to wanting it to be the case that one does A, wanting to do A is outward-looking in its perspective on what is desirable: it focuses on what one proposes to do, not on one's own doing of it.²

A person who wants it to be the case that she learns to play clarinet, by contrast, wants something to hold true of herself at some point in the future: that she has learned to play clarinet. She wants this fact to be a part of her life story, as it were. There is something palpably self-involved about this sort of wanting: one wants, not primarily to do something, but for it to be the case of oneself that one does it. If one tries to imagine the kind of attitude toward life that would motivate such a desire, it is natural to think of a kind of second-order desire to “live one's life to the fullest”, the kind of desire that

² Note that it is consistent with this point to admit that facts about my own nature and situation may affect the desirability for me of doing A. If my hands are arthritic, for instance, there may be less to be said, from my standpoint, for learning to play the clarinet than there would be if this activity were considered from a more favorable standpoint. But this kind of relativity of the desirability of doing A to a standpoint is a relativity in the desirability of doing A, which remains a different topic from the desirability of the state of affairs in which I do A. We can mark this difference by drawing a scope distinction between

(a) the desirability for me of doing A

and

(b) the desirability of my doing A

In these formulations, only what appears to the right of “of” characterizes the object whose desirability is under consideration. The “for me” in (a) falls outside the scope of the desirability function, as it were: it merely relativizes the desirability of doing A to a certain person, whereas in (b), the fact that it will be I who does A belongs to the object whose desirability is considered. Thus, even where my own nature and situation may affect what it is desirable for me to do, the object whose desirability is considered may remain an action, not a state of affairs in which I do something.

might be expressed in the remark “What a pity it would be to end my life having never learned to play a musical instrument!” It is certainly possible to desire things in this mode, but when one does so, one stands a step back from the standpoint of the ordinary wanting to do: one is concerned, not primarily with the desirability of doing something, but with the desirability of one’s being someone who does something. In this sense, one’s attitude is detached from the standpoint of first-order agential desire.

I have illustrated these points with reference to the contrast between subjective and objective desire, but analogous points hold for other attitudes that admit of a subjective/objective contrast. In general, the object of concern in subjective attitudes is not a certain subject’s being, doing, or undergoing something, but simply: being, doing, or undergoing something. As we have seen, to imagine swimming is not, except incidentally, to imagine oneself swimming. Similarly, to anticipate being hit on the head is not to anticipate oneself being hit on the head – though of course, if what one anticipates comes to pass, it will be one’s own head that is hit. Still, the object of one’s anticipation is not a state of affairs in which a certain person (namely, oneself) is hit, but a type of occurrence that might happen to anyone – being hit on the head. The fact that it will be I who receive the blow follows, not from what I anticipate, but from the fact that it is I who anticipate it: it follows from my being the holder of the relevant attitude, not from the sheer content of the attitude I hold. In all these cases, my perspective on the relevant state, action, or passion is, as we might put it, immanent rather than transcendent: the focus of my concern is not on my being, doing, or undergoing something, but on the relevant type of being, doing, or undergoing itself, considered “from within”.

4. Ethics and the first person perspective I: Problems

I have been stressing these contrasts between subjective and objective attitudes because I believe the distinction between an immanent or “first-personal” perspective on

something done or suffered and a transcendent perspective on a state of affairs is relevant, not just to the understanding of human subjectivity, but also to various problems in ethics. I now turn to the latter topic, beginning with a brief review of familiar difficulties.

