

*Impartiality, Compassion, and Modal Imagination* \*  
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*I. Impartiality*

By using the term "modal imagination," I want to call attention to a specific feature of imagination as we ordinarily conceive it. This is that we can imagine not only what actually exists, such as the computer screen now in front of me, but also what might have existed in the present or past, or might someday exist in the future, such as a vintage restored 1950 Remington Rand typewriter. The term *modal imagination* is intended to remind us of our capacity to envision what is possible in addition to what is actual.

We need modal imagination in order to extend our conception of reality - and, in particular, of human beings - beyond our immediate experience in the indexical present; and we need to do this in order to preserve the significance of human interaction. To make this leap of imagination successfully is to achieve not only insight but also an impartial perspective on our own and others' inner states. This perspective is a necessary condition of experiencing compassion for others. This is the primary thesis I will try to defend in this discussion.

My strategy for defending this thesis will be to offer a conceptual analysis of compassion. Therefore, although compassion is itself a substantive moral concept, nothing I say here carries any particular normative commitment to the relatively central or peripheral role I think compassion should play in a substantive moral theory. So, for example, the analysis that follows is consistent with a substantive moral theory that advocates the motivational priority of moral duty (or, for that matter, personal loyalty) over compassion when the two conflict. I try to develop metaethical criteria that constrain the choice of an adequate substantive moral theory elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

On the following analysis, compassion involves modal imagination, empathy, sympathy, a disposition to render aid or mercy, and what I will describe as *strict impartiality*, for which a conceptual analysis also will be furnished. Strict impartiality will be shown to differ from impartiality in the ordinary sense, by adhering more closely than impartiality in the ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian M. S. Piper, "Seeing Things," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (suppl., "Moral Epistemology") 29 (1991): 29-60.

sense to the spirit as well as to the letter of what impartiality in the ordinary sense explicitly requires. This is the secondary thesis I want to defend.

However, strict impartiality will be shown to be similar to impartiality in the ordinary sense, in that both are metaethical requirements on substantive moral principles of judgment and conduct, rather than substantive moral principles themselves. In the ordinary sense, a substantive principle is *inherently* impartial if it contains no proper names or rigged definite descriptions. But an inherently impartial principle may be *applied* prejudicially if it is applied only in some relevant circumstances and not others, or applied to suit the interests of some individuals and not others, or applied on the basis of attributes irrelevant to those explicitly picked out by the principle. So, for example, I violate the metaethical requirement of impartiality if I apply the principle of hiring the most competent candidate for the job only to the pool of candidates selected from a particular club or class or race. This applicative notion of impartiality is also part of the ordinary usage of the concept. I will be concerned with impartiality in this sense, in which it is the application rather than the formulation of the principle that is at issue.

In the applicative sense, to be impartial in one's *judgment* is to ascribe an evaluative predicate to a subject on the basis of the attribute or attributes the predicate denotes rather than on the basis of some other, irrelevant attribute which one happens to value or disvalue. Without knowing what the substantive judgment is and on what attributes it is based, there is no way of determining whether or not one has judged impartially. For example, my judgment that you would make a particularly entertaining dinner guest is impartial if it is based on the high quality of your conversation and social skills, and biased if it is based on your impressive professional connections. Without knowing what it is I am judging and on what attributive basis, whether or not my judgment is impartial cannot be determined.

Note that the impartiality of my judgment has nothing to do with whether or not I bear some personal relation to you, that is, with how impersonal I am in making the judgment. Thus, basing my judgment of your suitability as a dinner guest on your professional connections does not require that I be in the process of considering whether to invite you to dinner, or if I am, that I desire access to your impressive professional connections. There is nothing about failing to stand in personal relation to you that insures impartiality of judgment, and nothing about standing in such relation that precludes it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, this is not to deny that standing in a certain kind of personal relationship to you may tempt me to bias the application of my substantive principle in your favor,

Similarly, to *treat* others impartially is to be guided consistently in one's behavior toward them by an inherently impartial, substantive principle of conduct, such that one acts as the principle prescribes and in accordance with the attributes its evaluative predicates denote and not in accordance with other, irrelevant attributes one happens to value or disvalue. Again, without knowing what the substantive principle of conduct is, and on what attributive basis I am applying it, there is no way of determining whether or not my treatment of the other is impartial. So, for example, you cannot know whether I have treated you impartially in hiring you for the job unless you know, first, that my choice is guided by the principle of hiring the most competent candidate for the job, and second, that I have hired you because of your competence and not because of your club, class, or race. I will be concerned with impartiality in this latter sense, in which it is the application of inherently impartial principles of conduct (rather than principles of judgment) that is at issue. My argument will be that compassion is a substantive moral emotion that disposes one to apply the substantive principle of rendering aid to the needy and satisfies the metaethical requirement of strict impartiality (as I will define it).

Lawrence Blum's view of impartiality differs from mine with respect to at least two of these claims. First, Blum criticizes Kantian moral theories on the grounds that in assigning a major role to impartiality, they thereby "deny a substantial role to sympathy, compassion, and concern in morality and moral motivation."<sup>3</sup> Although Blum does not define what he means by "compassion," he does say about impartiality that it involves "not giving weight to one's own preferences and interests simply because they are one's own, but rather giving equal weight to the interests of all... favoring none simply because of personal preference" (p. 44). Impartiality, on Blum's conception, is not an appropriate requirement where friendship is concerned (pp. 46-66). My argument will imply that, like compassion, genuine friendship - as opposed to excessive dependency or insensitivity - would be impossible without it.

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e.g., if I want to curry your favor or avoid incurring your wrath. But this is just to acknowledge that impersonality, which is a psychological state, may, under certain circumstances, facilitate adherence to impartiality, which is a cognitive norm. It is not to conflate the two, and there is no psychological reason to suppose that they must always go hand in hand. I discuss this distinction at greater length in "Moral Theory and Moral Alienation," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 102-18.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 3. Henceforth, all page references to this work will be parenthesized in the text.

Second, Blum's characterization of impartiality as "giving equal weight to the interests of all,... favoring none simply because of personal preference" does not clearly identify impartiality as a metaethical rather than a substantive moral principle. It thus leaves open the conceptual possibility of substantive *pseudoimpartialist* principles which might, for example, require one to treat everyone with a similar degree of detachment, or to distribute resources in exactly equal amounts to everyone, or to ascribe to everyone, including oneself, exactly the same predicates, all regardless of attributive basis. These principles would prescribe a policy not of impartiality but of indiscriminacy. As substantive moral principles they would be very peculiar, and I know of no philosopher who holds any one of them. They would also violate the metaethical principles of impartiality in judgment and treatment earlier described, since the indiscriminacy of their application would be inherently biased against certain cases identifiably demanding of special consideration by virtue of circumstance.

Blum himself does not explicitly describe the target of his criticism in substantive pseudoimpartialist terms. But he does contrast what he thinks impartiality requires with what he thinks compassion requires with respect to substantive moral conduct. Since compassion is a substantive moral concept, this contrast suggests that he views impartiality as a substantive moral concept as well. I find this interpretation implausible for the reasons just mentioned. So I will assume in what follows that we both mean to address the concept of impartiality as a metaethical criterion for the correct application of substantive moral principles.

## *II. Modal Imagination*

Begin by considering what our conception of human beings would be like without the modal aspect of imagination. We would be able to recollect experiences and emotions we had had, as well as mentally to envisage objects, events, and states of affairs we were presently experiencing. Images of familiar human bodies, stationary and in motion, silent and audible, as well as some of our intellectual, psychological, and sensory reactions to them, and our present reactions to those, would be among the items accessible to memory and visualization. Our conception of human beings would consist, roughly, in our sensory experience of ourselves and other human bodies, plus our complex reactions to them. We might experience cravings, needs, desires, and intentions in ourselves. But we could envisage neither absent objects of desire nor ourselves satisfying those desires, since this would require us to imagine a possibility of action that we had not yet experienced (of course, this is not to deny that we might in fact satisfy them nevertheless). A nonmodal

conception of human beings, then, would be one in which our intentional states were experienced as events without foreseeable consequences.

Nor could we envisage other people satisfying their cravings, needs, desires, or intentions, for the same reason. In fact, we could not imagine other people having these or any of the other inner experiences that constitute our interiority. Thoughts, emotions, desires, and sensory responses would constitute part of our conception of ourselves, but not part of our conception of others. Since each of us can experience only our own responses and not someone else's, and since we could imagine only what we had experienced, others' experience would not be accessible to our imagination at all.

Without the capacity to envisage events or states of affairs other than those we ourselves were experiencing or had experienced, we would be unable to identify our experiences in terms of universally applicable concepts, concepts that apply equally well to classes of events that may occur in the future or might have occurred in the past, in addition to those that are occurring in the present or did occur in the past. This means that, in particular, the concepts in terms of which we understood even our own inner states would be extremely limited. For example, no quantity of recurrences of certain kinds of emotional state would be sufficient to lead us to formulate the concept of love, or fear, or anger, or joy as we actually understand those concepts, because the application of each extends past the experiences we have actually had forward into a possible future and backward into a counterfactually possible past. So not only would others' inner states be imaginatively inaccessible to us but our insight into our own would be almost nonexistent, or at least extremely primitive. We would experience our inner states as we do subtle changes in the weather for which we have no words.

