5-2-2018

The Problems of Impartiality: Attention, Deliberation, and Having "One Thought Too Many"

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THE PROBLEMS OF IMPARTIALITY:

ATTENTION, DELIBERATION, AND HAVING "ONE THOUGHT TOO MANY"

by

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Under the Direction of Christie Hartley, PhD

ABSTRACT

Much has been written about Bernard Williams' remarks (1981) regarding the (imagined) man faced with the choice of saving either a drowning stranger or his drowning wife. For Williams, the man's justification for saving his wife ought not to be any kind of practical syllogism, but simply, "because she is my wife." Susan Wolf claims (2012) that the standard response to Williams', which she dubs the Standard View, has been inadequate. Wolf then considers and rejects a potential response to the Standard View—what she calls the "virtuous attention" view. Such a view, Wolf argues, is merely a variation of the Standard View. In this paper, I argue that the virtuous attention view is not a variation of the Standard View. While Wolf's reading of Williams is correct, I argue that a developed version of the virtuous attention view can actually provide support for Wolf's reading of Williams.

INDEX WORDS: Bernard Williams, Aristotle, Susan Wolf, Moral deliberation, Practical
        philosophy

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2018

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May 2018

DEDICATION

To Emma. This thesis (like me) is a product of many wonderful conversations, energy, and patience. Thank you for your kindness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For her unwavering support throughout the development of this thesis and my time here as a student, I'd like to first thank Christie Hartley. She is the Platonic ideal of an advisor and instructor. For his guidance as an instructor, writer, and friend, I'd like to thank Eric Wilson. I'd also like to thank Tim O'Keefe for his comments on this thesis, and for being a guiding light through the murky waters of graduate school. Finally, I'd like to especially thank Clare Mauney for her friendship and support through the past two years. Thank you for being who you are.

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1   INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about Bernard Williams' remarks regarding the rescuer with "one thought too many."[1] Faced with the choice of saving one of two drowning people, one of whom is his wife, the rescuer asks himself: "am I morally justified in saving my wife instead of a stranger? If so, on what grounds?" For Williams, the man's justification ought not to be any kind of principled syllogism, but simply, "*because she is my wife."* Susan Wolf claims that the typical response to Williams' remarks has been inadequate.[2] She argues that this response, which she dubs the Standard View, merely alters when it is appropriate to consult an impartial moral principle in any given case. Such a response, she says, fails to address Williams' significant criticism: that consultation with the impartial moral view is fundamentally at odds with the partial nature of our personal relationships. Wolf then considers and rejects a potential response to the Standard View—what she calls the "virtuous attention" view. For Wolf, virtuous attention is a process of proper habitation and character development that explains how an ideal moral agent could come to know when it is appropriate to consult an impartial moral principle. Such a view, Wolf argues, is merely a variation of the Standard View.

In this paper, I argue that the virtuous attention view is *not* a variation of the Standard View. In so doing, I argue for two crucial points. First, that Wolf's claim that moral values and principles are "operative in the background"[3] in the virtuous attention view is misleading, and doesn't fit with an Aristotelian account of virtue. For, it would be a mistake to read Aristotle's conception of virtue and practical wisdom as necessarily consulting any impartial moral view.

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[1] Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality" in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-18.

[2] Susan Wolf, "One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment," in *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning & Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 140-160.

[3] Wolf (2015), 150.

Aristotle's virtuous agent, while *guided* by the demands of reason and the principles of the virtues, is by no means unconditionally bound—as Wolf thinks the Standard View is—to the demands of any modern view of morality in which action is morally justified just in case a principle can be applied to the circumstances at hand.

Second, I demonstrate that the Standard View is much more complex and varied than Wolf makes clear. Rather than a single, unified response to Williams, those who hold the Standard View have at least two different *kinds* of response to Williams. On the one hand, some claim that Williams' has mischaracterized the nature of how impartial moral principles work.[4] On this view, Williams has oversimplified the nature of how an appeal to an impartial moral principle works. The actual deployment of the categorical imperative, for example, is closely tied to the structure of practical rationality itself. Consulting an impartial moral view—namely, justifying its necessity in every moral dilemma—is a mischaracterization of how such a consultation really works. Proponents of this view conclude that Williams' picture of the impartial moral view is reductionist and a gross oversimplification of how principles function in moral life.

A second kind of critique within the Standard View is that Williams' presentation of the example doesn't capture what is really at stake.[5] Holders of this second view claim that what Williams identifies as the source of the normativity of morality—the partial nature of our personal relationships—is itself in need of justification. Wolf provides no defense of Williams on this point. The important point for our purposes is that Wolf fails to present any nuance in her discussion of Williams' detractors, rolling both critiques into the Standard View, and only

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[4] Barbara Herman (1993, 2007) is a good example of this line of criticism.
[5] This critique is exemplified by Harry Frankfurt (2002, 2004).

seriously responds to the first kind of criticism. While I think that Wolf's reading of Williams has the resources to answer both kinds of criticism, doing so requires a more developed treatment of the Standard View.

I argue that the best response to both types of criticism that are grouped under the Standard View is what Wolf calls the "virtuous attention" view. I conclude by showing how a developed version of the virtuous attention view (e.g. an Aristotelian account of habituation and practical wisdom) is not only distinct from all versions of the Standard View, but also renders support for Wolf's reading of Williams. By illustrating virtuous attention as a viable alternative to impartial moral principles in deliberation, we strengthen Wolf and Williams' joint criticism of modern moral theory.

