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The Nature and Ethics of Indifference

Indifference is sometimes said to be a virtue. Perhaps more frequently it is said to be a vice. Yet who is indifferent; to what; and in what way is poorly understood, and frequently subject to controversy and confusion. This paper presents a framework for the interpretation and analysis of ethically significant states of indifference in terms of how different subjects of indifference are variously related to their objects in different circumstances; and how an indifferent orientation can be either more or less dynamic, or more or less sensitive to the nature and state of its object. The resulting analysis is located in a wider context of moral psychology and moral theory in order to expose the frequent claim that people should generally ‘care more’, or show more empathy and emotional engagement, to be a defeasible insight with important qualifications.

1. *The meanings of indifference*

The term 'indifference' has many different recognizable uses, more than one of which is of significant ethical interest. In one of its core uses, ‘indifference’ means *a lack of interest and attention*; this being a matter of someone's having or not having a certain attitude or orientation towards something. Thus, I might be indifferent to the pain of my colleague, or to the exact cosmic distribution of dust. Indifference considered as a lack of interest or attention can take at least two forms. First, I can show indifference towards something by not showing any awareness of it. Thus, I might be indifferent towards the pain of my colleague in virtue of not giving it any thought, or by not even noticing it. Second, I might be indifferent towards something in virtue of showing a

lack of care for or interest in it. Thus, I might display indifference towards the pain of my colleague by attending to it in a way that is cold, calculative or devoid of feeling. It is easy to miss the distinction between these two forms that indifference can take, insofar as it is natural to think of both of them as involving a kind of absence. Yet absence of awareness and absence of concern are importantly different both from a psychological and from an ethical point of view. Thus, I might show no awareness of your pain simply by ignoring you completely, and even without having any beliefs about whether or not you exist. To display a lack of care for or interest in your pain, on the other hand, implies the awareness on my part both of you and its existence, in the face of which my attitude is a consistent lack of affective or intellectual engagement. A natural way of describing the distinction between these two forms of indifference is to say that whereas a failure to be aware of something has no necessary attitudinal direction toward that thing (as in forgetfulness, ignorance or inattention), a lack of care for or interest in something is necessarily directed at that thing as something that is either consciously or unconsciously outside a domain of affective or motivational engagement (as in exclusion, negation, or passing over). By way of illustration, many human beings are frequently indifferent to the lives of small insects without having any kind of attitude towards them at all, whether cognitive or affective, sympathetic or antipathetic. Contrast this with the attitude of other human beings whose attitude to the lives of said insects is one of attentive but cold-hearted observation.

A second use of 'indifference' is indifference as *unimportance*, this being a matter of the absence of significance of something we might (or might not) take an attitude towards. Thus, I might regard my future health prospects or the exact cosmic

distribution of dust as a 'matter of indifference'. On the plausible assumption that someone could be mistaken about what is genuinely unimportant, there will cases where something that is perceived to be indifferent in this sense is, in fact, of genuine significance (and vice versa). On the one hand, I might wrongly think that my future health prospects are a matter of indifference. In that case, something that is, in fact, of genuine importance (in the sense that it matters prudentially) is, in thought and action, of no importance to me (in the sense that I judge it to be insignificant). On the other hand, I might wrongly think that whether or not I have exactly three million and one Facebook friends is a matter of the greatest significance. In that case, something that is, in fact, indifferent (in the sense that it matters neither prudentially or ethically) is, in thought and action, of the greatest importance to me (in the sense that I judge it to be hugely significant).

Indifference considered as unimportance also comes in more than one kind. On the one hand, something might be considered 'neither good nor bad', and therefore ethically (or otherwise normatively) neutral. It is natural to think that some things just don't make any difference, and that we are therefore entitled to ignore them when we consider what counts either for or against possible courses of action and states of affairs. Thus, if you are considering whether or not to keep your promise to a friend it is normally safe to think that with respect to this question at least, whether or not there is a proof of Goldbach's Conjecture (that every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes) is a matter of indifference (unless, perhaps, you happen to be friends with a certain kind of mathematician). The second interpretation of 'indifference' as unimportance is a comparative one, according to which something is indifferent if it is either average, mediocre, or in some way inferior. Thus, you might

think the performance of the England football team in major international tournaments has tended towards the indifferent in recent years (the English won their only major international tournament in 1966). What is indifferent in this sense is poor compared to something else that is more admirable or to-be-preferred, such as the recent performances in major international tournaments of the Spanish football team (European Champions in 2008 and 2012, and World Champions in 2010). Comparative indifference is not necessarily something that can be safely ignored except, perhaps, in the sense of being disvalued, avoided, or strived against. Comparative indifference in this 'objective' sense is also something that admits of degrees.¹