Without the concepts that denote at least our own inner states, our capacity to reason about them or others - to draw analogies, inferences, and conclusions, or to make inductive empirical generalizations about them - would be correspondingly crippled. For example, we might be able to juxtapose two or more experiences we had had, and perhaps even note the differences and similarities among them. But we could supply no term to any analogy that required us to posit an experience that was in some respect unlike any we had had. So, in particular, I could not draw any analogy between any experience I had had and one you might have. Because your having an experience is not itself an experience I would have had, I would have no basis on which to conceive the possibility of your having an experience at all. Thus I might experience the piano landing on my toe, resultant shooting pains in my toe, and myself jumping up and down holding my foot, the surrounding visual horizon rising and falling accordingly. But from my observation of the piano landing on *your* toe and *your* jumping up and down holding your foot, I would fail to supply the corresponding

sensations of the piano's landing on your toe, the resultant shooting pains, or your jumping up and down. Because I experienced my own behavior entirely first-personally and yours entirely third-personally, I would be unable to detect the relevant similarities between my behavior and yours. I would lack the imaginative basis on which to make even the simplest inference from the one to the other.

The result would be a primitively self-centered and narrowly concrete conception of human beings, in which the most vivid and memorable events were intrinsically tied to our sensory experience of others as mobile physical beings, and our intellectual and emotional responses to it and them. This conception would be *primitively self-centered* in that the criterion of significance in evaluating and judging our own and others' behavior would be some function of our own visceral response to them: the psychological quality of our reaction, for example; or its degree of pleasantness or vividness; or the ability of that behavior to arrest our attention. A primitively self-centered conception of others is not necessarily a selfish conception of them, since it does not necessarily evaluate and judge others' behavior with respect to the satisfaction of one's own needs and interests. A primitively self-centered conception is, rather, one that evaluates and judges another's behavior in accordance with the centrality of one's own experience: other people are more or less important or valuable, and their behavior more or less interesting or worthy of note, insofar as they viscerally move one - in whatever direction - to a greater or lesser degree. A primitively self-centered conception of others reverses the psychologically and morally intuitive order of events in moral appraisal: ordinarily it is supposed that we are moved by an event or action or state of affairs because it is significant. An agent who holds a primitively self-centered conception of others regards an event or action or state of affairs as significant because she is moved by it.

The conception of human beings that resulted from a nonmodal imagination would also be *narrowly concrete* in that our view of ourselves and others would be neither informed nor inflamed by implicit, tentative suppositions regarding our or their internal motivations, thoughts, or emotional states; by hopes or expectations about our or their future behavior; or by speculations on possible courses of action revealed by our or their present behavior. We can assume for the sake of argument that our own motives, thoughts, and emotional states would be experientially accessible to us in some conceptually limited way, perhaps as schematic conjunctions of images.<sup>4</sup> But we would lack the capacity to speculate on the conceptual

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<sup>4</sup> I make this concession to non-Kantians only because considerations of space preclude more extended argument to the effect that without modal imagination and bona fide

identity of those states in ourselves, just as we would lack the capacity to conceive them as being of any sort at all in others. Nor could we plan for the future, aspire to achieve goals, or consider alternative courses of action we might take. Our mental lives would be restricted to experiencing our present inner states and remembering past ones, and observing others' behavior and reacting to its impact on us.

Our social relations would be correspondingly bereft. Communications about plans, hopes, dreams, or desires would be nonexistent, as would the corresponding dimensions of personal character these intentional states express. The very ideas of sharing one's thoughts, reaching agreement, or achieving understanding with another would be unintelligible. Such relations might be somewhat more vivid to sensation without the intervention of suppositions and expectations about the other. But they would also be harsher, bleaker, and inchoate. They would lack the significance and depth conferred by our implicit presumption of potential. They would lack the richness of mutual insight conferred by shared emotions and thoughts. And there would be no place in such relationships for the mutual contentment and familiarity borne of a common worldview or value commitment, or for the cooperative behavior that makes them possible.

Many of us have occasionally experienced primitively self-centered and narrowly concrete relationships, whether as object or as subject. Ordinarily we think of them as unsatisfactory and without future, and we try to improve or move past them. In the scenario I have been envisioning, in which modal imagination of alternative possibilities is foreclosed, even the conceptual possibility of moving past such dead-end relationships would be foreclosed as well. Virtually our entire ability to think about and understand our experience, both of ourselves and of others, as well as our ability to coordinate our behavior with others presuppose the functioning of modal imagination. Those inclined to Cartesian skepticism about the existence of other minds need to be reminded of the centrality of modal imagination to the functioning of human social and mental life. And their verificationist fears need to be met with a reminder of what that life would be like without it.

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concept formation we would have no first-personal access to our motives, thoughts, or emotional states at all. Nothing of consequence for my argument turns on this concession. I take up this issue in greater detail in "Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism," *Philosophical Forum* (in press).

### III. Self-Absorption and Vicarious Possession

Next consider two extremes of imaginative object. At one end of the spectrum, there is the kind one effortlessly calls to mind with no cue beyond that of a momentary association or verbal description. For example, I now ask you to imagine yourself rising from your seat, flapping your arms vigorously, and sailing aloft. It probably does not require very much mental concentration for you to activate the required visual imagery and subliminal sensations; the mere verbal description may suffice. However, easy come, easy go. Virtually any actual internal or external cue will suffice to banish that fantasy: the ringing of the telephone, your shifting in your chair, or something you read here that momentarily catches your attention. Call this a *surface object* of imagination. At the other end of the spectrum, *depth objects* of imagination call forth a deeper psychological investment of energy and attention. They occupy a larger proportion of one's waking consciousness, and may either replace or vividly enhance reality as one experiences it. For example, I read a first-person account by a battered wife of her experiences, and my emotions as well as my thoughts are fully engaged, not only as I am reading but afterward as well. My imaginative reconstruction replaces reality as I am absorbing her story and alters my view of the world afterward. Most imaginative objects lie somewhere between these two.

Clearly this taxonomy of imaginative objects is far from exhaustive. Nor does it sort imaginative objects into those we visualize and those we conceive in some more abstract or schematic sense: I may be deeply involved in imagining the outlines of my cosmological theory of the universe, or only momentarily distracted by the visual image of the groceries I must purchase on the way home. Whereas nonmodal imagination precludes imaginative conceptualization, modal imagination, as already suggested, supplements rationality to produce it.

Nor does the distinction between depth and surface objects of imagination classify such objects by content: Penrod Scofield was so fully engaged by the first-described fantasy that even Miss Spence's repeated shouting scarcely sufficed to return him to the reality of the classroom. Rather, I mean to distinguish among such objects of imagination according to the degree of one's momentary experiential involvement in them. Some such objects hold us in their grip, while others slide over the surface of our awareness while barely disrupting our emotional and psychological state at all.

Sometimes we treat as objects of surface imagination those we are called upon to treat in depth. For example, charitable concerns often bulk mail letters to potential contributors that describe in vivid detail the plight of those for whom they wish to garner support. Upon receiving these mailings, one



skims the letter, barely registering the import of the words, before tossing it in the trash. Conversely, we may treat in depth imaginative objects that are more deserving of surface treatment. For example, one may die a thousand deaths imagining in excruciating detail the possibility that one may flub a line the next time one presents a paper. The vividness of this scenario may overwhelm one with such serious anxiety or depression that it interferes with one's sleep patterns. In both of these cases, something has gone awry. In the first, one's level of imaginative involvement is, at least on the face of it, insufficiently responsive to another person's real crisis - a predicament that demands a considered and fully attentive response. In the second case, one's level of imaginative involvement is excessively responsive to an inconsequential possibility that can be prevented easily (e.g., by rehearsing a few times beforehand one's delivery of the paper).

Naturally, each of these inappropriate imaginative responses could be directed toward the other imaginative object. It may be, for example, that one is so engaged in dying a thousand deaths while reading about the plight of the disadvantaged that one can scarcely collect oneself sufficiently to take out one's checkbook. Alternately, one may treat so offhandedly the possibility of flubbing a line in one's paper that one neglects even to review the arguments therein, much less rehearse one's delivery of them. In each of these cases, one's level of involvement with the imaginative object is either too deep or too superficial relative to other, more pressing, considerations.

What considerations? The first example, in which one fails to register the import of another person's serious crisis, suggests the violation of a moral norm of conduct, that one should be responsive rather than insensitive to another's suffering. But in the second through fourth examples, some different requirement of proportion seems to have been violated. For instance, responsiveness to another's suffering that is so excessive that it incapacitates one from acting does not seem to exhibit any of the familiar *moral* defects of character. We pity a person who has a nervous breakdown in response to the political torture of her countrymen; we do not condemn her. What all of these examples have in common is instead the violation of certain *psychological* norms. In each of them, the balance between preserving the unity and rational integrity of the self against external violation, on the one hand, and maintaining a self-enhancing connection and receptivity to external input, on the other, has been destroyed.<sup>5</sup> In each, the involvement of the self in its

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss this issue at greater length in "Two Conceptions of the Self," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985): 173-97, reprinted in *Philosopher's Annual* 8 (1985): 222-46, and in my "Pseudorationality," in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. Brian McLaughlin and Amelie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 297-323.

imaginative object is inappropriate because it fails to recognize and respect the ontological boundaries either of the self or of the imaginative object. As a rough first approximation of necessary (though possibly not sufficient) criteria of appropriate involvement, I propose the following:

An appropriate level of involvement in an imaginative object recognizes and respects both

A. the psychological boundaries of one's self as an acting subject  
and

B. the psychological boundaries of the other's self as an acting subject.

A and B apply to cases in which one's imaginative object is another subject. They also apply to cases in which it is not, on the assumption that one's level of involvement in the object itself has consequences for other subjects. The application of these criteria can be illustrated by reconsidering the preceding examples in its light.