The difficulties that interest me all arise from the fact that commonsense moral thought seems to recognize various forms of what Derek Parfit called “agent relativity” in what people have reason to do: it recognizes that there may be reasons that speak in favor of a certain agent’s promoting some end, or indeed that require that agent to promote that end, but that do not require any other agent to promote that end.³ According to a commonsense moral outlook, for instance, my having a certain desire, project, or commitment can give me a reason to promote a certain end although it gives other people no reason to support that end. Suppose, for instance, that I want to compete in an ultra-marathon. The fact that I have this project might give me reason to undertake a grueling training regimen for the sake of competing; but the fact that I have this project would not, on its face, give others a reason to support my endeavor at all, unless they stood in some special relationship to me that made them care about my aims. Yet it is commonly assumed that it is permissible for an agent to give significant weight to such “agent-relative reasons”, even though the agent might, by acting otherwise, produce states of affairs with greater objective importance. It might, for instance, be a very worthy thing for me to take the time and money I would put into marathon training and devote it instead to helping the needy; but it is commonly supposed that, other things equal, I may permissibly make the more self-centered choice, even though my competing

³ This is a rough characterization of agent-relativity, and I will not attempt to give a sharper one at this point, since I believe the true nature of the phenomenon only becomes clear once its connection with representing-as-subject is recognized. For Parfit’s characterization, see Parfit 1984: 27. Other classic discussions of agent-relativity include Scheffler 1982 and Nagel 1986, Chs. IX-X.

in an ultra-marathon has little or no objective importance. This is one way in which commonsense moral thought – or at least, the commonsense moral thought of bourgeois liberalism – seems to permit agents to give a weight to their own satisfaction that is out of proportion to any objective importance which their aims might plausibly be claimed to have.

The preceding point concerns ways in which we are permitted to give special weight to our own projects and commitments, but a related point applies to things we are required to do or prohibited from doing. Consider for instance so-called “deontological constraints” on action, which categorically prohibit certain forms of action such as murder, torture, or lying. Such prohibitions seem to constrain what a given agent may do in ways that cannot be explained by appeal to the idea that it is a bad thing for anyone to perform an action of the relevant type. For a true deontological constraint on murder, for instance, requires me not to commit a murder even if I know that only by doing so can I prevent a larger number of murders from being committed by others. Yet how could that be the right choice to make if I accept that any murder is a terrible thing and know that my making this choice will in fact result in a greater number of murders? Discussing such a case, Nagel remarks:

[T]hings will be better, what happens will be better, if I [violate the deontological constraint] than if I do not. But I will have done something worse. If considerations of what I may do, and the correlative claims of my victim against me, can outweigh the substantial impersonal value of what will happen, that can only be because the perspective of the agent has an importance in practical reasoning that resists domination by a conception of the world as a place where good and bad things happen whose value is perspective-free. (Nagel 1986, pp. 180-181)

Deontological constraints on action are thus agent-relative in the sense that they constrain what, from the perspective of a given agent, it is permissible to do in ways not derivable from any impersonal principle about what state of affairs it would be best to promote.

Finally, there seems to be a surprising kind of agent-relativity presupposed in our ordinary thinking about whom we are obliged to help, as is brought out by a famous example due to Peter Singer.⁴ Singer contrasts two cases:

Proximate Threatened Child: As you are walking home, you see a child drowning in a shallow pond. You could save him, but only at the cost of ruining your expensive suit.

Remote Threatened Children: There is famine/disease/war in nation X. Without assistance, many children will die. By donating a modest portion of your income to relief organizations, you could prevent some of these deaths.

As Singer observes, there is a striking difference in our intuitive response to these two cases. In the first case, our commonsense verdict is that you are morally obligated to try to save the drowning child, even at the cost of ruining your suit, whose importance is negligible by comparison with the life at stake. In the second case, the commonsense verdict – expressed perhaps more clearly in our practice than in any explicit avowal – is that although we may have some kind of “imperfect duty” to donate some of what is ours to address world hunger, and it is certainly praiseworthy for us to do so, we are under no strict and definite obligation to come to the aid of these remote children.

Singer’s view, of course, is that this difference in our verdicts on the two cases is indefensible, since there is no feature of moral importance that differentiates them.

⁴ See Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972).

What differentiates the two cases, seemingly, is merely that the proximate child is one I have actually encountered. But to suppose that this kind of fact makes a morally-significant difference to my obligations seems once again to presuppose a kind of agent-relativity: which children I am obligated to help appears to depend, not simply on objectively-significant facts about their need for help and my capacity to help them, but on special facts about whether I, the agent, happen to have come across them.