A third common use of 'indifference' is indifference as *neutrality*, this being a matter of the comparative significance of different things we can take an attitude towards. Thus, I might be indifferent between the suffering of strangers and the cosmic distribution of dust in the sense that I care just as much about one as I do about the other. Thus understood, indifference does not need to involve either a lack of interest in the things in question, or a judgment (true or false) that the things in question are unimportant. I could (wrongly, as it happens) be neutral between my future health prospects and the exact cosmic distribution of dust even if I were to judge that they are the two most important things in the world. Thus understood, indifference just consists in the absence of a comparative preference, including the absence of a

¹ Talk of indifference as unimportance naturally raises the question whether indifference thus understood is essentially comparative, or whether there is such a thing as being absolutely indifferent. The relevant distinction is that between something that matters less than everything else on the one hand, and something that matters not at all on the other. I take no view on this matter here.

comparative preference for or against the same thing. Thus, a person might be indifferent between having fish or veal for lunch. Alternatively, they might be indifferent between either having or not having any lunch at all.

Indifference as neutrality is also sometimes associated with the idea of an impartial spectator or judge. Thus, a football referee is normally thought of as being neutral with respect to the ambitions of the two teams whose match he referees. In this sense, he will be indifferent with respect to which team actually wins. Yet comparative neutrality in one respect is compatible with comparative preference in another, as in the case of the professional referee who is able to suppress his personal preference for one of the teams during the course of a match, or the corrupt referee who cares not one way or the other about which team deserves to win, having been paid in advance to give one of the teams preferential treatment. Like all forms of indifference, indifference as neutrality is always neutrality in some respect or other (e.g. sporting merit versus personal pay-off in the case of the corrupt referee). I shall return to this point shortly.

Indifference as neutrality also has an objective aspect. Thus, you can decide to remain neutral between two options on the basis of having judged that the choice between them is ‘genuinely’ indifferent; neither being better or worse than the other. Two things are indifferent in this sense just in case they are either perfectly or ‘roughly’ equal, where ‘rough’ equality would be a genuine difference that falls short of making a difference to whether or not you should go for one alternative over the other. ‘Genuine’ indifference as neutrality with respect to the same thing occurring or not occurring implies a genuine lack of importance of that thing itself (e.g. whether or not

you passed an odd or an even number of traffic lights on the way home from work yesterday). Yet indifference with respect to substantially different things occurring carries no analogous implication with respect to how important the things in question 'genuinely' are. Thus, I may justly have no preference between dying as the result of hitting a bus as opposed to dying as the result of a bus hitting me. I may correctly think that both options are equally unpleasant. Alternatively, I may have no preference between listening to Mahler's Ninth symphony at the Semper Oper in Dresden as compared to listening to his Third symphony at the Philharmonic in Berlin. I may be truly certain that both will be equally satisfying. To say that I am justly indifferent between these two options does not imply that I am justly undecided. Not wanting to get stuck between two equally big piles of hay like Buridan's fabled ass, I could be happy to settle the issue by means of some independent consideration, such as the price of the tickets or the toss of a coin. The initial choice between options could be indifferent, as could the method used to pick one. Yet whether or not I am able to choose at all normally isn't (as in a case where the decision is a matter of life and death).