The first case described above, in which a written description of others' misfortunes scarcely registers in one's consciousness, much less moves one to action, violates B, for in it one fails to recognize the existence of the other's subjectivity altogether. This brand of self-absorption comes closest to the primitively self-centered and narrowly concrete view of others described in Section II. In this case, however, the mental representations of others' inner states exist at least as surface objects of imagination, while one's own are depth objects. One regards other people as mere furniture in the external environment and is without a visceral comprehension of their internal conscious states. When we lack a visceral comprehension of what we read, the text in question is a conjunction of empty words without personal meaning to us. Our intellectual grasp of the material is impeded by a failure of the modal imagination those words are intended to spark.

By contrast, the second case described above, in which one cannot sleep for anxiety at the possibility of flubbing a line in one's paper, violates A. Here the mere possibility of an event that is temporally external to the self in its present state invades that self to the point of disrupting its internal equilibrium. That internal equilibrium itself is treated as a surface object of imagination, whereas the envisioned possibility is a depth object. In such cases, one's preoccupation with external events or anticipated external events is so all-encompassing that one fails to notice one's own internal discomfort at all. This is an abdication of the present self to an anticipated future scenario.

The third case, in which one experiences the agony of the unfortunate one is reading about to such an extent that one is rendered incapable of action, also violates A, for here, a spatiotemporally external event is allowed to invade the self in its present state to the point of disrupting its internal equilibrium. In this case, one appropriates others' experience of suffering into

the self and replaces one's own responses with it. Whereas a visceral comprehension of others' suffering may motivate one to act, the appropriation of their experience as a replacement for one's own renders ameliorative action impossible. Couples who have experienced the contagious effects of one partner's bad mood may recognize this phenomenon. Taking action to help a sufferer requires one to make a sharp distinction between one's own inner state and the sufferer's. Otherwise one abdicates one's actual self to the imagined self of the sufferer.

Finally, the fourth case, in which one is oblivious to the consequences for others of one's neglect to prepare for a future contingency of one's own behavior, violates B, for in it one fails to respect the validity of other people's normal expectations. This case treats one's audience's inner states - their justified expectations of a certain standard of performance, their assumptions and hopes of intellectual dialogue or edification - as surface objects of imagination, whereas one's own inner state - of confusion, oblivion, complacency, presumption, sloth, or self-indulgence - is a depth object. In this sort of case one fails to imagine with sufficient vividness the difference between others' inner states and one's own. Indeed, one identifies others' inner states with one's own. Like the first, this case illustrates a species of self-absorption that approaches the primitively self-centered and narrowly concrete view described earlier as resulting from a lack or failure of modal imagination.

In general, then, an inappropriate level of imaginative involvement that violates A tends to abdicate the actual, present self to the imagined object. Call this a state of *vicarious possession*. One can be vicariously possessed by the thought of an actual or possible external event as well as by that of another person's inner states. (The possession is vicarious rather than actual because abdication of the self is in part voluntarily effected.) By contrast, an inappropriate level of imaginative involvement that violates B tends to express a failure to imagine modally the object as separate from the self altogether. This draws one closer to the primitively self-centered and narrowly concrete perspective earlier described. Call this a state of *self-absorption*.

Vicarious possession and self-absorption are both a matter of degree, and each can take a variety of imaginative objects. I may be so self-absorbed in my experience of your discomfort as I conceive it that I am completely insensitive to your discomfort as you experience it in fact: obsessed with reassuring you that your recent auto accident is not likely to reoccur, I fail to notice that my repeatedly broaching and dilating upon the topic only increases your anxiety. Conversely, I may be so vicariously possessed by your conception of me as I envision it that I am completely insensitive to the discomfort it actually causes me to conform to it: inspired to feats of strength by the conception of me as

physically powerful I imagine you to have, I pull unnoticed and uncounted muscles lifting the heavy objects of which, so I imagine, you think me capable. In all such cases, one is self-absorbed by one's own inner state if others' have little impact on it, and vicariously possessed by another's inner state if one's own has little impact on it. Someone who is self-absorbed has too little imagination regarding externals, whereas one who is vicariously possessed has too much.

Vicarious possession and self-absorption are also relative to the actual psychological boundaries of the particular self in question. The self is always constituted by (among other things) the particular social and cultural norms instilled in the process of socialization as well as by the values, goals, and practices that distinguish it both as an individual self and as a member of a specific social community.<sup>6</sup> So what counts as vicarious possession or self-absorption for one self might be a healthy expression of another self's central interests or commitments. For example, a self unconditionally devoted to the problem of feeding the starving in India would satisfy the above criteria if it were Mother Teresa's but would violate A if it were Faye Wattleton's; a self preoccupied by memories of its own past experiences might satisfy these criteria if it were James Baldwin's but would violate B if it were Richard Nixon's. The boundaries of some selves circumscribe primarily other-directed or self-sacrificial ideals, whereas those of others circumscribe primarily self-directed ones. Perhaps the more numerous and familiar selves - those that cement most human communities - contain both, in proportions varying with their roles and positions in the community as well as their personal aptitudes and inclinations. We must first know these facts about their individual commitments and relations to the surrounding community in order to ascertain whether any particular self is vicariously possessed, or self-absorbed, or both.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I say more about this in "Two Conceptions of the Self."

<sup>7</sup> Cases in which valuable contributions to the world are offset by neglect of loved ones at home furnish numerous illustrations of selves unbalanced by self-absorption in some areas and vicarious possession in others. Take Paul Gauguin, who abandoned his family to go off to the South Seas to paint. His psychological profile gives clear evidence of self-absorption, both in his neglect of his family and in the patent racism and sexism of his attitudes toward the subjects of his painting. On the other hand, his obsession with the island culture of Tahiti and of his own role in it might be viewed as evidence of vicarious possession, in his abdication to it of the self formed by his prior, longstanding social and familial commitments. Merely his central and overriding commitment to his art by itself - independently of the psychological and social attractions of his adopted as compared to his original environment - cannot, I think, be

Next I will argue that when the imaginative object is another's suffering, a compassionate response is the mean between these two extremes.

#### IV. Compassion

An involvement with another person's inner states as an imaginative object requires more than that one verbally ascribe certain drives, feelings, and thoughts in order to explain her behavior. To do only this much would be to treat those states as a surface object and so violate B. In addition, it requires that one empathically experience those drives, feelings, and thoughts as one observes her behavior. To *empathize* with another is to comprehend viscerally the inner state that motivates the other's overt behavior by experiencing concurrently with that behavior a correspondingly similar inner state oneself, as a direct and immediate quality of one's own condition. Empathy, in turn, requires an imaginative involvement with the other's inner state because we must modally imagine to ourselves what that state must be as we observe her overt behavior, in order to experience it in ourselves.

These inner states are not to be identified with those one experiences in reaction to her behavior - for instance, as I experience gratitude in reaction to my interpretation of your action as beneficent. Instead, they are the inner states that constitute one's interpretation of her behavior - for instance, as I empathically experience subliminal sensations of pain in interpreting your wincing, grimacing, and putting your hand to your forehead. The claim is that an involvement with another person's inner state as an imaginative object is mutually interconnected with one's ability to experience empathically an inner state similar to that which one ascribes to the other as an interpretation of her behavior.<sup>8</sup>

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cited as evidence of one or the other, since such a commitment might have existed independently of or concurrently with both. There are other such cases, such as Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*: "Mrs. Jellyby... devotes herself entirely to the public. She has devoted herself to an extensive variety of public subjects at various times and is at present (until something else attracts her) devoted to the subject of Africa.'... 'Mr. Jellyby... is... merged - in the more shining qualities of his wife.' [Her eyes] had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if... they could see nothing nearer than Africa!" (chap. 4). It appears that Mrs. Jellyby is self-absorbed, in that she is unable to imagine proximate others (children, husband, friends) as selves separate from herself; and vicariously possessed by the numerous and transient causes to which she devotes all her energies. I am grateful to Ruth Anna Putnam for raising these cases for discussion.

<sup>8</sup> That understanding another person's inner state requires one's empathic experience of it may seem to be a very strong epistemic claim. It implies that understanding another

How similar one's own state or condition must be to the other's in order to count as a case of empathy depends on the proportional relations between the intensity and quality of (i) the other's self and her condition, and (ii) one's own self-conception and one's own condition.<sup>9</sup> If you are being disemboweled by a charging bull and I experience in response only the mildest twinge in my gut, I probably am not empathizing with your condition. Similarly if you are mildly apprehensive about your first driving lesson whereas I am beside myself with panic. These responses of mine fail to count as empathic because they are too different from your actual inner state to enable me validly to attribute them to you. The more radically I get it wrong when imagining the analogue of your inner state in myself, the less I succeed in understanding yours. The less I succeed in understanding yours, the more the coordination of our actions must depend on convention or force or detailed verbal agreement. And the more we must depend on these factors to coordinate our actions, the more closely we will approximate a dead-end relationship of the kind earlier described. Empathy requires not only a rich modal imagination but an approximately accurate one as well.