Agent-relative permissions and obligations of these kinds form part of the fabric of commonsense moral thought; but on reflection, they can seem hard to justify. What rationale could there be for a deontological constraint on murder except that it is a terrible thing to murder someone? But if this is the rationale, how can it make sense to accept a principle that requires us to refrain from committing a murder even when a larger number of murders could thereby, and only thereby, be prevented? To insist, in such a case, that one should under no circumstances oneself commit a murder can seem like a moral fastidiousness that prevents one from producing the less awful of two awful outcomes. This is sometimes called “the paradox of deontology”.⁵

A related problem can be raised about the permission to give one’s own projects special weight in deliberation. What could justify my assigning a weight to my own project of running an ultra-marathon out of proportion to its objective importance? If I would not regard another person’s desire to compete in an ultra-marathon as giving me a weighty reason to support her project, and my own situation is not different in any relevant respect except that it is mine, then in giving my own project special weight in my decision-making, I seem to be drawing a distinction in the absence of a rational difference. How can the mere fact that the relevant project is mine entitle me to treat it as a weightier reason than it would otherwise be? Again, this way of valuing options,

⁵ See Scheffler 1982, Ch. 4.

which initially seems natural, can seem unjustifiably self-indulgent on reflection. This could be called “the paradox of self-concern”.

Finally, as Singer famously argues, the idea that I am under a stricter obligation to help the child I actually encounter than the children whose peril I merely know about seems to give an unjustifiable moral weight to contingent facts about my own path through the world. How can the fact that I encounter a given child make a difference to my moral obligations in a way that sets this child apart from other children I know to be in peril and could help without major sacrifice? It is as if moral commonsense held that which children one is obligated to help depends on which fall within the beam of a moral spotlight emanating, like a miner’s lamp, from one’s own forehead. But why should my obligations to strangers depend on such an apparently adventitious fact as which of them will fall within this spotlight? We might call this “the paradox of bias toward the near”.

5. Ethics and the First Person Perspective II: Self-Concern

One possible response to these paradoxes would be to reject the commonsense verdict on the relevant cases, and this indeed has been the response of Singer and many other moral philosophers. It is not easy to set aside our ordinary intuitions about these cases, however, not merely because they are ingrained, but because they feel tied to things that matter, even if we do not find it easy to say what it is that matters so much. Before dismissing these intuitions, therefore, it would be desirable to understand better the basis of their appeal. I want to suggest that our distinction between subjective and objective forms of representation can help to clarify the rationale for such seeming anomalies in the structure of practical reason.

To bring this out, I will first consider the phenomenon of differential self-concern, which provides a particularly simple and transparent application of the point.⁶ Many philosophers have observed that human beings typically feel a special, differential concern for their own fate. Here for instance is Adam Smith:

If [a man] was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own. (Smith 1985, Part III, Ch. 3)⁷

Smith may be exaggerating when he says that our concern for ourselves will trump our concern for a hundred million unseen others, but it is certainly true that our concern at the prospect of some misfortune to ourselves is characteristically much more immediate, vivid, and forceful than our concern at another person's experiencing an equal or greater misfortune. Nor do we generally blame ourselves for this: in ordinary life, we tend to regard it as a permissible form of partiality to ourselves. We may admit that great praise is due to those who take as lively an interest in the well-being of others as in their own, but we generally do not think it unreasonable for a person to feel a specially vivid interest in what will happen to her, simply because it is she herself to whom it will happen.

It is often treated as a mere reformulation of this point to say that we regard it as reasonable for people to hold benefits and harms to themselves to be more significant than benefits and harms to others. But if this reformulation is permitted, this way of

⁶ Although I disagree with its main conclusion, my thinking about this topic has been greatly stimulated by Setiya 2015.