Some indifferent attitudes or orientation that are appropriate objects of criticism or censure essentially involve the absence of some kind of affective or motivating attitude. I refer to such forms of indifference as 'practical indifference'. Practical indifference can be distinguished from what I call 'epistemic indifference', which involves the absence of some kind of cognitive attitude, either by way of ignorance or lack of attention, or by way of a refusal to affirm any of a number of incompatible claims on the grounds that no one of these claims is more strongly supported by evidence or argument than any of the others. One extreme form of epistemic

indifference is what is sometimes known as ‘Pyrrhonic indifference’, by which is meant the refusal to affirm any claim or its negation, as apparently suggested in all seriousness by Sextus Empiricus in his *Outlines of Scepticism*.² Although not primarily an ethical position, this kind of epistemic indifference can be ethically relevant in at least two ways. First, some of the claims we could refuse to affirm or deny are themselves ethical. By refusing to affirm either them or their negation we are refusing to take a stand on an ethical issue on epistemological grounds. Thus, by remaining agnostic about the rightness or wrongness of slavery, for example, the Pyrrhonic skeptic appears to stake out an ethically significant path which, although not logically equivalent to that of someone who affirms that slavery is ethically neutral, will in practice often amount to the same thing. Epistemic indifference can therefore play a closely analogous role to the ‘friend of the enemy’ that is sometimes played by paradigmatic forms of practical indifference. This is arguably one reason why some philosophers refuse to consider Pyrrhonic scepticism as a serious intellectual possibility. Second, most ethical claims make specific assumptions about what the world is like non-ethically. Epistemic indifference directed at these assumptions will undermine our confidence in ethical claims, depending on the extent to which these claims depend on the plausibility of those assumptions. Thus, by remaining agnostic about whether or not slaves really have the worldly talents and aspirations that their owners do, a Pyrrhonic sceptic would always be at least one premise short of an argument against some historically important forms of domination and oppression. Like certain forms of motivated ignorance and inattention, Pyrrhonic pleas of ignorance can therefore express a practical position of neutrality that their social reality might well (quite sensibly) refuse to grant them.

² Sextus Empiricus, 1994.

There is a second close connection between practical and epistemic indifference. Someone who takes no interest in what the world is like in some respect has no particular incentive to move from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge about what the world is like in that respect. To this extent, epistemic indifference can be a symptom of practical indifference. Thus, if you really don't care about the environmental implications of oil exploration you will have less of an incentive to consider the arguments for and against the claim that multinational oil companies are destroying the environment. The effects of practical on epistemic indifference are also important in the quest for knowledge for its own sake. Thus, if you really don't care about whether Goldbach's conjecture can be proved you may be less likely to have a belief in whether or not a proof can be found, and if so, how. Analogous claims apply to beliefs formed in the process of activities undertaken on the behalf of others. Thus, a government-sponsored scientist could be more likely to form beliefs about questions the pursuit of which offers a financial or professional reward than questions the pursuit of which offers a penalty, censure, or a life in professional obscurity. This is one (but only one) reason why some institutional incentives end up putting the cart before the horse. In these and other ways, epistemic indifference, like practical indifference, can be motivated or otherwise caused by separate intentions, purposes or aims (either on the part of the indifferent subject or on the part of others). Mainly for this reason, epistemic indifference plays a significant part in my analysis of the nature and ethics of indifference in what follows. As far as my account of the nature and

ethics of indifference is concerned, paying attention to something and forming beliefs about it can be one way to show what you really care about.³

2. States of indifference: four aspects

All ethically significant states of indifference have at least four distinguishable aspects, each of which could be the target of ethical interpretation and criticism. To identify these aspects, I find it natural to start by identifying the different relations that someone can stand in to something when they are in some way concerned with, it, and then to define the various forms that indifference can take as different ways of not being concerned with something. Yet given the established connections between the term 'care' and terms like 'concern', 'affection', 'sympathy' or 'empathy' and so on, this way of putting things is potentially misleading. First, you can move out of a state of indifference towards something in more than one direction, either by taking up a positive attitude towards it (as by way of affection) or by taking up a negative attitude towards it (as by way of hostility). Moreover, there are ways of being sensitive to something (and thereby 'caring about' or 'being interested in') which simply consist