How does one achieve empathy without having had first-personal direct experience of that state one attempts to approximate imaginatively oneself? We can only speculate on the extent to which some such external perceptual cues, such as the sight of another person laughing with joy or grimacing in

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person's inner state - as opposed to merely explaining it - is dependent on a felt psychological connection with the other in a way that understanding a nonpsychological course of events or state of affairs is not. This claim is not as radical as it may seem at first. In Sec. II I argued that modal imagination of another person's inner states as a way of understanding the other person is the norm in most human interactions, without which they all would have a very different cast. In this section it transpires that modal imagination requires not merely that we envision the other's inner state in order to understand it but that we viscerally comprehend what we envision as well. This is no cause for alarm. The implications that there then must be much about other people that transcends our relatively parochial powers of understanding; that we then must work quite hard in order to achieve that understanding, of anyone; and that many human interactions are corrupted by a failure of that understanding should not be surprising and should not be news. I discuss the consequences of moral corruption and the failure of motivational understanding at greater length in "The Meaning of 'Ought' and the Loss of Innocence" (invited paper on ethics delivered to the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Convention, Atlanta, December 1989), abstracted in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 63 (1989): 53-54.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss the notion of a self-conception, and distinguish it from a conception of the self, in "Two Conceptions of the Self" and "Pseudorationality."

pain, or the sound of a baby crying, might function as biologically ingrained stimuli to which we are biologically disposed to respond empathically. Or we may see another behave in a certain way often enough, and in a sufficiently wide variety of circumstances, that we develop an empathic appreciation of her motives through inference, analogy, or induction. Sociopaths are characterized by, among other things, the inability to respond in these ways; and we do not yet know whether their disability is primarily social or biological in origin.

However, it is at least clear that forms of creative expression such as music, painting, poetry, fiction, and first-person narrative accounts enhance our ability to imagine modally another's inner states, even if we have had no such first-personal experience ourselves. Fresh combinations of images, words, metaphors, and tonal progressions enable us to construct an imaginative vision that may in turn causally transform or enlarge our range of emotional responses. Claims that one cannot understand, for example, what it is like for a woman to be raped if one is a man, or what it is like for a black person to be the object of racial harassment if one is white, have the virtue of refusing to appropriate the singularity of another's experience into one's necessarily limited conception of it. But they are too often based on a simple lack of interest in finding out what it is like through exploring the wide variety of literary and artistic products designed precisely to instruct us about these things.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising to find a failure of modal imagination of another's inner states preceded by a failure of curiosity about them or to find a self-centered and narrowly concrete view of others accompanied by a lack of interest in the arts.<sup>11</sup>

How can we know how accurate our empathic responses are? We cannot, since we have no way of comparing interpersonally our own first-personal experiences - even our first-personal experiences of another's inner state as we modally imagine it - with the other's inner state itself. *A fortiori*, we have no

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<sup>10</sup> These creative products may instruct one about another's inner states by depicting what it would be like for oneself to have those states or, alternately, what it would be like if one were the other and had them. But they aid in the cultivation of one's capacity for empathy to the extent that they ultimately enable one to understand viscerally what it is like for the other to have them. That is, they satisfy both A and B above.

<sup>11</sup> Obviously, we can confirm (to varying degrees) whether or not a person genuinely empathizes with another only by looking at the behavior that inner state is presumed to motivate. But words and deeds alone constitute neither a necessary nor a sufficient requirement of empathy itself, since they might mask the clever dissembler, manipulator, or sociopath. There is no necessary link between the behavior taken as evidence of empathy and the inner state that is empathy.

way of comparing interpersonally two such first-personal states with respect to quality or quantity. Nevertheless, we may make rough-and-ready estimates of the accuracy of our empathic response by gauging the other's reaction to those of our own actions motivated by it. We may be motivated to respond verbally or behaviorally in such a way that the other's response to our words or actions tells us whether or not they expressed genuine insight into the other's inner state as we empathically imagined it. Or we may simply ask whether the conjunction of words, phrases, similes, metaphors, and colloquial expressions we used in order to describe it is, in fact, accurate, and correct our description and so our understanding according to the other's response. The deep philosophical problems of private language, other minds, and solipsism do not necessarily engender correspondingly deep practical problems when the effort to understand another is committed, persistent, and sincere.

And, of course, that we cannot know with certainty how accurate our empathic responses are does not imply that there is no fact of the matter about this, or, therefore, that we cannot approximate empathic accuracy to varying degrees whether we know with certainty that we are doing so or not. In what follows I will often speak of an (accurate) empathic understanding of or insight into another's inner state, as though such a thing is possible. This reflects my belief that it is, even if we cannot know with certainty that it is, or how it is.

By contrast with empathy, to *sympathize* with another is to be affected by one's visceral comprehension of the other's inner state with a similar or corresponding state of one's own, and to take a pro attitude toward both if the state is positive and a con attitude toward them if it is negative. In order to feel sympathy for another's condition, one must first viscerally comprehend what that condition is. Therefore, sympathy presupposes at least a partial capacity for empathy. But once one has achieved an empathic interpretation of the other's behavior, sympathy is, of course, not the only possible response. I may interpret your behavior as murderous rage with the help of my empathic experience of it, and react with even greater revulsion against it for that reason. Whereas sympathy implies one's emotional accord with the other's inner state, empathy implies only one's visceral comprehension of it. That an interpretation of another's inner state requires an empathic imaginative involvement with it does not mean it requires one's concordant reaction to it as well.

An empathic imaginative involvement with another's inner states treats those states as depth rather than surface objects of imagination. It is an application of modal imagination to a particular kind of imaginative object, namely, a human subject, and to a particular quality of that kind of object, namely, her inner states. To entertain another's inner state as a surface object



of imagination is also an exercise of modal imagination, and therefore might suffice for mere verbal ascription of inner states to explain another's behavior. But it is insufficient for empathic understanding of that behavior. An involvement with another's inner states as an imaginative object requires that one empathically experience those states as well.

An inappropriate involvement that violates A, that is, vicarious possession, has this feature to an excessive degree. In the case of vicarious possession by another person's inner states, one treats one's own inner states as surface objects and the other's inner states as depth objects. Here is what it means to appropriate the other's experience as one imagines it into one's self and replace one's own with it:

1. one empathically experiences the other's feelings as one imagines them to the exclusion of one's own reactions to them (i.e., a case of being "out of touch with one's feelings");
2. one is so preoccupied with imagining what the other is thinking that one's own thoughts are temporarily suppressed; and
3. one's actions reflect one's conception of the other's wishes or desires as to how one should act or what should be done.

In general, to be vicariously possessed by another person's inner states means that one's own sentience, rationality, and agency are suppressed in favor of the other's as one empathically imagines her to be. This constitutes an abdication of one's self to another as one imagines her.

By contrast, an inappropriate involvement that violates B, that is, self-absorption, lacks this feature entirely. When another's inner states are treated as surface objects in deference to one's own as depth objects of imagination, the constituents of one's interpretation of her behavior are empty words at best (assuming one bothers to interpret her behavior at all). Terms such as "headache," "grief," or "starvation" fail to elicit in one any corresponding empathic response altogether. This is one state of mind that makes it easy to toss the letter from the charitable concern into the trash. The moral term for this condition is "callousness," and it constitutes a sacrifice of another's inner states as one conceives them to one's absorption in one's own.

The contrast between both of these brands of inappropriate imaginative involvement and an appropriate one is that in the latter case, one manages to retain the empathic experience of the other's inner state and the reactions that constitute one's own simultaneously and with equal vividness, in such a way that neither A nor B is violated. One holds two equally vivid and sharply distinct experiences - one's own response and the other's as one empathically imagines it - in mind simultaneously. An appropriate imaginative involvement in another's inner state is *symmetrical* with respect to the relation between that state and one's own.

Now it might seem that insofar as this is possible, it would engender agent paralysis. It might seem that to imagine empathically to oneself another's inner state with a vividness equal to one's direct experience of one's own would be to be torn between being motivated to act by the other's inner state as one empathically imagines it and being motivated by one's own inner state as one directly experiences it. If I empathically imagine you to experience embarrassment at the same time and with the same vividness as I directly experience *schadenfreude* in response, then it appears that neither motivational state overrides the other in my consciousness. Then what spurs me to act at all?

However, this difficulty is more imagined than real. First, these two states may be equally vivid without being equally intense. The *vividness* of an object or state depends on its perceptual (not necessarily visual) clarity and on the sharpness of its sensory detail. The *intensity* of a state depends rather on the strength of its causal impact on one. For instance, your heady pride of achievement may meet with only faint enthusiasm in me. Yet I may empathically imagine your heady pride of achievement no less vividly than I directly experience my own faint enthusiasm for it. Second, that I experience simultaneously and with equal vividness two different motivational states does not imply any further similarity of structure between them. A structural feature that my own inner state has and that my empathic imagination of yours lacks is a direct connection to my own capacity for agency. Whereas I can empathically imagine your inner state, I cannot spur you to action on the basis of my imaginative involvement with it. By contrast, my direct experience of my own inner state in response can spur me to action on the basis of my imaginative involvement with it. Essential to the boundaries that enable me to distinguish my self from yours, hence to satisfy A and B, is the natural link between my self and my action that is missing between your self and my action or between my self and your action.

