

Lecture 6: Treating points of view

Richard Pettigrew 4th June 2025

Handout (with references): RICHARDPETTIGREW.COM/LOCKE

A puzzle

- (1) There are demands of *intrapersonal* morality ...
but
 - (2) ... they are weaker than the demands of *interpersonal* morality.
- There are burdens morality permits me to place upon myself that it does not permit me to place upon you.
 - There are no burdens it permits me to place upon you that it does not permit me to place upon myself.
 - But there are burdens it does not permit me to place upon myself.

The existence of intrapersonal moral demands

[I]t deserves to be considered whether men are more at liberty, in point of morals, to make themselves miserable without reason than to make other people so, or dissolutely to neglect their own greater good, for the sake of a present lesser gratification, than they are to neglect the good of others whom nature has committed to their care. It should seem that a due concern about our own interest or happiness, and a reasonable endeavor to secure and promote it [...] is virtue, and the contrary behavior faulty and blamable, since, in the calmest way of reflection, we approve of the first, and condemn the other conduct, both in ourselves and others.¹

¹ (Butler, 1983); quoted in (Schofield, 2021).

[I]f we have accepted general and indeterminate obligations to further various moral objectives, as [modern moral philosophy] encourages us to do, they will be waiting to provide work for idle hands, and the thought can gain a footing [...] that I could be better employed than in doing something I am under no obligation to do, and, if I could be, then I ought to be: I am under an obligation not to waste time in doing things I am under no obligation to do. At this stage, certainly, only an obligation can beat an obligation, and in order to do what I wanted to do, I shall need one of those fraudulent items, a duty to myself.²

² (Williams, 1985); quoted in (Schofield, 2021).

As we'll see, once we start thinking about intrapersonal morality, we'll see that Williams would have worried more about the demand-
ingness of modern morality philosophy because of it, not less.

Why might duties to self be fraudulent? Because any attempt to violate them fails because it automatically waives the duty; a duty you can't violate is no duty.³

But...

- Violations of unwaivable duties, e.g., duty not to torture; duty not to enslave.⁴ Yes, but this doesn't cover everything.
- Violations of self-consent, e.g., impaired reasoning; perhaps preference formation as in Lecture 5.⁵ It's much less obvious this is true.⁶

Further cases in which morality places demands on your treatment of yourself, even if they do not amount to duties:

- You act now in ways that are certain or very likely to cause physical, psychological, or cognitive harms on yourself in the future (certain dangerous sports, falling in love).
- You act now in ways that reduce the autonomy of yourself in the future (burdensome contracts).
- You act now in ways that burden yourself in the future with what will then be unwanted moral obligations (burdensome promises).
- You destroy the projects you valued deeply in the past and for which you sacrificed a great deal.⁷
- You fail to resist attempts to treat you badly, or give yourself too little weight in cases of trade-offs.⁸

And note: very often, burdening yourself now for future benefit is viewed differently from incurring a future burden to benefit yourself now. This suggests that current consent is not sufficient to ensure far future permissibility.

The Units of Morality

We often state general moral theories or local moral principles in terms of *persons*.

General moral theories

E.g. contractualism:

An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of

³ (Singer, 1959, 1963). Compare Wittgenstein's (2009, §244-271) private language argument: any attempt to break the rules of a private language fails because it automatically alters those rules; a rule you can't break is no rule.

⁴ (Hills, 2003).

⁵ (Muñoz & Baron-Schmitt, 2024).

⁶ Would it entail a duty not to impair yourself, if this would predictably lead to unwaived violations of duties to self?

⁷ Cf. (Pettigrew, 2019, Chapter 12).

⁸ Cf. (Hay, 2013) on duties to resist oppression.

behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced, general agreement.⁹

⁹ (Scanlon, 1998, 153).

The author of the act is taken to be a *person*; and the potential rejectors are typically taken to be *persons*.

And the same for the utilitarian, prioritarian, Kantian, virtue theorist, etc.¹⁰

¹⁰ Though utilitarian and some versions of prioritarian can be indifferent between persons and selves. E.g., interestingly, Fleurbaey's (2010) *expected equally distributed equivalent prioritarianism* is indifferent between persons and selves in a strong sense, if we take a person's lifetime well-being to be the same function of their selves' well-being that gives a population's well-being of a population on the basis of its members' well-being.

Local moral principles

E.g. promising.

If a *person* promises another *person* they'll do X, the former *person* is obliged to do X unless the latter *person* releases them from their obligation.

I think our opening puzzle suggests we should restate theories and principles in terms of *selves* or *persons at a time* or *persons from a point of view*.

The conclusion is similar to the one Parfit draws from his Russian nobleman example.¹¹ But intuitions about that case are fragile. And it shares some features with the moral view that Monima Chadha and Shaun Nicholls have been developing over a series of papers.¹²

¹¹ Parfit (1984, Section 110).

¹² (Chadha & Nicholls, 2019; Chadha, 2021; Chadha & Nicholls, 2023; Berryman et al., 2024).

First account: same duties; easier release

[It is] only natural that Kant became the modern era's most forceful defender of duties to the self. For Kant, wrongful action most often stems from an impulse to make an exception of oneself.¹³

¹³ (Schofield, 2021, 5).

[*Self-Other Symmetry*]: one has the same basic rights against oneself as against anybody else.¹⁴

¹⁴ (Muñoz & Baron-Schmitt, 2024).