2   WOLF AND WILLIAMS ON THE STANDARD VIEW

To begin, we must consider Wolf's reading of both Williams and the Standard View in more detail. Williams' example, originally posed by Charles Fried,[6] asks us to imagine a man who is faced with the choice of saving one of two drowning people, one of whom is his wife. Williams' claim is that there would be something deeply troubling if, in order for the man's choice to save his wife to be morally permissible, he must first deliberate and consult some impartial moral principle. For instance, must the man *really* ask, while listening to the pleading of his drowning wife, "am I justified in taking the means to save the life of someone I am married to over the life of someone I do not know in virtue of the quality of our relationship?" If he concludes that he *is* justified in saving her on the basis of some impartial moral principle, the man must then confirm that this is an instance where such a rule applies. Only then, when he has confirmed that it is morally permissible, is he morally justified in saving his wife—which seems

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[6] Charles Fried, *An Anatomy of Values* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 227.

absurd. The typical response to Williams' objection is to shift *when* one must deliberate (from before to after the fact) so as to make room for split-second decision-making. Wolf thinks that Williams' point is different. According to Wolf, Williams' criticism is this: consultation with an impartial moral principle is, in this case, altogether inappropriate. The reason the man is justified in saving his wife (fully fleshed out) is simply "*because she is my wife*"—thinking of moral permissibility here is simply "one thought too many."

On Wolf's reading of Williams, if a moral theory requires individuals to *always* consult an impartial moral principle (which conflicts with other values such as our loving personal relationships), then it is deeply misguided. For Williams, "the point is that somewhere (and if not in this case, where?) one reaches the necessity that such things as deep attachments to other persons will express themselves in the world in ways which cannot at the same time embody the impartial view."[7] Following Williams, Wolf argues that any moral theory that requires the adoption of an impartial moral view to deem any act morally good is fundamentally in tension with certain desirable forms of personal relationship.

According to Wolf, those who hold the Standard View[8] concede that there is something strange about a man who checks to see whether it is morally permissible before paddling or diving toward his drowning wife—but, for them, this is all that is strange. Their solution is to shift the temporal location of the man's deliberation from *prior* to saving his wife to *after*. So, they claim that while it would be absurd for the man to deliberate in the moment about whether to save his wife, and there is nothing wrong with the man, after having saved his wife, wondering retroactively whether and why what he did was morally permissible. Wolf says this misses the

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[7] Williams (1981), 18.

[8] *Ibid.*, 145. Here she is thinking in general of Utilitarian and Kantian moral theories. Specifically, Wolf mentions Railton (1984) and Herman (1993) as examples.

point: Williams is not concerned with *when* deliberation is appropriate in any given case—*he rejects the idea that consultation with an impartial view is always required.*

3   FLESHING OUT THE STANDARD VIEW

At this point we might reasonably ask if Wolf's reading is charitable to proponents of the Standard View. To answer this question, let us first consider the view of those who claim that Williams has oversimplified the use of impartial principles in particular situations. Our aim will be to see whether Wolf's reading of Williams' critique holds up against a thorough and imaginative account of how impartial principles work in moral life. From this in-depth look at Herman's account, I claim that while Herman does appear to give a more plausible version of the Standard View than Wolf makes clear, it ultimately doesn't respond to Wolf's criticism.

In *The Practice of Moral Judgment*[9] Barbara Herman provides an account of Kant's moral theory that purports to answer Williams' central concern: that it would be strange to require that the ideal moral agent consult some impartial principle *always in every case* in order to justify her actions. Herman's account attempts to show how Kant's categorical imperative can be most plausibly understood as a providing a set of tools for moral deliberation rather than a decision procedure to be followed at any cost. Such an account, if successful, would answer Williams' criticism by demonstrating that Kant's ideal moral agent doesn't simply apply some abstract, agent-neutral principle to any and all particular circumstances in order to act morally. Instead, on this view, the categorical imperative serves as a way of explaining the judgments we already take to be uncontroversially moral. In short, it is a formal expression of how a rational agent actually deliberates about moral decisions.[10]

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[9] Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73-93.

[10] Another way of putting this claim is that Williams and Wolf assume a discrete sphere of morality that is *by nature* impartial and contrasts with partial and prudential considerations, and then raise problems with

To motivate this alternative interpretation the categorical imperative, Herman first outlines two distinct, yet intricately related problems with how to interpret the function of categorical imperative (henceforth the CI procedure), as a test for the permissibility of maxims in deliberation. Herman tells us that "internal criticisms of the CI procedure have usually focused on two issues: the nature of the input to the procedure (the problem of maxim description) and the nature of the contradiction that the procedure is designed to detect."[11] On the one hand, the CI procedure could be seen as generating a logical contradiction, where the universalization of the maxim undermines its own conception. On this view, Herman argues, the success of the maxim on the CI procedure is tied to the specificity of the maxim rather than just its moral character. The more specific the maxim, the more likely it is to pass the CI procedure test—too many false positives.

For example, suppose my maxim to be tested is as follows: When it is convenient for me, I will deceive others. For Herman, this maxim creates a logical contradiction. For, if we imagine a world where everyone deceived when it is convenient for them, no one would believe each other and the very concept of lying breaks down. But suppose we specify the maxim a little; suppose my maxim is only to deceive on Tuesdays, after 1pm, when talking to my mother about what I've had for lunch. Surely, such a case feels trivial and irrelevant to moral life. But the point is that it's hard to imagine that such a maxim could generate any *logical* contradiction. Instead, "when the CI procedure rejects a maxim it ought to do so for reasons that explain what is morally wrong with the maxim."[12] But surely, Herman writes, the specificity of a maxim should not entirely determine its moral permissibility. If we interpret the contradiction at the heart of the CI

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morality thus conceived. But Herman rejects that conception of what the sphere of morality is. For more on this view, see Sherman (1987).

[11] *Ibid*., 136.