It is only when this natural link is weakened that violations of A or B occur. For example, when a child is repeatedly told that she feels what her caretakers think she should feel instead of what she does feel, she may learn to suppress awareness of her own responses and replace them in imagination with others that are prescribed to her. This habit of thought encourages vicarious possession. Alternately, when others regularly assume responsibility for a child's actions and shield her from their human consequences, she may fail fully to develop the capacity to imagine modally others' responses to them as independent of her own wishful thinking about them. This habit of thought encourages self-absorption. Both of these cases involve a conflation of one's own inner states with those of others, and so a severance of the natural link between one's own thought and one's actions. In

the first case, of vicarious possession, one's own action is guided by another's conception, as one empathically imagines it, of one's own inner state. Such a case can lead to agent paralysis when I empathically imagine your conception of my inner state to be at least as motivationally compelling as my direct experience of my own response in fueling my action. In the second case, of self-absorption, one's action is guided by one's own conception of another's inner state as one self-centeredly imagines it. Such a case can lead to agent paralysis when I imagine my conception of your inner state to be at least as motivationally compelling as your direct experience of your own in fueling your action. In neither case, however, do I succeed in directly experiencing my own inner state as fueling my action with the same vividness and intensity as I empathically imagine your inner state as fueling yours. Only in this last case is neither A nor B violated.

Of course, my empathic imagination of your inner state as comprising a desire that I act in a certain way can spur me to action, but only if I already directly desire to act as you desire me to act. Or my empathic imagination of your inner state as comprising a desire to act in a certain way can spur me to action, but only if I mistakenly imagine, empathically, that I am you. But both of these possibilities violate A. The first abdicates my self to the desire, which I empathically imagine you to have, that I act; my original desire to act as you desire me to act is ignored. The second abdicates my self to the self I empathically imagine you to have. Both possibilities require a severance of the direct connection between my capacity for agency and my own inner motivational state. Both possibilities require establishing a connection between my capacity for agency and the motivational state I empathically imagine you to have. Thus, both require my vicarious possession by your inner state as I empathically imagine it. This just is to appropriate your responses into my self and replace it with them. It is to treat my own inner state as a surface object of imagination, and your inner state as a depth object. It is not to treat both as occurring simultaneously and with equal vividness after all.

Alternately, my primitively self-centered conception of your inner state as comprising a desire that you act in a certain way can spur you to action, but only if you already desire to act as I imagine you desire to act. Or my primitively self-centered conception of your inner state as comprising a desire to act in a certain way can spur you to action, but only if you mistakenly imagine, empathically, that you are me. But both of these possibilities presuppose a brand of self-absorption on my part which violates B. The first sacrifices your self to the desire to act which I self-centeredly conceive you to have. The second sacrifices your self to the self you empathically imagine that I conceive you to have. Both possibilities require a severance of the direct connection between your capacity for agency and your own inner states. Both

possibilities require establishing a connection between your capacity for agency and the inner states you empathically imagine me self-centeredly to conceive you as having. Thus, both require your voluntary submergence in my imaginative but primitively self-centered reconstruction of your inner state. This imaginative reconstruction treats my own inner states - including those I self-centeredly conceive you to have - as depth objects, and your actual inner states as surface objects of imagination. Again, the symmetry required of an appropriate imaginative involvement is lost.

When the other's experience is one of suffering, the appropriate imaginative involvement that satisfies both A and B is one of *compassion*. Compassion comprises at least three distinguishable responses. First, it includes empathic understanding of the other's condition. Second, it includes sympathetic "fellow feeling" in reaction. And, third, it includes a consequent disposition to render aid or show mercy to the other. So compassion includes cognitive, affective, and conative components, respectively.

To render aid, mercy, or restitution to another is not the same as acting unreflectively on a momentary feeling of concern. It is rather to act consistently and reliably in such a way calculated to relieve the other's distress. That is, it is to act in accordance with a substantive principle of moral conduct that itself has application to a variety of situations. By contrast with occasional stirrings of sympathy which may or may not spark fleeting impulses to help, compassion is a principled moral emotion that moves one to a course of action in accordance with a substantive requirement of rendering aid. As is the case with all substantive moral principles of conduct, the requirement to render aid is a requirement that one strike a balanced accommodation between the condition and demands of the self and the condition and demands of another.

Striking a balanced accommodation between these two different sets of interests and demands requires that the self be vicariously possessed by neither, but that it have a deep imaginative involvement - one that is antithetical to self-absorption - with both. Vicarious possession by the other's inner state would constitute a sacrifice of the integrity of the self to the inner deprivation or suffering of the other. It would be to take on the other's suffering as an internal condition of one's own. This would mean paralyzing or incapacitating oneself, in the ways earlier described, from consistent and principled agency in the service of relieving that suffering. When altruistically inclined agents worry that an active, participatory commitment to solving an intractable social problem (such as inner-city poverty) will "suck them dry," or "suck them in forever," it is the fear of this very real kind of incapacitating self-sacrifice that they express. But incapacitating self-sacrifice, and the sacrifice of one's own needs and interests that accompany it, is a consequence

of vicarious possession by the other's suffering. It is not a consequence of compassion properly understood.

As defined in this discussion, compassion precludes such abnegation of the self and its interests because compassion disposes one to act in accordance with the moral principle of rendering aid to the needy. Applying this principle requires one to conceive of oneself either as a potential provider or as a potential recipient of aid, and calls upon the former to put their resources in the service of the latter. But incapacitating self-sacrifice is clearly a condition of need that itself demands amelioration. Hence, consistent application of the principle of rendering aid to the needy prohibits depleting or sacrificing one's resources so thoroughly that one ends up joining the ranks of the needy oneself. Rather, the terms of this principle implicitly require protecting the psychological integrity of the self that is disposed to act on it, at the same time that it requires extending the self in the service of the other. So the principle of rendering aid to the needy imposes a double requirement of balance on the affective and conative dispositions it regulates.

Compassion satisfies the double requirement of balance by satisfying the symmetry requirement already discussed. Indeed, this double requirement just is a special case of the symmetry requirement. In compassion, the interests and demands of the self are balanced in relation to those of the other because the self as a unified whole is balanced in relation to the other. The self is situated between self-absorption and vicarious possession with respect to another's inner state of suffering. It is a condition both of inviolate inner integrity and of experiencing the other's felt distress, in which the demand for relief of that distress is met by principled action to restore the other to a condition of similarly inviolate integrity. *Mean-spiritedness*, by contrast, marks poverty of the spirit. It is a condition of emotional deprivation in which inner integrity is violated by the other's felt distress - that is, in which one is vicariously possessed by that distress, and in which the demand for relief of that distress is met by desensitizing and fortifying the self against it - that is, in which one is self-absorbed by one's own. Thus, the spiritually undernourished or mean-spirited self swings between vicarious possession and self-absorption relative to the other's distress. It is bereft of the inner resources both for preserving the integrity of the self against incursion by the other and for extending those resources beyond the self to the other. Whereas compassion presupposes the integrity and emotional abundance necessary to fuel actions on behalf of another as well as those on behalf of oneself, mean-spiritedness involves a felt violation, an emotional deficit in which action on behalf of the other is experienced as an extortion, as usurping those on behalf of oneself. Compassion thus prepares the self for a balanced accommodation with the other because it requires one neither to sacrifice one's own well-being on the other's behalf nor the other's well-being on one's own. Instead it

involves respect for the psychological boundaries of both, and a disposition to restore the inner integrity of the other that is altruistic without being - literally - self-sacrificial.

This is why compassion requires a symmetric imaginative involvement with the other's inner states. Unlike both vicarious possession by another's suffering, which violates A, and self-absorption, which violates B, compassion preserves the symmetry, required of an appropriate imaginative involvement with another's inner state, between one's empathic understanding of that state and one's own direct reaction to it. In compassion, I sympathetically feel the same inner state I empathically imagine you to feel, namely, suffering, and with the same vividness I imagine you to feel it. However, my sympathetic experience of your suffering as I empathically imagine it is connected to my agency in a way in which your direct experience of your suffering as I empathically imagine it is not. That my sympathetic experience is of your suffering as I empathically imagine it, and not of my own, is what inclines me to ameliorate your suffering rather than my own. That my sympathetic experience of your suffering as I empathically imagine it is sympathetic is what inclines me to ameliorate your suffering rather than (or in addition to) you. And that my sympathetic experience is of your suffering, rather than of your gratification, is what inclines me to ameliorate it rather than promote it.