⁷ I'm grateful to Olivia Bailey for drawing my attention to this passage.

valuing can look paradoxical. After all, most people will admit that their own fate is not in fact more important than the fate of other persons, and anyone bold enough to deny this will be hard pressed to justify their position. If I undergo a painful operation, I will certainly suffer, and doubtless I am someone whose suffering matters. But this much is true of all persons, so it is not clear how appeal to these facts can justify differential concern for myself. Yet if I appeal to the fact that another person's suffering won't happen to me, this seems not to explain, but rather to presuppose, that it is rational to accord special importance to one's own suffering. And won't any putative reason for self-concern take one of these two forms? Either it will make reference to the fact that the person in question is me, or it will not. If it does make such reference, appeal to it will presuppose what is to be justified. If it does not, it will appeal to features that might be in principle, and are probably in fact, possessed by other people. Thus it may appear that differential concern for one's own fate is not rationally justifiable, and indeed rests on an assumption about one's own importance that looks unreasonable on its face.

Once we bring to bear our distinction between representing as subject and representing concerning a certain subject, however, the point of differential self-concern does not look so mysterious. As usual, the crucial first step is to distinguish between a subjective and an objective attitude:

(6a) concern about being F (6b) concern about S's being F

A concern of form (6a) differs from a concern of form (6b), even if one conceives of the object of the latter sort of concern as oneself. Suppose I know that tomorrow I will undergo a painful operation. When I contemplate undergoing the operation, I may find this prospect greatly concerning. Yet when I consider the matter objectively, I may find it to be a matter of small importance that I will suffer: people go through worse every day. This difference of attitude is intelligible enough, for the foci of these two concerns are different: what makes concern about undergoing a painful operation reasonable is simply

the painfulness of the operation, whereas what makes concern about someone's undergoing a painful operation reasonable is the importance of that person's having to endure pain. I may coherently think that undergoing a painful operation will be terrible while denying that my undergoing it is a uniquely terrible thing.

The bearing of this distinction on the paradox of self-concern should be clear. The truth underlying Smith's observation is surely this: typically, a concern about being F has far greater motivational force than a concern about someone's being F. But this fact about how we are moved by different forms of concern does not imply that we are committed to judging our own suffering to be more important than the suffering of other persons. It would imply this only if this motivational difference reflected the fact that people judge states of affairs in which they themselves are F to be more important than states of affairs in which another person is F. But having distinguished between subjective and objective forms of representation, we are entitled to say that a person who feels concern about being F is concerned, not with the prospective existence of a state of affairs, but with the prospect of being in a certain state (or performing a certain action or suffering a certain misery). Her special responsiveness to this sort of concern need not express the judgment that there is special reason to be concerned about a state of affairs in which she herself is F.

On reflection, we may judge the lives of other people to be no less important than our own, and this judgment may serve as a counterweight to our natural concern about being, doing, and suffering. And even prior to such reflection, we may feel forms of empathy that make us vividly appreciate the misfortunes of other persons. Openness to these sorts of motivation may, indeed, be one of the most praiseworthy attributes of a human being. But even if the judgment that one's own welfare is not more important than the welfare of other persons were rationally required, this would not directly imply

that differential self-concern is irrational, for as we have seen, such concern does not presuppose a judgment about the relative importance of persons.

6. Ethics and the First Perspective III: Deontology & Bias toward the Near

I believe that similar distinctions can help to illuminate the coherency of deontological constraints on action. What makes these features of practical rationality appear paradoxical is primarily the assumption that the topic under consideration is the state of affairs in which I do A, which makes it seem that there should be some justification for weighing this state of affairs differently from a state of affairs in which someone else does A. But again, framing the matter in this way distorts the issue: it is not a question of the value or disvalue of the state of affairs in which I do A, but of the permissibility of doing A. Just as it is coherent to regard A as worth doing although one does not regard the state of affairs in which I do A as having “agent neutral” importance, so too it is coherent to reject the deed of murder as impermissible although I admit that the state of affairs in which I myself commit a murder is less more appalling than the state of affairs in which another person commits several murders.⁸

Much more could be said about this topic, but in order to highlight the most striking implications of the ideas we have been developing, I propose to turn now to bias toward the near. This phenomenon raises more complicated issues than the preceding ones, inasmuch as it turns on questions, not just of personal perspective, but of interpersonal relations. In cases of bias toward the near, what seems intuitively to matter is whether I have actually encountered a given person. Our puzzle was why this should affect my moral obligations. As Singer puts it:

⁸ Related points are made in Schroeder 2011, to which I am indebted.