[12] *Ibid*., 140.

procedure as a logical one, then permissibility of the maxim will be tied to the specificity of the maxim description. The more general a maxim is described, the less more likely it is to generate a contradiction, the more specific the less likely, *regardless of the moral character of the action*, which is precisely what Kant *wants* to drive whether the maxim passes the CI procedure.

But if we interpret the contradiction at the heart of the CI procedure as a *practical* contradiction, a whole new set of problems arise. If the CI procedure detects a practical contradiction, then the procedure fails to distinguish between cases of coordination (i.e. only playing tennis when the courts are empty) and free-riding. According to Herman, a maxim fails the practical CI test when, if we imagine a world in which our maxim is a law it is no longer rational for us to will the maxim as such. In the practical sense, the efficacy of one's maxim depends on it being the case that not everyone does what your maxim states. For instance, imagine I have a maxim that states that I will only play tennis on days when the courts are not crowded. If this maxim were universalized, it seems that no one would play tennis. The problem with a case like this is that such a maxim is made impermissible because its success would be undermined by universal action on that maxim. On Herman's view, the practical interpretation of the contradiction at the heart of the CI procedure fails to distinguish between free-riding and coordination.

On Herman's view, each traditional interpretation of the nature of the CI procedure leads to its own unique problem. Whether interpreted as a logical or a practical contradiction, the CI procedure seems unable to isolate the moral character of a maxim as the decisive feature for whether it is morally permissible. Thus, Herman's project is to develop an account of the CI procedure that remedies this problem.

To do this, she approaches the CI procedure by focusing not on the nature of the

contradiction in any particular maxim, but rather, the occasion for deliberating about maxims at all. For Herman, "moral deliberation is called for by deliberative principles (presumptions) derived from the CI procedure." This is relevant because, if those principles "are to be able to resolve complex and unfamiliar cases, agents must not only recognize the morally significant features of their circumstances and of their proposed action, but they must also be able to make the necessary value translation of the flagged features of action and circumstance in to the terms of rational agency."[13] On Herman's view, if we are to understand how to properly evaluate our particular circumstances and moral dilemmas with moral principles, we might first get clear about (i) the structure and occasion for moral deliberation and (ii) the kind of pre-moral knowledge that is required in order to deliberate at all.

For Herman, before one can even think to use the CI procedure, the agent must first have some pre-moral knowledge about what counts as a genuine moral dilemma. Prior to deliberation, the agent must identify her actions as in need of moral examination and determine the nature of her interest in the action. Herman calls the pre-moral deliberative rules that shape what we flag as morally relevant "rules of moral salience."[14] For Herman, rules of moral salience (RMS) establish both the relevance of particular maxims to morality and deliberative presumptions against certain types of actions. Their role is to set the stage for deliberation, flagging certain features of the world as morally relevant and in need of evaluation.

For example, imagine a moral agent who thinks, on the whole, that lying is morally impermissible. Such an agent, on Herman's view, before she is ever confronted with a particular case, holds a pre-moral assumption that lying is wrong *unless* proved otherwise in a specific

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[13] *Ibid*., 157.

[14] For more on the development and mechanics of rules of moral salience, see the title essay of this work "The Practice of Moral Judgment," 73-93.

circumstance. As such, lying is flagged for her as a morally relevant action that is in need of evaluation. In contrast, the decision of what color shirt to wear is not flagged as morally relevant and as such never prompts any moral deliberation. The reason lying is morally relevant to our agent—seen as in need of moral deliberation at all—is that she has developed a kind of pre-deliberative presumption that lying is the kind of action that needs an awfully good reason to justify its execution. It's simply built into the landscape of her moral life that most maxims that involve lying are cases in need of moral attention. Rather than simply searching in the dark for how to apply an abstract principle to a particular case, Herman's claim is that the moral agent brings quite a bit of moral knowledge and experience to each and every moral deliberation. With such presumptions and knowledge of moral relevance, it's not such a mystery how Herman's moral agent figures out how to apply impartial moral principles. Knowing already which kinds of maxims are morally relevant, she runs the relevant ones through the CI procedure and decides whether the particular maxim she already has is reflective of the proper kind of motivation that provides moral justification.

Herman's contribution to our understanding of the CI procedure is to show us that there is much more to moral life than slapping impartial moral principles onto specific circumstances whose relevance to the impartial moral principle is questionable—the picture is actually the reverse. Instead, the moral agent already has a specific maxim built for her specific circumstance. In addition, she has knowledge of what kinds of cases count as morally relevant at all, as well as a set of presumptions against certain type of actions before any deliberation takes place. This is all *before* she universalizes her maxim. Rather than applying impartial principles to specific circumstances, as both Williams and Wolf imagine, Herman's account of impartial principles in moral deliberation suggests that particular circumstances dictate how and when

particular principles are deployed.

To illustrate this, consider the case of lying once again. Running the maxim of lying through the CI procedure I uncover the kind of motivation that underlies the maxim itself. Thinking about *why* I am compelled to override my deliberative presumption against lying could lead me to see, for example, that I could be permitted to lie *if* the object of my reason is, say, the other person abandoning his impermissible action. Thus, on Herman's view, the categorical imperative allows us to see more clearly the reasons that underlie our maxims, and as such, allows us to more accurately assess when it is acceptable to make overriding exceptions against the deliberative moral presumptions that we already have.

With an account of Herman's account in hand, we can now focus on whether Herman's account answers Williams' critique. Specifically, has she provided a sufficient and plausible response to Williams' criticism of the use of impartial principles in morality? Herman answers Williams' critique by conceding that there are certain cases, like facing the choice of whether to save a drowning of a loved one, where moral deliberation simply isn't needed in order for the action to be morally permissible. But while Herman would agree that the loving husband might reasonably fail to flag some action done in service of saving his wife from death as morally relevant (and thus is not in need of any moral justification at all) it's not because of the nature of moral principles. Rather, on Herman's view, it's simply part of the husband's pre-moral deliberative landscape that the perpetuation of his wife's life need not be justified by any appeal to an impartial moral principle at all.[15] Given this more robust understanding of Herman's account, what can Wolf's reading of Williams offer in response?