But if my sympathetic experience is overwhelmed by the vividness and depth of your suffering as I empathically imagine it, then I abdicate my sense of self and agency to the self I empathically imagine you to have; I am vicariously possessed by your suffering. And if your suffering as I empathically imagine it is overwhelmed by the vividness and depth of my sympathetic experience of it, then I sacrifice your suffering as I empathically imagine it to my sympathetic experience of it; I am absorbed in that sympathetic inner state of my self I empathically imagine to be yours. Like dead-end relationships, self-absorption in one's own sympathy for others is hardly an unfamiliar phenomenon; but it is itself more worthy of pity than sympathy. That is why an imaginative involvement with another's suffering counts as compassion only if it is symmetric with respect to the relation between the other's empathically imagined inner state and one's own sympathetic one.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> How should we analyze our feelings toward the masochist? This depends on the correct description of masochism. If masochism involves feeling pleasure in response to an experience that would cause us pain, then it may be difficult to empathize with the masochist's inner state, since difficult to understand it viscerally; more difficult still to sympathize with his inner state, since difficult for us to feel concordantly; and impossible to feeling any immediate inclination to render aid, since, according to this

### V. Strict Impartiality

Now to take up in greater detail Blum's characterization of impartiality as being unbiased by one's personal preferences or interests in one's treatment of others. Blum adds that it involves "giving equal weight to the interests of all" (p. 44). Presumably he means "equal weight *other things equal*," since, as we saw in Section I, it would be a sign of bias, not impartiality, to give equal weight to the interests of the homeless and to those of billionaire real estate developers in distributing HUD funding, when the interests of the homeless weigh so much more heavily. We can say, then, to begin, that to be impartial is to treat competing preferences and interests on their own merits and without being biased by one's own. Even with this adjustment, impartiality remains a metaethical requirement rather than a substantive moral principle, since we must first know what these interests are and for what they are competing - information provided in the substantive principle to be applied - in order to identify the non-arbitrary attributes relative to which the principle can be impartially applied. In all such cases the requirement of impartiality directs us to apply a substantive principle of conduct evenhandedly. It does not tell us which substantive principle to apply. In this concluding section I want to show that compassion requires not only a symmetric imaginative involvement with another person's inner states but therefore a disposition to impartiality of treatment as well.

Clearly, impartiality as just characterized presupposes modal imagination. It requires one to imagine as depth objects interests and preferences that one may not have and may never have had. This requires of one an imaginative involvement with the inner states of those who have them. As we have seen, such an involvement is a necessary condition of the ability to form universal concepts of inner states such as love, fear, desire, or joy - concepts that extend backward into a counterfactually possible past and forward into a possible future. Modal imagination is what enables one to apply these concepts to instances of possible in addition to actual experience,

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description, he does not suffer. So whatever we may feel about this brand of masochist, it will not be, on this account, compassion. Of course, we may feel distressed or shocked that he takes pleasure in what causes us pain and feel inclined to try to reform him. But this would be paternalism at best, meddling at worst. Suppose, however, that the correct description of the masochist is that he takes pleasure in his own pain; i.e., that he experiences two opposing states, consecutively or simultaneously, where we would feel only one, namely, pain. Then we might both empathize and sympathize with his pain, and also feel an inclination to render aid - an inclination that is, however, dampened by our recognition that, astonishingly, he would prefer none. In this case I think we should simply say that we feel compassion compounded by incomprehension, frustration, revulsion, and so forth.

and so to apply them to the imagined inner states of others of which one has no actual experience at all.

Without an empathic imaginative involvement, one's understanding of the interests and preferences of others would remain purely verbal; they would be surface objects of imagination. This is not to maintain that they would be entirely lacking in significance. But one would lack insight into what was at stake psychologically and emotionally for individuals who have those preferences and interests. By contrast, to the extent that one had first-personal insight into what was at stake psychologically and emotionally in having one's own preferences and interests, those interests would be depth objects of imagination. In thus violating symmetry, one's capacity for impartiality would be correspondingly defective. One's judgment would be distorted by the psychologically and emotionally compelling representation of one's own interests and preferences, relative to which others' would appear by definition less compelling.<sup>13</sup> The same argument applies when we must judge impartially not between our own interests and another's but between two third-personal sets of interests, in only one of which we have an imaginative involvement.<sup>14</sup>

We may begin, then, by thinking of impartiality in the judgment of preferences and interests as the result of applying a universal and general

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<sup>13</sup> Could one be impartial in one's judgment if both one's own and the other's interests were equally surface, rather than depth objects of imagination? Since symmetry would remain inviolate, why not? Since, in this case, one's capacity to understand any of the interests in question would be vitiated, a fortiori one's capacity to judge them impartially would be as well.

<sup>14</sup> For example, consider the California association of African-American social workers that has successfully lobbied for legislation prohibiting the adoption of African-American children by Euroethnic families, even when those families have served the child in the capacity of foster parent for a sufficiently extended period of time that strong emotional and psychological bonds have formed between foster parents and child. The association's reasoning is that African-Americans in general are best served by being raised in cohesive African-American families - a concern with which all adult African-Americans can identify. What the association seems to lack is the empathic understanding of what it means to a child to have psychological bonds of trust and affection with an adult caretaker destroyed, and destroyed repeatedly as the child is moved from one foster home to another, and what toll this will take on the child's capacity to form bonds of trust and affection with anyone as an adult. It would seem that the association's failure of imaginative involvement with the child's inner states as depth objects, and correspondingly deep imaginative involvement with the long-term interests of adult African-Americans as a group, incapacitates its members from impartially carrying out their mandate to protect and promote the child's best interests.



substantive moral concept or principle to those relevantly situated agents' inner states selected by the terms of that principle, such that the inner states of the person applying the principle do not lead her to tailor its application to her own situation or add special weight to her personal interests or allegiances in determining its application.<sup>15</sup> So, for example, an impartial application of the principle of directly apportioning quantity of resources to need in the distribution of HUD funds would not give any special weight to the need of the distributor to cement her political alliances. Nor would it tailor the application of this principle to her personal or social connections to billionaire real estate developers. An impartial application of this principle would compare the respective inner states of need of all designated parties relative to one another, on the basis of a symmetric, empathic imaginative involvement with those of each, and distribute the funds accordingly.

Such a distribution presumes no solution to the problem of interpersonal comparisons, since a symmetric empathic understanding of an-other's inner states does not aspire to the objective quantifiability of those states.<sup>16</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>15</sup> I discuss this notion of impartiality further in "Moral Theory and Moral Alienation."

<sup>16</sup> First it should be noted that the attempt to make interpersonal comparisons of utility in welfare economics is engendered by a different set of issues. Its goal is to end up with a cardinal utility scale that objectively calibrates the satisfaction level of each intended beneficiary of a utility distribution, so that total or average utility can be maximized overall. Thus it is generated not by the metaethical requirement of adequacy that any substantive moral principle be impartially applied, regardless of content but, rather, by the demand to demonstrate in practice the application of one particular substantive moral principle, namely, the principle of utility. But no such calibration could be objective in the sense welfare economics requires, even if the term "utility" had some fixed reference to a qualitatively identifiable inner state, and even if that state were detectable and individually quantifiable by means of some overt behavioral manifestation. Suppose there were some sort of natural physiological barometer that all human subjects had, such as a pale pink "utility mole" in the middle of their foreheads that turned bluer as one felt more overall satisfaction. Suppose further that my utility mole turned bright cobalt blue when I received five hundred dollars in HUD funding, whereas yours would attain that hue only upon receiving five hundred thousand dollars. What would that demonstrate? Surely not that I were objectively more satisfied overall with my five hundred dollars than you were with your five hundred dollars. My satisfaction with my five-hundred-dollar grant might still be less objective satisfaction quantitatively than your dissatisfaction with yours, even though my utility mole were bluer. And surely not that I were just as objectively satisfied overall with my five hundred dollars as you would be with your five hundred thousand: my satisfaction with my five hundred dollars might still be far less objective satisfaction quantitatively than yours with your five hundred thousand dollars, even though our utility moles were the same shade of blue. The difficulty about making

the irreducibly qualitative variety among such states precludes this. As suggested in Section IV, it assumes, without being able to show or prove, the capacity of one's modal imagination to represent subjectively as depth objects the quality and intensity of others' inner states with some degree of de facto accuracy. This capacity is based on an empathic comprehension of the behavior that ordinarily accompanies them and on rough-and-ready behavioral interactions that then enable one to fine-tune one's empathic insights. It also assumes one's capacity to preserve the distinctive quality and intensity of each such imaginative object with equal vividness, simultaneously in one's consciousness.<sup>17</sup> And it assumes one's ability to compare such vividly imagined objects with respect to one's subjective representation of their quality and intensity. In a symmetric empathic understanding of another's inner states, the scale of quantitative calibration among these states as imaginative objects is a function of their relative effect on the subject. It is ultimately the quality and relative intensity of one's own experiences that are being compared.

Some philosophers have offered procedural accounts of impartiality. It has been claimed, for example, that impartiality of judgment is what results from putting oneself in the place of the individual whose preferences are being judged,<sup>18</sup> or that it results from discounting one's own interests and

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interpersonal comparisons of objective utility does not disappear by stipulating a solution to the problem of other minds. The difficulty is caused by the unavoidable existence of different subjects. It is not the inaccessibility of a subject's inner states but, rather, her subjectivity itself that presents the obstacle to interpersonal comparisons of utility. (Thus, I disagree with Allan Gibbard, who conceives the problem of making interpersonal comparisons as a special case of the problem of knowing other minds. See his "Interpersonal Comparisons: Preference, Good, and the Intrinsic Reward of a Life," in *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, ed. Jon Elster and Aanund Hylland [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989], pp. 165-93.) But here again, that interpersonal comparisons are in theory impossible to make does not imply that there is no fact of the matter about whether two individuals are equally satisfied or not.

<sup>17</sup> It assumes, that is, our ability to experience walking and chewing gum at the same time, even when it is oneself who is doing the walking and another who is chewing the gum. Obviously, this assumption becomes less legitimate as the number of empathees increases. Possibly some adaptation of the method of pairwise comparisons might be useful here.