The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we shall assist him, but this does not show that we ought to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us... (Singer 1972: 232)

Can our distinction between subjective and objective forms of representation help to clarify the intuitive difference here? I believe it can, but its application to the present topic raises novel issues that did not arise in our account of the rationality of self-concern and of categorical prohibitions on action.

In Singer's cases, we seem to have two different ways of being aware of children in peril: in the remote case, I am aware that there are children in peril, but I am not actually acquainted with any of the relevant children, whereas in the proximate case I am acquainted with a particular child in peril in virtue of having encountered him. This might suggest that the intuitively significant contrast is between a de re and a de dicto form of awareness:

(7a) knowledge of a child in peril (7b) knowledge that children are in peril

(7a) ascribes, not mere knowledge of a fact (that there is at least one child in peril), but acquaintance with a particular child who is in peril.

Clarifying this distinction would of course require giving an account of the relation of acquaintance, but supposing this could be done, drawing such a distinction would put us in a position to offer an account of the rationality of bias toward the near that parallels our account of the rationality of self-concern. The idea would be that what obligates me to help the proximate child is not the fact that there is a child in peril near to me, but rather that my encounter with a certain child establishes a moral connection between me and this child in particular, one in virtue of which I owe it to him to come to his aid when

he is in peril. My obligation here would not be a monadic obligation to do something given a certain fact, but a relational obligation owed to a particular child to do something for him.

This analysis of Singer's cases in terms of the distinction between de re and de dicto knowledge seems to me a step in the right direction, but I do not think it fully clarifies the basis of my special obligation to children I encounter. Our proposal was that when I actually encounter a child in peril, this can give me a special obligation to this child. But why should encountering a child in a way that gives me de re knowledge of that child have such a decisive moral consequence? If a moment earlier I would have had no special obligation to this child, why does my simply coming across him have such a radical effect on the moral landscape in which I act? It is not as if I am supposed to have some deep or enduring connection to the child in Singer's example, after all: he is just a stranger I happen to come across. Yet our intuition is that I am now obligated to sacrifice things I hold dear for the sake of saving him, whereas I would have no such strict obligation to assist unencountered children whose plight I merely knew about. So what is an encountered child to me that an unencountered child is not? And when, indeed, do I "encounter" a child in the relevant sense? Do I encounter a child whom I see in a televised appeal for famine relief? Or if this does not count as an actual "encounter" in the morally significant sense, why does it not?

To make progress here, it will help to think further about the televised appeal. Many of us have likely seen such advertisements, which describe a widespread crisis and then introduce us by name to an individual child suffering in that crisis, telling us that our donation could make a crucial difference to the lives of children like this one. Whatever their problematic features – among which I would mention their invitation to the viewer to participate in a strange and vaguely colonialist gaze at foreign suffering – such advertisements cannot fail to arouse a painful sense that one must do something to help

these people. I take it relief organizations commonly choose to personify crises via individual children precisely because this is an effective way of evoking such feelings.⁹ Nevertheless, I think the moral intuition expressed in our practice is that we do not stand in the same type of moral relation to the child in the advertisement that we would to Singer's drowning child. Seeing the televised appeal, I may feel ashamed if I do not donate – ashamed at what this shows about my character and priorities – but I do not feel that this child would have the standing to reproach me in personal terms (“Why won't you help me?”), whereas I do feel this when I imagine passing by the drowning child. If I failed to help the drowning child, I would show, not merely a shameful lack of empathy for human suffering, but indifference to a particular person whose peril makes a claim upon me: having encountered him, I owe it to him to come to his aid.¹⁰