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[15] I think it's an open question whether Herman thinks our pre-moral deliberative landscape is unique to the individual. However, she is clear that this landscape will be informed by our cultural, social, and educational norms, all of which are somewhat malleable.

One option is to claim that Herman has kicked the proverbial can down the road. For, if the categorical imperative—taken as a strategy for moral deliberation—is supposed to avoid the criticism of being problematically callous to the context of our individual moral life by making clear the underlying values implicit in our maxims, then by implication there are some reasons that are good enough to rebut our deliberative presumptions and some are not. But, how are we to determine which reasons are in fact good enough reasons to act as overriding concerns? What Herman's account leaves out, then, is a story about what kinds of reasons are acceptable to override our moral duties. Without such an account, Herman's discussion lacks normative force—how am I to *judge* which of the reasons that motivate my maxims are morally acceptable?

But there is another, more serious concern that Wolf's reading raises—namely, that Herman fails to address Williams' central concern. Recall Wolf's interpretation: that there are specifically moral cases where consultation with an impartial moral view is simply not relevant to the moral permissibility of the action. So, perhaps it is the case that Herman would respond to Williams' criticism by saying that the example he uses to illustrate his criticism is not an example of a moral dilemma given the specific pre-moral deliberative presumptions of the imagined husband. But, on Herman's view, even though this is not an occasion for moral deliberation, the action that morality requires remains; namely saving his wife. Such a response fails to answer Williams' criticism. For, his quibble is not with how skillfully the ideal moral agent can identify which cases are truly moral dilemmas, but rather, that when an agent is faced with a genuine moral dilemma (on his view) there is something deeply strange about appealing to impartial moral principles as the be-all-end all decider of what to do. Specifically, what is intuitively unappealing, on Williams view, is to appeal to an impartial principle given the necessarily partial

relationship we have to most of the morally relevant decisions are faced with. Williams' criticism is that impartial principles are fundamentally incapable of capturing the central property of moral life—the partial nature of our personal relationships. Herman's account of the robust nature of the ideal agent's moral knowledge does not address Williams' central criticism because her account rests on a kind of rule-following that isn't capable of being sensitive to the contextual contours of a person's moral life. Even if we build complex moral knowledge into the ideal moral agent, such an agent is still ill-prepared to deal with the partiality of our moral life.

4   ANOTHER VERSION OF THE STANDARD VIEW

We must now turn to the second kind of criticism under the umbrella of the Standard View, most notably leveled by Harry Frankfurt. Frankfurt's broader criticism is that what, for Williams, justifies our concern with morality—our subjective experience and partial personal relationships—is itself in need of justification. Frankfurt's criticism begins with Williams' presentation of the drowning wife example itself. Frankfurt claims that the example simply cannot work in the way that Williams intends it to, "if what it stipulates concerning one of the drowning people is merely that she is the man's wife."[16] For, Frankfurt imagines, a man can have a lot of different feelings (and lack thereof) toward his wife.[17] Regardless, Frankfurt's point still stands: Williams' example seems focused on the wrong kind of relation. By specifying nothing about the relationship of the man to his drowning wife other than a bare legal tie, Williams puts the emphasis in the wrong place. But, surely what Williams *meant* to point out was a particular

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[16] Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 36.

[17] For starters, the man might hate his wife and be glad to be rid of her. Frankfurt playfully adds, "suppose that she detests him, too, and that she has recently engaged in several viciously determined attempts to murder him. Or suppose that it was nothing but a cold-blooded arranged marriage of convenience anyhow, and that they have never even been in the same room together except during a perfunctory two-minute wedding ceremony in thirty years." *Ibid.,* 37.

kind of loving relationship between the man and his wife, rather than a merely legal one. Our aim in this section will be to (a) sharpen Frankfurt's response to Williams, showing how it is distinct from the kind offered by Herman and (b) to see whether Wolf's reading of Williams has the resources to avoid Frankfurt's criticism.

There are a number of different responses to Frankfurt's criticism open to the defender of Williams. The first and most obvious is simply to say that Frankfurt has missed the point of the entire example. To any charitable reader, it is clear that Williams' example is meant to pick out a particular kind of partiality a man could easily have toward his wife. Wolf responds to Frankfurt is along these lines. She simply concedes that Williams would agree: the relevant relationship between the man and wife of his example has little to do with their legal relationship as such, and everything to do with the feelings they have toward each other. But it is here that Wolf's response ends. For Wolf, Frankfurt's point is merely a case of uncharitable reading. I think that Wolf has underestimated Frankfurt's criticism here—it's much more than a trivial misreading.

For Frankfurt, Williams' example grounds moral concerns in the wrong place. While Frankfurt agrees that consultation with impartial moral principles can be irrelevant to certain cases, he also thinks that it is a mistake to ground moral concerns in the nature of our subjective experience and personal relationships. Instead, Frankfurt thinks that it is what we love that does and should explain the moral character of our actions.[18]

To make this point clear, Frankfurt tells us that we must first understand both what

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[18] In *The Reasons of Love* (2004), Frankfurt's concern is, broadly, to distinguish love as a fundamental and essential grounding for practical rationality and morality. For Frankfurt, this is complex and nuanced task that, among other things, involves the delineation of the concepts of care, importance and desire as different forms of valuation that are all central to understanding love. On Frankfurt's view, desire is a non-rational emotive drive. We can desire things that we do not care about or find important at all (e,g, an addiction to a hazardous drug.) In contrast, caring is an intentional kind of valuation that flows from love. We cannot help but care about the things we love. Moreover, caring is how we infuse certain ends and means with value.