<sup>18</sup> Rawls reconstructs this view from Hume and attributes it to classical utilitarianism in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 33, 184-87, and 27-28. Also see Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Claim to Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Judgment," *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 630-46.

desires when making the judgment,<sup>19</sup> or both. The close conceptual connection between all of these accounts of impartiality and the foregoing analysis of compassion deserve emphasis. Both impartiality and compassion require an empathic imaginative involvement with the other's inner state, and both require a reduction of the preeminence in consciousness of one's own inner state, in order to arrive at a judgment that appropriately balances the interests of the self and those of the other. So both impartiality and compassion require an imaginative extension of the self into the domain of the other and a corresponding imaginative accommodation of the other within the domain of the self. It is difficult to see impartiality and compassion as being as mutually exclusive as Blum seems to think.<sup>20</sup>

However, all of these accounts of impartiality are faulty in presupposing the natural preeminence in consciousness of one's own inner states over another's as one empathically imagines them. Each assumes, without explicitly stating this, that impartiality consists in applying a corrective to a natural tendency to self-absorption alone - as though vicarious possession were not as much of a vice, and as prevalent a vice, at the opposite extreme. Consequently, taken at face value, these two procedures, alone or in conjunction, exhibit bias toward the other. Both advocate the suppression of the self in the service of vicarious possession by the other. But the symmetry requirement implies that impartiality could not result from either of these procedures considered independently, or from both of them conjoined, for this very reason. If impartiality requires unbiased judgment, then the judgment in question must be biased neither toward oneself nor toward the other. Call this *strict impartiality*. An adequate procedural account of strict impartiality - which I do not pretend to offer here - must explicitly steer the self clear both of vicarious possession and of self-absorption.

Blum's rejection of impartiality as appropriate and intrinsic to feelings of compassion seems to stem from the view that impartiality is merely a corrective to a predominantly self-interested tendency to make personally biased judgments about the proper weight to be accorded other's interests in the pursuit of one's own. If this is all impartiality is, then of course it will follow, as Blum seems to infer, that a compassionate person whose judgments are not biased by an excess of self-interested concern has no need of

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<sup>19</sup> Thus Rawls's own view is that impartial judgments are those that result from observing the conditions characterizing the original position, especially the veil of ignorance (of one's own interests and position in society).

<sup>20</sup> The connection between impartiality and compassion is particularly evident in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974). See the first parts of bk. 2, pt. 1, sec. 11, and bk. 3, pt. 1, secs. 1 and 6.

impartiality's corrective influence. But this presupposes a conception of the self - what I elsewhere call the Humean conception of the self<sup>21</sup> - as motivated by essentially self-interested concerns, to which impartiality is the corrective and compassion the exception. That is, compassion (as well as friendship and altruism) in Blum's account functions as though it were a counterexample to a generally valid empirical generalization about the de facto prevalence of self-interested motivation and judgment biased accordingly.

But suppose the Humean conception of the self is wrong as a descriptive model of human motivation, and other-directed motives such as sympathy and altruism play a more central role overall. Does this mean that we may dispense with strict impartiality as a virtue as well? Clearly not. An altruistic person may give unjustifiably short shrift to her own interests in devoting her energies to others. Or a sympathetic person may be uncertain to whom, among the many claimants on her sympathy, she should direct her sympathetic response. Strict impartiality has a central role in the analysis of compassion, because so many claims on our sympathy regularly confront us, including those of our own interests and preferences, that we are compelled to adjudicate among them. As we have seen in Sections III and IV, a healthy compassionate response to others demands that we navigate between the Scylla of self-absorption and the Charybdis of vicarious possession. It demands that we find a principle for distinguishing between unhealthy fortifications or transgressions of the boundaries of the self and healthy social expressions of it. A principle of strict impartiality meets this demand.

The symmetry requirement on compassion as an appropriate imaginative involvement with another's suffering implies that compassion presupposes strict impartiality of modal imagination. We have already seen in Section IV that unlike occasional and unpredictable stirrings of concern, or impulsive attempts to be helpful, compassion involves a disposition to respond to the suffering of another in a consistent and discriminate manner, that is, in accordance with universal and general substantive principles of aid, mercy, or restitution that, *like all substantive moral principles*, require a balanced accommodation of the demands and interests of the self with those of the other symmetrically. Compassion achieves such an accommodation by avoiding both vicarious possession by the other's distress and self-absorption by one's own, and so by disposing the self to action that sacrifices the inner integrity of neither self nor other.

Moreover, satisfaction of the symmetry requirement implies that compassion as a moral motive is consistent with personal dislike or revulsion toward the object of one's compassion, because the empathic comprehension

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<sup>21</sup> See n. 5 above.

of the other's suffering, the sympathetic reaction to it, and the respect in which compassion disposes one to extend oneself on the other's behalf in order to ameliorate it, is independent of attributes irrelevant to those picked out by the principle of rendering aid to the needy. Where a personal dislike of the sufferer precludes sympathy with her distress, symmetry is violated, skewing the self toward self-absorption; and bias thereby precludes compassion from taking hold. Impatience with the other's personal vanity or disgust at her malodorous garb may coexist with the feeling of compassion because the object of that feeling is her suffering and her need, not her self-estimation or her sartorial habits; and because the resulting disposition to action is directed to the amelioration of her suffering and her need, not to the improvement of her personality or sense of style. Strictly impartial conformity to an inherently impartial, substantive prescriptive principle of compassion rules out as attributively irrelevant both sacrifice of self or other in the amelioration of suffering, and also bias toward popular or charming sufferers over unpleasant or socially repulsive ones.

The strictly impartial application of such principles thus requires an absence of personal bias, both toward the other's inner state and toward one's own. One exhibits personal bias toward another's inner state to the extent that one's imaginative involvement with it is weighted toward vicarious possession: one appropriates the other's suffering as one empathically imagines it into one's self and replaces one's own with it, as described in 1-3. By contrast, one exhibits personal bias toward one's own inner state to the extent that one's imaginative involvement with the other's recedes toward self-absorption, with primitive self-centeredness and narrow concreteness constituting the extreme.

But why describe these as cases of personal bias rather than of mere imaginative excess and failure, respectively? A bias, unlike a merely unbalanced imagination, presupposes a value judgment, that is, that the object of bias is more worthy of favor or consideration than the alternative. The basis for this judgment is the possession by the object of bias of some specific but irrelevant attribute which the alternative is perceived to lack. In the case of an imaginative involvement with one's own experience or that of another, personal bias occurs when one evaluates either as more worthy of favor or consideration than the other on the basis of a specific but irrelevant attribute that the one has and the other is perceived to lack. For example, one may regard another's pain as one empathically imagines it as more worthy of consideration than one's own as one directly experiences it, because one regards other people in general as more important or worthy than oneself; or because one regards other people's inner states as intrinsically more interesting or worthy of investigation than one's own. In either of these cases,

the irrelevant attribute that directs one's personal bias to the other is the attribute of being other than oneself.

Conversely, one may regard one's own pain as more worthy of consideration simply because it is one's own, or because one regards oneself as in general more important or interesting than others. Unlike cases in which one regards one's own or another's pain as more worthy of favor or consideration because the pain in question is more intense, these cases exhibit personal bias because the attributive basis for ascribing superior value to the one or the other is arbitrary and irrelevant. The mere fact that my headache is mine does not entitle it to precedence in my imagination over your imminent demise from malnutrition. Nor does the mere fact that your suffering is yours entitle it to precedence in my imagination over my sympathetic response to it. Indeed, if my sympathetic response to your suffering is to motivate my ameliorative action on your behalf, your suffering as I empathically imagine it had better not overwhelm my sympathetic response to it.

Of course, it might happen that the pain of my sympathetic response to your suffering is greater than the pain of your suffering as I empathically imagine it. Conceiving of myself as infinitely more sensitive than thou, I might suffer for you in a way that I empathically imagine you to be incapable of suffering yourself. Hence, this is a case not of vicarious possession but rather of *surrogate martyrdom*. (Surrogate martyrdom is distinct from genuine martyrdom because a genuine martyr shoulders the actual suffering of others, not the suffering she imagines they would feel were they as sensitive as she.) Since greater pain justifies greater consideration, according to the foregoing account, surrogate martyrdom would seem to warrant more attention to my sympathetic response than to your suffering, without implying personal bias. However, in conceiving of myself as being more sensitive to suffering than thou, I violate B, for I imagine your inner state of suffering as though it were a surface object of imagination in comparison to my own inner, sympathetic state as a depth object. Hence, even surrogate martyrdom implies personal bias. The bias consists in arbitrarily ascribing superior sensitivity to myself and weighting my imaginative involvement accordingly. Surrogate martyrdom is therefore distinct from genuine compassion.

What about the standard case, in which the magnitude of your pain as I empathically imagine it exceeds the magnitude of my sympathetic response to it? Since neither A nor B is violated, surely symmetry is violated by our unequal experiences of pain, without implying personal bias in this case? Not so. This standard case is analogous to that discussed in Section IV, in which your heady pride of achievement outstrips my faintly enthusiastic response to it, and the answer is the same. I may hold in mind with equal vividness both your greater pain as I empathically imagine it and my lesser sympathetic pain

response to it. Symmetry remains inviolate, and therefore strict impartiality does as well. Compassion has the psychological feature that neither the other's suffering as one empathically imagines it nor one's own sympathetic response to it is submerged by the other, regardless of the magnitude of either.