You have the same rights against yourself as you have against others; you have exactly the same duties towards yourself as you have to others; but obtaining consent from yourself is easier and more common than obtaining consent from others.

This would explain the puzzle at the beginning.

First worry. We don't obtain consent from ourselves.

Response (I). We predict we'd get it if we were to ask.

But:

- (a) that doesn't fly in interpersonal cases;
- (b) we're not very good at predicting whether far future selves would give consent.

Response (II). We willingly embark on a joint project with ourself, and that has the same effect as granting consent to whatever is essential to pursuing that project.¹⁵

Second worry. This works for synchronic cases, but not long-term diachronic cases.

Response. Can we appeal to Korsgaard's argument for the unity of agency across time?

Suppose Parfit has established that there is no deep sense in which I am identical to the subject of experiences who will occupy my body in the future. [...] I will argue that I nevertheless have reasons for regarding myself as the same rational agent as [that subject]. [...] [S]uppose that a succession of rational agents *do* occupy my body. I, the one who exists now, need the cooperation of the others, and they need mine, if together we are going to have any kind of a *life*. [...] The unity of our life is forced upon us, although not deeply, by our shared embodiment, together with our desire to carry on long-term plans and relationships. [...] In order to make deliberative choices, your present self must identify with something from which you will derive your reasons, but not necessarily with something present. The sort of thing you identify yourself with may carry you automatically into the future; and I have been suggesting that this will very likely be the case.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. (Gardner, 2017; Muñoz & Baron-Schmitt, 2024).

¹⁶ (Korsgaard, 1989, 109-113).

But: everything here we can say also about our friends, family, colleagues, and others in our network of relationships.

Korsgaard agrees and accepts an analogy between the relationship between our selves and the person we are, and the relationship between those subject to a state's authority and the state itself.

We have a state only where these citizens have constituted themselves into a single agent. They have, that is, adopted a way of resolving conflicts, making decisions, interacting with other states, and planning together for an ongoing future.¹⁷

¹⁷ (Korsgaard, 1989, 114).

But: in the case of a nation, the citizens exist together, and so can agree upon the way the nation will be administered. Future selves are not present to do that with present selves.

Third worry. There are cases in which it's permissible to do something that will harm a future self, even if we know the future self wouldn't consent to being harmed in that way.

Second account: no duties; no release

You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with a famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right

blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you—we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." [...] Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it?¹⁸

¹⁸ (Thomson, 1971, 48-9).

Her reply: no.

So my own view is that even though you ought to let the violinist use your kidneys for the one hour he needs, we should not conclude that he has a right to do so—we should say that if you refuse, you are [...] self-centered and callous, indecent in fact, but not unjust. [...] The complaints are no less grave; they are just different.¹⁹

¹⁹ (Thomson, 1971, 61).

Altered case: A flautist is hooked up to your circulatory system. (i) He is as light as air and currently unconscious; (ii) he will remain hooked up to you and unconscious until the day you die, at which point he'll wake up cured, he'll detach himself from you, and he'll live his life; (iii) his quality of life after you die and he wakes up depends significantly on how you live your life. Do you have a duty to refrain from behaviour that will likely result in a certain degree of suffering for the flautist? Does the flautist have a right against you?

By analogy with Jarvis Thomson's case, we might again reply: no. And, again by analogy, we might say that nonetheless morality places demands on your treatment of the flautist.

But what is the source of the analogy? In both cases:

- (a) you have not chosen to be in a position in which your actions have the effects they will have;
- (b) the actions we think you have no duty not to do are genuinely positive actions, rather than the omission of actions;
- (c) our reactions stem in part from the sense that duties would here impose a substantial constraint on your freedom.

By analogy with the flautist case, we might say you have no duties to your future selves, but intrapersonal morality is nonetheless demanding in exactly the way Jarvis Thomson describes. This would explain the puzzle from the beginning.

Worry. While all of this might end up being true, there seems to be no principled means by which to determine when (a)-(c) entail there is no duty, and when they are compatible with the existence of a duty. When is the burden on your freedom too great?

Third account: private property and self-ownership

Hypothesis: At the heart of our reaction to both the violinist case and the flautist case is our judgment that there is a sphere of influence over which a person has primary jurisdiction; it is their dominion and they get to say what goes on within it, up to a point.

We can then give an instrumental justification of this very minimal right to private property: much of what I do, I do in the service of long-term goals and as a part of a plan I have for my life. Korsgaard notes I often need the cooperation of others, and in particular my own past and future selves, to pursue these goals and carry out these plans; but I don't just need the presence of active assistance and cooperation; I also need the absence of active intervention and disruption. And so we need a system that ensures that.²⁰

As usual with instrumental or consequentialist justifications, this does not justify an absolute right of self-ownership or private property. In this case, the good and bad consequences of having sole dominion over something the treatment of which has consequences for points of view other than your own current one.

As for your rights to dictate what happens on your property, so for your current self's right to dictate the use of the body they share with your other selves.

²⁰ We might also look to other justifications of property rights that also ground them in the effect of having them, or their necessity for some good, e.g., (Fichte, 1797/2000) and (Hegel, 1821/1967) (see (Patten, 1995)). For both, some domain over which you have sole jurisdiction (up to a point) is essential for the exercise of freedom and the development of personality.

The lack of absoluteness mirrors our reactions to these cases: they have the appearance of reflecting systems of rules designed to balance two or more considerations.