normative authority morality *does* have over our daily lives and what authority it *should* have. He writes, "it is often presumed that the demands of morality are inherently preemptive—in other words, that they must always be accorded an overriding precedence over all other interests and claims. This strikes me as implausible."[19] On this point, Frankfurt and Williams agree. The reason it seems implausible, for Frankfurt, has to do with how we circumscribe what falls under the scope of morality. For Frankfurt, "morality is most particularly concerned with how our attitudes and our actions should take into account the needs, the desires, and the entitlements of other people." It is here that he rightly asks, "why must *that* [the needs, the desires, and the entitlements of others] be regarded as being, without exception, the most compelling thing in our lives?"[20]

Thus, Frankfurt makes clear two important points: first, that he shares with Williams a deep suspicion of treating moral principles as an unquestionable authority for action guidance. For Frankfurt and Williams, morality thus conceived, at its core, is an artificially narrow set of concerns that have, through the corrupting forces of philosophical inquiry, disfigured and obscured some important questions about how we ought to live. Both think that the kinds of concerns that morality imposes on us as universally binding and overridingly important are simply not all there is to knowing how one ought to live. More than this, Frankfurt's concern is to delineate the various kinds of values that are important for living well, but clearly fall outside the boundaries of what is by now considered "moral" concerns. Frankfurt's aim is, in part, to flesh out how concepts like love and caring provide an important facet of practical reasoning that is both vital to our own happiness but also entirely left out of the concerns of morality.

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[19] *Ibid.*, 7.

[20] *Ibid.,* 7. Instead, Frankfurt later tells us that, "the most fundamental issues of practical reason cannot be resolved [...] without an account of what people love." (57).

Let us now examine how this general criticism applies to Williams. Recall Frankfurt's claim that Williams' example is out of focus. What is important about the man's relationship to his drowning wife is not that she is his wife but that *he loves her*. Surely, this is what Williams meant. But Frankfurt continues, if the man does love his wife, "it certainly would be incongruous for him to look for a reason to save her. If he truly does love her, then he necessarily already has that reason."[21] Thus, Frankfurt tells us, *any thought at all* is one thought too many.

A more serious criticism of Williams' view crystallizes later, when Frankfurt is discussing the nature of love and its normative status. He tells us that, "there is among philosophers a recurrent hope that there are certain final ends whose unconditional adoption might be shown to be in some way a requirement of reason."[22] Frankfurt thinks that this is misguided. For, "there are no necessities of logic or rationality that dictate what we are to love." He continues, "the origins of normativity do not lie, then, either in the transient incitements of personal feeling and desire [as Williams claims], or in the severely anonymous requirements of eternal reason [such as impartial principles]. They lie in the contingent necessities of love."[23] Thus, Frankfurt illustrates what is wrong with Williams' account: Williams rightly excludes the impartial principles ("severely anonymous requirements of eternal reason") from the domain of normatively relevant moral concerns, but instead located the normative content of morality in the "transient incitements of personal feeling and desire," which according to Frankfurt, is just another version of the same type of mistake Williams criticizes. On Frankfurt's view, Williams rightly eliminates impartial moral principles as the source of morality's normative force but replaces them with an arbitrary source: the partial nature of our personal relationships.

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[21] *Ibid*., 37.
[22] *Ibid*., 47.
[23] *Ibid*., 48.

While Frankfurt shares with Williams a deep suspicion of moral theory, including the use of impartial moral principles, the Frankfurt's suspicion also extends to the latter's account of the primary subject of morality itself. As such, Williams' account rests on subjective and unjustified assumptions about what counts as specifically moral concerns. If the upshot of Williams' criticism of impartial moral principles is supposed to be that they do not properly account for the rightfully partial nature of our personal relationships, Frankfurt asks, why must partiality in our personal relationships be the primary concern of morality? What justification do we have for excluding more abstract concerns like fairness, justice or the greater good of mankind?

Frankfurt's broader criticism is that what, for Williams, counts as morally pressing—our subjective experience and partial personal relationships—is itself in need of justification.[24] How, can we rightly exclude impartial moral principles from moral deliberation entirely without some such justification? These more abstract concerns are, in theory, what impartial moral principles are designed to account for. Without some impartial evaluation of our actions towards others, we are prone to neglecting our obligations towards those we do not love or particularly care about. In so doing, Frankfurt opens the door to a deeper criticism of Williams: the theoretical study of morality leaves unexamined the fact that *everything hangs on what is considered to be a moral value*.[25] Whether a moral system strikes us as cold and alienating or inviting and holistic depends entirely on what kinds of values are considered to be moral and which are considered nonmoral. The most pressing criticism of the enterprise of moral theory, one that includes a criticism of Williams' view as well, is that what counts as moral at all, what falls within the domain of

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[24] *Ibid.,* 48.

[25] Although Frankfurt's focus is not squarely on examining the assumptions of Williams alone, his criticism of Williams' example suggests that this general criticism of the foundations of modern moral theory apply equally to Williams.

morality is itself arbitrary and subjective. Moreover, the kinds of actions and expectations that are deemed acceptable or obligatory within any particular moral system is in part determined by how the scope of moral concerns is defined. The point is this: if what counts as a moral concern is itself in need of justification, what justification could we possibly give for why *these* concerns (and not *some others*) are overridingly important and must be given precedence over and above all others?

I think that Wolf fails to address this deeper criticism of Williams—more is out of focus than merely the example. Does her reading of Williams have the resources to answer his criticism? More pointedly, does it provide non-arbitrary grounds for excluding impartial principles from the domain of moral deliberation? I don't think so. On Wolf's view, Williams is simply making a negative point: that impartial moral principles are both (i) not always relevant to practical moral deliberation and (ii) that they do not contain, in virtue of the requirements of rationality itself, the source of the normativity of morality.