This analysis extends to third-person cases. Consider, for example, the friendship case Blum raises for discussion. Blum thinks it is obvious that when choosing between helping a friend and helping a stranger, (1) one is morally permitted to choose to help the friend simply because she is one's friend. However, this view has bite only if the stranger is stipulated to be in greater need of help. In that case, as it turns out, Blum acknowledges the possibility that (2) if the stranger is in greater need of help, she may have a superior claim on one's compassion (p. 49).

In these passages, Blum's discussion treats the psychological fact of compassion as generating substantive moral principles, among them that the object of this emotion should be the recipient of one's ameliorative action. But the plausibility of this substantive principle depends on rejecting the connections between strict impartiality and compassion for which I have argued here. Specifically, Blum's notion of compassion is consistent with the primitively self-centered view of others described in Section II, according to which one's treatment of others is determined by how fully they happen to engage one's feelings.

By contrast, my conceptual analysis of compassion, as including satisfaction of the metaethical requirement of strict impartiality, carries no such substantive implication. My analysis leaves open the questions whether compassion should be motivationally central in a substantive moral theory; whether or not one should act on those principles of aid in a particular case; if so, whether one is most appropriately motivated by feelings of compassion, ties of personal loyalty, or the voice of conscience; and to whom, among the deserving candidates, one should direct one's ameliorative efforts.

Nevertheless, the foregoing analysis can accommodate both 1 and 2. Friendship, too, is governed by substantive moral principles of conduct and emotion. As in the case of compassion, adherence to these principles requires an empathic imaginative involvement with the other's inner states that violates neither A nor B. Without satisfaction of these two conditions, one's relation to the other is poisoned either by vicarious possession or by self-absorption. Vicarious possession by another's inner states bespeaks a level of psychological dependency on the other that is patently inimical to genuine friendship. Self-absorption in one's own inner states or self-serving conceptions of the other bespeak an insensitivity to and disrespect for the other that is equally antithetical to genuine friendship. So genuine friendship presupposes strictly impartial satisfaction of inherently impartial, substantive

principles of mutual sensitivity, respect, and psychological independence, and therefore, satisfaction of the symmetry requirement. Therefore friendship presupposes strict impartiality. And when a friend suffers, this strict impartiality is expressed in compassion for her condition.

When a friend and a stranger suffer with equal intensity and one empathically imagines the inner states of both with equal vividness, a compassionate person will feel equal sympathy for both, and equally moved to ameliorate the suffering of both. Because the inner state of each bears the same relation to one's own, namely, satisfaction of the symmetry requirement, compassion evinces a strictly impartial concern for the stranger's as well as the friend's condition. What finally determines one to render aid to one's friend instead of the stranger is not one's heightened compassion for the friend. What moves one to help the friend are the bonds of mutual trust, loyalty, shared history, responsibility, and respect that uniquely define the relation of friendship.

This conclusion departs from Blum's in two respects. First, Blum seems to think that there is a psychological connection between liking someone more, or having a more intimate relationship with her, and feeling greater compassion for her. In Section IV I rejected this connection on the grounds that compassion is strictly impartial with respect to irrelevant attributes that might bias one either toward or against the sufferer. But moreover, the psychological connection may work in the opposite way: it may happen that the more intimately one knows a person, the more one becomes accustomed to her suffering, and the more emotionally inured one becomes to it. Hence, friendship may undermine compassion rather than promote it.

Second, Blum believes there is a normative connection between having a more committed or intimate relationship with someone and feeling greater compassion for her suffering. I reject this connection on the grounds that it prescribes stronger feelings of empathy and sympathy, and a more motivationally effective disposition to render aid on grounds irrelevant to the magnitude of the pain felt by the sufferer, and irrelevant to the magnitude of her need for aid. That is, it prescribes feeling more compassion for people we know than for people who are in greater pain. I find this prescription unacceptable, but not only because it expresses clear bias toward an attributive basis that is irrelevant to feeling compassion. It is also unacceptably exclusionary in the presence of those for whom the conditions of survival make stable friendship an unattainable luxury and whose magnitude of suffering clearly surpasses that which anyone we know is likely to experience firsthand. Compassion demands a generosity of spirit which is incompatible with narrow and arbitrary restrictions of scope. So I insist on



satisfaction of the symmetry requirement in compassion for normative as well as psychological and conceptual reasons.

Compassionate action toward one other requires only the special link between my self and my action when the symmetry observed is between my own and the other's inner state as I empathically imagine it. By contrast, compassionate action when symmetry is observed between my own and many others' inner states also requires, when all suffer equally, some further motivating attribute of the particular other on whose behalf I compassionately act. Since one's own strict impartiality among equally suffering others expresses an inherently *ceteris paribus* relation among agents, one's compassionate action on behalf of any requires some sort of motivational tiebreaker among them. Otherwise, agent paralysis really does set in.

In the case in which the stranger patently suffers more intensely, the dictate of compassion is equally clear: my empathic imaginative involvement with the plight of brutalized black South Africans will move me to contribute funds to Transafrica rather than to my friend's purchase of a new coat, when these two options conflict, because I perceive the greater intensity of suffering in the former. But the responses to each of these cases are applications of the strict impartiality requirement, not precluded by it. In the first case, strict impartiality determines the empathic recognition of equal suffering on the part of both friend and stranger, and of the bonds and obligations of friendship as a tiebreaker. In the second case, strict impartiality determines the empathic recognition of greater suffering on the part of the stranger despite those bonds and obligations that might otherwise have biased one toward the friend. In both cases, the requirement of strict impartiality fixes one's compassionate response to the situation in such a way as to give one's own interests and attachments no more and no less than their due.<sup>22</sup>

The unbiased application of distributive principles, the emotion of compassion, and the relation of friendship are not the only moral virtues that presuppose strict impartiality between self and other. Honesty, trust, love, and responsibility - indeed, any virtue susceptible to analysis in terms of substantive principles of behavior - could be treated similarly, although I will not attempt this here. The general point is that strict impartiality requires the ability to balance the demands and interests of the self with those of others in

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<sup>22</sup> That strict impartiality is a metaethical requirement of adequacy on the application of any substantive moral principle and not itself such a principle implies that the fact that one's experience of identifiable compassion for one or many sufferers will move one to ameliorate their suffering does not by itself commit one to ameliorative action on their behalf: feelings of compassion may need to be balanced against considerations of efficiency, rational prudence, or other moral obligations - such as those to friends or family - and may not always override them.

accordance with a substantive principle biased toward neither. Indeed, the set of moral principles that constitute a moral theory just is a strictly impartial solution to the problems created by the competing demands and interests of different selves.<sup>23</sup> So it is not surprising that Kantians insist that this ability is definitive of the moral point of view and that it enters into the conception and practical application of every moral virtue. Without strict impartiality, personal interactions would consist solely in manipulative self-absorption or dependent vicarious possession. Feelings of injustice, violation, neglect, or betrayal are moral reactions that rightly alert us to the operation of these vices in our social relationships.

That the functioning of moral virtues such as compassion or friendship presuppose empathic modal imagination of another's suffering which is strictly impartial with respect to the relation between one's own inner state and others' explains why commitment to an impartial moral theory engenders rather than precludes such virtues. I have argued elsewhere that a moral theory is an ideal descriptive theory that enables us to make sense of our moral experience: to identify another's condition as one of suffering, for example, or our own behavior as that of rendering aid. I have also argued that if it is a genuine theory, a moral theory is by definition impartial, since it contains neither definite descriptions nor arbitrary bias.<sup>24</sup> In this discussion we can see how a strictly impartial moral theory might function both to constitute and to regulate our empathic imaginative responses to another's condition in a morally appropriate way. Moral theory constitutes our imaginative responses by providing us with concepts of morally virtuous - that is, strictly impartial - character. We use these concepts to identify, understand, and evaluate our experiences of our own inner states as well as those of others' as we modally imagine them.

Moral theory also regulates our imaginative responses because these strictly impartial concepts of virtuous character serve to guide their cultivation. By describing ideals of character and action against which we compare our own, the strictly impartial concepts of substantive moral theory provide criteria of self-evaluation the application of which itself contributes to our moral growth. In applying these criteria we come to understand the difference between, for example, a balanced, sensitive response to another's suffering versus one that uses another's suffering to meet various unmet

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<sup>23</sup> That is, it solves a Prisoner's Dilemma-type situation, although to point this out is not necessarily to justify the theory or to account for its origins.

<sup>24</sup> Piper, "Moral Theory and Moral Alienation," and "The Meaning of 'Ought' and the Loss of Innocence."

psychological needs of one's own. We thereby come to see that what distinguishes compassion from vicarious possession and self-absorption is not the agent's good will toward the sufferer or her desire to minimize unhappiness as completely as possible. A person whose responses to another's suffering fail to satisfy the strict impartiality requirement of compassion is not necessarily an immoral person. But we rightly say of such a person that she is infantile, self-indulgent, or lacks vision or, alternately, that she is too invasive, self-abnegating, or meddlesome to behave reliably as a moral agent. What distinguishes compassion from vicarious possession and self-absorption is the more general requirement of a strictly impartial moral theory, that we treat another's moral personhood with no more or less than the care and respect we accord our own – that is, with the care and respect due a moral person impartially considered.