Yet in what sense do I “encounter” the drowning child but not the child in the televised appeal, and why should this entail that I have a direct obligation to the one child but not the other? Is it just that I come physically nearer to the drowning child? Intuitively, that is not the crucial issue: the point is that the drowning child has come within my sphere of interaction, my sphere of acting and being acted upon in a way that is mutually recognized. This kind of connection could in principle be established with a

⁹ And note that even seeing the child in the televised appeal presumably gives me a kind of de re knowledge of this particular child. I no longer merely know that there is a child in peril, I know which child this is, in a sense that isn't reducible merely to knowing that this child meets some general description.

¹⁰ Let me emphasize that I do not think all relational obligations to persons depend on encounters of this sort. Suppose, for instance, that I propose to set off a bomb in a crowded market in order to draw attention to some cause I hold dear. If I do this, I will (so I believe) wrong each person who is killed or injured: I owe it to each of them not to treat them in this way, and this would hold even if I had never encountered any of these people. We have, I believe, many negative relational obligations of this kind to people we have never encountered, and perhaps we have positive ones too. My claim is merely that there are some kinds of relational obligations that can come to exist only on the basis of an actual encounter with another person.

distant person via Zoom, or perhaps even by an old-fashioned exchange of letters, but it is not established by the televised appeal: this makes me aware of a particular child, but does not put me in a position to interact with him in particular. It does not establish “personal contact” between us, in the special sense of that term that we reserve for cases where a standing connection is established between two persons, a connection of such a kind that it makes possible for each to act on the other in a way that directed specifically toward this other and mutually recognized as such. Many personal relationships are richer and more longstanding than my relationship with the drowning child: the two parties know each other and have a shared history of which they are both aware. But even the drowning child whom I merely come across establishes, when he draws my attention, a minimal kind of personal contact with me. From this moment, he is not merely in a situation on which I am a spectator; we are in a situation together.

Giving a sharp characterization of these notions of interaction, personal contact, and shared situation would involve many difficulties, but for my purposes here it will suffice if it is granted that such notions are relevant to analyzing the intuitive contrast between Singer’s cases. And indeed, Singer himself all but acknowledges their relevance when he mentions in passing that physical nearness to a child might make possible “personal contact” with him. I think the notion of personal contact is more interesting than Singer recognizes: it points toward the relevance of the notion of mutually-recognized interaction, and toward the contrast between a situation I am in and one I am merely aware of.

Describing the difference between Singer’s two cases as a difference between a situation I am in and one I am merely aware of brings us back to our contrast between an immanent of “first personal” and a transcendent or “objective” perspective on a topic. In this case, the topic is not my own being, doing, or suffering, but some other person’s being in peril; but again, this kind of topic can be viewed either as belonging to a situation

I contemplate “from without”, so to speak, or as belonging to a situation of which I am aware “from within”. When I am in a position to think of a child’s peril from the latter perspective, we might say, I face the kind of predicament expressed by (8a) rather than merely the one expressed by (8b):

(8a) encounter with a child in peril (8b) awareness that a child is in peril.

(8a) implies awareness of a child from within a shared situation, whereas (8b) does not. If there is a real distinction between these two forms of awareness of children in peril, then it is not irrational to feel an obligation to a child I encounter that I do not feel to a child about whose situation I merely know. Moreover, just as it is coherent to be specially concerned at the prospect of being in pain while admitting that the fact that I will suffer is not intrinsically more important than the fact that another person will suffer, so to it is coherent to feel a special obligation to a child with whom I share a situation while admitting that the fact that a given child is near me does not make that child intrinsically more deserving of my help than other remote children who are in equally perilous predicaments. In each case, the special source of motivation becomes intelligible when I view the relevant situation, not from the standpoint of a transcendent onlooker who must assess the moral significance of a fact, but from the immanent perspective of a participant in the relevant situation: the person who experiences pain or encounters a particular child.