But this response, we've shown, isn't enough. The point of discussing Frankfurt's view was to gesture toward a deeper problem for modern moral theory. Namely, if the boundaries of what one designates as properly moral concerns will, in part, determine the content of any particular moral theory, how can one justify setting the boundaries of morality where one does? How can we hold on to Williams' criticism of impartial principles without some justification for his alternative?

I think that the best available option for modern moral theory is to return to Aristotle and a virtue ethics approach. However, Wolf rejects such a view in her discussion of "virtuous attention." For, Wolf writes, "we can imagine a person coming to develop the right values nonverbally through a process of training and habituation, whose values shape his perceptions in

ways that lead him infallibly to do the right thing without further thought."[26] Surely, part of what

it means to be virtuous in Aristotle's sense is to be disposed to the right thing, for the right

reasons, to the right extent and in the right way.[27] The question is then, how *should* one

deliberate? Such an account can easily make sense of a form of deliberation that does not consult

impartial principles. Instead, the locus of Aristotle's account of deliberation is his discussion of

habituation and the development of virtuous character. An Aristotelian account of proper

habituation and education will have the advantage of (i) putting distance between deliberation

and consultation with impartial principles and (ii) explaining how one can come to properly

know when deliberation is necessary.

Our discussion of Aristotle will not answer all of Frankfurt's questions. In particular, by

examining the virtuous attention view, we are tacitly conceding Frankfurt's broad position—that

normative force of modern moral theories is in need of greater justification if it is to be "the most

important thing in our lives."[28] Our suggestion, then, will be that if we grant that Frankfurt is

correct, and the justification moral principles will itself require further justification, this is itself a

good reason to consider virtuous attention as a viable alternative to moral theories based on the

use of general principles. The following section will demonstrate the plausibility of the virtuous

attention view as a genuine alternative to the Standard View.

5   A DEFENSE OF THE VIRTUOUS ATTENTION VIEW

Recall that according to Wolf, the virtuous attention view is an attempt to explain how an

ideal moral agent would come to know what circumstances are appropriate for consulting the

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[26] Wolf (2015), 150. To be sure, I do not take Wolf to be suggesting here that the virtuous agent will never
have to deliberate. For, even if we hold that the virtuous agent is infallible (which we need not) it does not
follow that she will always, without deliberating, sense what to do.

[27] Importantly, this does *not* mean that Aristotle's virtuous agent never deliberates about what to do.

[28] Frankfurt (2004), 7.

impartial moral view. On this view, the ideal moral agent learns, via a process of proper habitation and character development, when impartial moral principles are irrelevant for acting well here and now. So far so good. However, as Wolf notes, such an account of would have to carry with it an explanation of how the agent could come to have such knowledge. When *should* one deliberate, and does that deliberation necessarily require a consultation with impartial principles? What we must demonstrate, then, is that it is a mistake to read Aristotle's account of deliberation and habituation as a kind of straightforward rule-following. If we can develop an account of Aristotelian habituation to virtue without the operation of such explicit or latent impartial rules, then we will have successfully distinguished the virtuous attention view as a legitimate alternative to—rather than a variation of—the Standard View.

For Aristotle, habituation is a part of the process of acquiring virtue. It is important to note straight away that the term "habit" is a rather uninformative translation from the Latin *habitus* or *habeō*, which itself is a thin translation from the Greek *hexis.* By "habit," Aristotle isn't picking out the kinds of passive, unconscious states we use to describe why we bite our nails or tap our toes. Instead, Aristotle means a kind of active state of the soul that can liberate us from our *original* habits such as, among others, our tendency (especially when we are young) to immediately yield to impulse and desire.

In *NE* 2.1, Aristotle tells us that virtue must be acquired through doing virtuous acts. To explain how this works, he makes an analogy to craft knowledge: people become good builders as a result of building well, and bad ones as a result of building badly (*NE* 1103b10-13). The same is true of the virtues. For Aristotle, it is the way that we behave in our dealings with others that makes us just or unjust, and the way that we behave in the face of danger (accustoming ourselves to be timid or confident) makes us brave or cowardly. To produce a disposition to do

what is virtuous one must, at minimum, practice those deeds that are representative of a virtuous character (*NE*1103a15-18). But the craft analogy has limits. Unlike learning to build, acting well isn't enough to acquire virtue. For Aristotle, we must also take pleasure in acting well. So, one who abstains from bodily pleasures and *enjoys the very fact of doing so* is temperate, and if he finds it irksome he is licentious[29] (*NE* 1104b1-5). Acquiring virtue, then, is not a matter of learning to follow implicit procedures, but of having reliable motives, expressed in chosen actions, which will themselves not be chosen by any rigid procedure. But how are we to *learn* to act from the right motivation, in the right way, to the right degree, and feel the right way about it without any impartial principles, latent or otherwise?

To answer this, we must look closely at Aristotle's view of ethical development.[30] In order to be the kind of person who deliberates about how to achieve virtuous ends a lot of things need to go right in the agent's childhood—they must be fed, clothed, and generally taken care of. But the child also starts with a certain unreasoned sense of what is good that is made familiar to them by their parents and educators. In order for a child to one day be virtuous, he must be brought up such that he is familiar with basic notions of virtue from early in his education. From here, the child develops a general evaluative (but thus far unreasoned) attitude toward virtue, one that involves learning to hold themselves ready and being open to the world in a certain way— namely, to do virtuous actions. They do the right action but they do not yet know *why* it is right. In this sense, habituation is only a mere preparatory stage for virtue. But through habituation toward virtuous action over time, the learner develops a sense for both doing what is right and

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[29] It is interesting to note that Aristotle isn't consistent about this. For instance, in *NE* II.3 he tells us that the courageous man "stands his ground against terrible things and delights in this or at least is not pained." (1104b5-7) Translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* here and elsewhere are translated by Joe Sachs. Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2002.