7. Adjudicating the claims of personal and impersonal concern

Taking note of the distinction between an immanent and a transcendent perspective on a situation allows us to see that the combinations of attitudes we have been considering are not irrational, but it does not yet show positively that they are rational. To show the latter, it would be necessary to make a case for the relevant asymmetries of attitude:

being motivated by the prospect of being F in a way one is not motivated by the thought that S is F, feeling obligated to an encountered child in peril in a way one does not feel obligated when one merely knows that there is a child in peril, etc.

Even if we admit that there is no direct incoherence in holding such asymmetrical attitudes, we might wonder how a reflective subject who holds them can justify her view of the world. After all, such a subject will presumably understand that, if she is concerned about suffering a harm or experiencing a benefit, what she is concerned about will come to pass just if she herself suffers or benefits. And similarly, she will understand that, if she feels a special obligation to children she encounters, acting on this obligation will in fact assist the children who are near her but not other, equally deserving children who are further afield. A subject who recognizes these points may feel pressure to reform her “subjective” attitudes toward situations she represents-as-subject in a way that brings them into closer conformity with her “objective” attitudes toward states of affairs she contemplates from a transcendent standpoint; and we as philosophers may feel pressure to hold that the attitudes of the former type should give way to attitudes of the latter type as a matter of principle.

Yet the pressure here is not one of sheer rational consistency; for as we have seen, the relevant attitudes are not inconsistent. The pressure is rooted, rather, in the ethical problem of arbitrating the claims of different modes of normative thought. And on further reflection, I think it is not obvious that our subjective attitudes should give way to their objective counterparts. I can illustrate this point by once again appealing to the case of self-concern. To demand that the subjective mode of thought should give way here is to demand that people should not be specially concerned about being F unless there is some objective reason that justifies special concern for the state of affairs in which they themselves are F. But it seems open to question whether a world in which differential

self-concern were eradicated would be a world worth wishing for. To appreciate this point, it will help to think about an observation made in a famous paper by John Taurek:

My concern for what happens to [other people] is grounded chiefly in the realization that each of them is, as I would be in his place, terribly concerned about what happens to him... If it were not for the fact that these objects were creatures much like me, for whom what happens to them is of great importance, I doubt that I would take much interest in their preservation. As merely intact objects they would mean very little to me, being, as such, nearly as common as toadstools. The loss of an arm of the Pietà means something to me not because the Pietà will miss it. But the loss of an arm of a creature like me means something to me only because I know he will miss it, just as I would miss mine. It is the loss to this person that I focus on. I lose nothing of value to me should he lose his arm. But if I have concern for him, I shall wish he might be spared his loss.

(Taurek 1977, pp. 306-7)

I take Taurek to be suggesting that our most basic reason for concern about the welfare of other people rests on the assumption that they are entitled to be concerned for their own welfare in the special, disproportionate way we have been considering. If this is right, then in eliminating the special, first personal way in which each of us cares about his or her own fate, we would at the same time eliminate much of our reason for caring about the fate of others.

A similar point can be made about bias toward the near. If our analysis is correct, the forms of concern that appear to express such bias are in fact grounded in personal contact that makes possible reciprocal, mutually-recognized forms of interaction. This kind of contact between persons supports the rich forms of human relationship involved love and friendship, but it also undergirds the more minimal form of personal

acquaintance I come to have with the drowning child. And now a counterpart to Taurek's thought about self-concern would be this: that the general "value" of persons – whatever it is that makes them worth saving when they are in peril, worth aiding when they are suffering, etc. – depends in some way on the special, first personal kinds of interest people take in one another on the basis of personal contact. I will not attempt to defend this proposition here, but I hope it has some plausibility on its face. At any rate, if this proposition were granted, then again, we would have reason to think that a world without these special forms of interest would not be a world worth wishing for, since eliminating them would undermine the central pillar supporting our concern for persons in general.¹¹

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