[30] For a detailed account of ethical education in Aristotle, see Burnyeat (1980).

taking pleasure in doing so. The growth of pleasure from doing virtuous acts goes hand-in-hand with the internalization of practical wisdom. With a love of the virtuous, the agent must then connect his unreasoned evaluative responses that he gained from his education with the correct objects. On this view, our desires are generated by our habituated dispositions, and those desires set the ends toward which practical deliberation aims.

In his introduction to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Joe Sachs explains how the process works by analogizing it the way a child learns a native language.[31] By watching and listening those around her, the child picks up familiar patterns and responses to certain people, objects and tones. But according to Sachs, while surely the child must learn a set of rules, this can't be the whole story. For, if we simply *told* the child the rules of language, we would be useless to them, since they do not yet know the language. Instead, it is the child that must do all the work, where mastery of the language is "something that the deepest things in them reach out to grasp."[32] Language learning isn't merely a kind of rule-following. While the particular language the child learn comes from without—that is, they learn from others—it is not *imposed on them* as only a set of rigid rules. Instead, it is something the child reaches for and actively aims at. I think that this is exactly the way that Aristotle thinks we learn the practical virtues.

On this view, Aristotle's virtuous agent doesn't subconsciously follow principled directives about how to act in any given case. What's more, this agent is not concerned with 'morality,' construed in our modern sense. This sense of morality is concerned with a set of impartial constraints on behavior, especially constraints that are concerned with what sort of regard we should have towards others. Indeed, the Latin derivation of "mores" emphasizes a

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[31] Sachs (2002), xiii.
[32] *Ibid.,* xiii.

sense of social expectation, while the Greek word from which "ethics is derived [ηθική] connotes a sense of individual character. As a result, the term "morality" has developed a much more narrow scope. For Aristotle, practical wisdom (and the virtues of character) encompass all of our actions and concerns as a whole, both self-regarding and other-regarding, 'moral' and not. See, for instance, his discussion of 'wittiness' as the virtue concerned with carrying on entertaining conversations well, NE 4.8. Learning how to carry on conversation well is a practical skill that you learn by doing and having the right sort of experience, and cannot plausibly be thought of as having an explicit or implicit set of general rules that one applies to the particular situation in order to be witty. Thus the heart of Wolf's rejection of the virtuous attention view rests on a faulty understanding of what is involved in Aristotle's version of habituation to virtue. On the Standard View, deliberation involves, in every case, consultation with a principle that does not take stock of our commitments to values outside of the scope of morality. In contrast, developing virtuous character doesn't necessitate any procedural consultation with an impartial principle. For Aristotle, this involves learning certain ways of reacting, seeing, feeling, and understanding which aim at establishing durable patterns of action.

To be clear, there are two problems with imposing impartial moral rules on Aristotle's account. First, given his discussion of practical wisdom and habituation,[33] the virtuous person is not following a latent set of rules. To conceive of Aristotle's account as rule-following in any relevant sense is distorting. Second, given what Aristotle says about friendship he's partial in his ethics.[34] Imposing requirements of impartiality as constitutive of the moral point of view would require abandoning the kind of partiality that Aristotle thinks is inherent in the nature of our

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[33] See his discussion in *NE* 2 and *NE* 6.
[34] See especially *NE* VIII-IX (and elsewhere).

personal relationships. For him, our settled state of character is the result of not only our education, but also the choices we make and the actions we take as a result. Such choices are influenced by rational deliberation about taking means to ends, but this deliberation works nothing like the rigid imposition of any deductive chain of reasoning, moving from some impartial principle, whether it be it a categorical imperative or a principle for maximizing utility, to some particular action. Moreover, to talk solely of those *actions* is to ignore what makes Aristotle's practically wise person, the *phronimos*, different from the rest of us. On Aristotle's view, actions are the terminus of a long process that presupposes a lot about the agent. In acting, the agent demonstrates (i) that she has identified the situation as requiring a response at all, ii) a set of reactive emotions that mark that response, and (iii) desires and beliefs about how and for the sake of what one should act.

How does this relate to Wolf's claim about the role of impartial principles? The point is that if we isolate the exterior moment of action as a straightforward application of an impartial moral rule, then we have effectively ignored what separates the virtuous from the rest. The problem with Wolf's discussion of virtuous attention is that it drastically oversimplifies the connection between the exterior moment of action and the interior cognitive and affective processes that characterize the properly habituated agent.

Let me say more about what is meant by "properly habituated" on the virtuous attention view. For Aristotle, the process of being habituated to virtue isn't a quantitative process of adjustment like tuning a radio dial.[35] Instead, it's a qualitative positioning between different kinds of vice. Sachs encapsulates this point when describing what kind of mean Aristotle claims virtue

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[35] Surprisingly, some scholars think that it is. For example, Fred Seddon (1997) tells us that when striving for courage, "cowardice is -5 while rashness is 3 [...] In our number language [..] Always try to lower the absolute value of your vice." (1997, 101).

to be. He tells us that virtue is the condition of the soul in which all its powers work together, making it possible for an action to engage the whole human being.[36] This condition is a kind of mean, but not in any arithmetic or quantitative sense. Finding virtue isn't like tuning a cello or calibrating a compass. Instead, "virtue is a mean, first because it only emerges out of the stand-off between pairs of opposite habits, but second because it chooses to take its stand not in any of those habits but between them."[37] In this middle region, thinking does come into play, but it is not correct to say that virtue takes its stand *in principle*. Aristotle makes clear that vice is a principled choice; namely, to follow some extreme path toward or away from pleasure (*NE* 1146b22-33). On this view, the formation of one's character isn't a process that requires, in all cases, consultation with any impartial (and certainly not *moral*) principle.

Principles are certainly useful things, but exclusive and inflexible adherence to any of them would be a severe departure from Aristotle's understanding of virtue.[38] Indeed, Aristotle tells us to look for just so much precision in our inquiries as the nature of the subject admits. So, when discussing messy subjects, "one ought to be content [...] to point out the truth roughly and in outline, and when speaking about things that are so for the most part, and reasoning from things of that sort, to reach conclusions that are also of that sort" (*NE* 1094b20-23). Tying this discussion to the use of principles in deliberation, Aristotle points out that, "at what point and for how much of a deviation [from right action] one is to be blamed is not easy to determine by a formulation, for no other perceptible thing is either; such things are in the particulars, and the judgment is in the perceiving" (*NE* 1109b21-23).

What Wolf fails to see is how Aristotle's account of habituation and practical deliberation

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[36] Sachs (2002), xvii.

[37] *Ibid.*, xx.

[38] Indeed, part of virtuous character, on this reading, is to be able to accurately and charitably identify exceptions to principled rules.

leads to practical knowledge without the rigid rule-following that characterizes the Standard

View; and that is because she fails to articulate how virtue acquisition works. For Aristotle,

virtue acquisition looks more like the process of language learning, one that does not necessitate

any straightforward, nor latent consultation with impartial principles. Such an imposition is

simply foreign to his account. For, "even when we impose habits on ourselves, what remains has

nothing of the original purpose, but only a passive and mechanical response to a superficial

sameness in outer circumstances."[39] For Aristotle, learning to be virtuous is not becoming

disciplined to some mindless uniformity, nor is it a passively mechanical response. Instead, it is a

flexible stability in discerning the particulars of a situation and reading its salient characteristics.

Such a reasoning process represents the point of view of experience and reflective judgment,

which corrects for individual biases—all this doesn't look much like the Standard View.

The point of view of Aristotle's *phronimos* is always a *human* point of view, constituted

by emotional as well as rational capacities. In other words, when deciding what to do in any

particular situation, the *phronimos* is not required to consult the abstract deliberative point of

view of *anyone* who might be faced with that same dilemma. For, part of what it means to hit the

mean is to be sensitive to specific circumstances, while also being aware of one's own particular

biases and correcting for them. Such sensitive reasoning is non-procedural; it is a figuring out by

improvising in a sense, by accurately seeing and being affected by the concrete details in the

right way (*NE* 1106b15).[40] Thus the *phronimos* is never truly legislative—neither applying

general rules to specific cases, nor constructing general rules from the circumstances at hand—

but rather, her actions are constrained by a concern for harmonizing a particular end with other

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[39] Sachs (2002), xiv.

[40] For more on Aristotle's view of habituation and morality, see Sherman (1987), (1989).

ends in her life. Partiality, then, is essential to Aristotle's conception of practical virtue.

To illustrate this point, consider the drowning example once again, but this time with the *phronimos* as the actor. Upon recognizing *that* his wife was drowning, Aristotle's virtuous agent—having developed a disposition to promote the life of those he cares for—would act without prior deliberation. The motivation for doing so is not the application of any impartial principle to the circumstances, but rather, a habituated desire to promote the life of his beloved. But is he required to deliberate after the fact, reflecting upon the goodness of his action? Not necessarily. For, the habituation of Aristotle's *phronimos* does not learn to follow *all and only* impartial principles, the proper application of which designate actions as "morally good." Even if he were to deliberate in this case, what would he deliberate about? Is it whether saving his wife was a good thing to do, whether it was morally permissible?[41] Does he really deliberate about *whether doing so counts as good*? Surely not. For, if he loves her, he already believes that.

6   CONCLUSION

To tie our discussion together, we must again ask: How is virtuous attention *not* a variation of the Standard View? For Wolf, the latter's defining feature is that, in order for any particular action to be morally permissible, it must be shown as such *via* an impartial principle. According to Wolf, the only difference between the virtuous attention view and the Standard View is a shift in the class of situations in which consulting an impartial moral view is necessary. On Wolf's view, this feature remains even if we develop some account of how an agent can come to know what the right situations for consulting the impartial moral view are. But is anything like this going on in Aristotle's account of habituation and virtue acquisition?

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[41] We might reasonably add a third reason; namely, that Aristotle's virtuous agent would not be concerned with anything like properly moral concerns. Instead, his primary concern is the well-being of his wife, the secondary concern being the development of his character.

My answer is no—Wolf's characterization of virtuous attention doesn't fit with Aristotle's account of habituation and practical deliberation. Perhaps it isn't meant to. But a proper treatment of Aristotle on this point would actually strengthen Wolf's reading of Williams by providing a positive alternative to the Standard View. Specifically, we saw that such an account can explain (i) how the ideal agent can deliberate without necessarily (in every case) consulting an impartial moral principle and (ii) an idea of how the ideal agent can come to know when to deliberate and when such deliberation is entirely irrelevant. Aristotle's ethics, properly understood, provides a path toward exactly what Wolf is asking for—a life that is not unconditionally committed to satisfying the demands of morality.

The primary task of such a life, expressed by John Dewey, "is to know when to leave acts without distinctive moral judgment [...] The serious matter is that this relative pragmatic, or intellectual, distinction between the moral and non-moral, has been solidified into a fixed and absolute distinction, so that some acts are properly regarded as forever within and others forever without the moral domain."[42] It is this fixed and absolute distinction that Wolf and Williams point us to and that Aristotle delivers us from. Our focus on virtuous attention represents a small step toward a life where "relief from continuous moral activity [...] is itself a moral necessity."[43]

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[42] John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), 40.

[43] *Ibid.*, 40.

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