³ The term 'indifference' has also been employed in ways that will appear only at the margins of my discussion in this paper. Among these may be counted 'religious indifference' in the sense of loving acquiescence of the Divine Will; 'sacreligious indifference', in the sense of adopting an irreverent attitude towards recognized ethical and religious codes; 'sublime indifference' in the sense of the ethical significance of something being so great that it transcends the human capacity of comprehension; 'cosmic indifference' in the sense of the apparent lack of concern showed by God or the Universe towards the human condition; and 'undifferentiated indifference' in the sense of some aspect of reality being considered as pre-ordered, non-conceptualized, indeterminate or unconnected. Although none of these additional senses of 'indifference' are the focus of my analysis in this paper, some of them are obviously connected with it.

in either paying it some kind of attention or having a belief about it. It is therefore more accurate to describe the relevant relation of concern as one in which something ‘makes a difference’ to someone or something, and the various forms that indifference can take as different ways in which something fails to make a difference. Having noted this caveat, I shall nevertheless make extensive use of the vocabulary of ‘being concerned about’, ‘not caring’, and ‘not being interested in’ to describe the different forms of indifference I discuss throughout the paper. This is partly for expository convenience, but also in order to exploit some of its obvious ethical connotations. When I describe a state of indifference as a state of not being concerned about, not caring or not being interested in, this is ultimately to be understood in terms of something not making a difference to someone or something in some particular way (as in ‘She doesn’t care’, or ‘He doesn’t care either way’), where ‘making a difference’ can involve either a positive or a negative attitude or orientation, and where one kind of orientation in the relevant sense is a state of being cognitively attuned (whether intentionally or otherwise) to have a view about what something is like.

When I say that someone is concerned about something, I have in mind a relation between something that is concerned (what I call the ‘subject’ of concern), something they are concerned about (what I call the ‘object’ of concern), an attitude or orientation of the subject towards the object (what I call the ‘orientation’ of concern), and the facts of the situation in which the relevant orientation is embedded (what I call the ‘context’ of concern). I define a ‘state of indifference’ as the absence of one or more of a range of possible orientations of concern about some object on the part of some subject in a certain context. Thus, you might be indifferent to the value of

your investments in a variety of different ways, e.g. by not thinking about them, by not worrying about them, or by never doing anything about them. You might be indifferent to various aspects of your investments, such as their short- or long-term yields, their likely value in the next five years, or the rise and fall of their value in the next five minutes. And you can have this attitude in a variety of different circumstances, from a state of ignorance of the economy, through a state of false belief that the economy is booming, to the realization that the economy is heading for a triple dip recession. Furthermore, when a state of indifference is attributed to a subject in a given context, that context itself could form part of a wider context in which the various attitudes of its subject are in a continuing state of development or change. Thus, your state of indifference to the value of your investments could be displayed at the beginning of a process of personal financial planning, at the end of such a process, or at some point in the middle (as you are muddling through it).⁴

A *subject* of indifference ('subject' being used here in a schematic sense) is a something or somebody capable of having an attitude or orientation towards some aspect of the world (including themselves). An indifferent subject in this sense could be a human individual, a social group, an institution, a society, or any other ethically significant locus of agency; maybe even a 'system', in the sense of 'system' that is the object of study by social scientists and the target of political protest and critique (as

⁴ Although each aspect of indifference can be separately identified in theory, in practice they are obviously related. Thus, you cannot be indifferent to your investments unless you are located in a society with an economy that makes it possible for you to have them. Nor can you cultivate indifference to physical pain unless you are embodied in an organism where physical injury is registered in first person consciousness. When I define the four different aspects of indifference as I do here, I do not mean to presuppose that any of these aspects can be subtracted from the others in a given scenario while leaving all the others unchanged.

when Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* of ‘the relative indifference of the great systems of punishment’, and ‘the apparently indifferent element of the disciplinary apparatus’).⁵ An indifferent orientation in this sense need not involve the possession of an intentional state on the part of its subject, although it often will do. Thus, it might be complained that the Pope is indifferent to the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests, more so than Catholics in general, but less so than the Catholic Church, or the social forces embodied in organized religion. Of these uses of ‘indifference’, the first is closer to its core ethical uses than the last, and therefore to the paradigm cases with reference to which other ethically interesting uses of ‘indifference’ can be understood. Even so, it is clearly intelligible to extend the term to non-standard cases. The interesting question is whether the relevant ‘subject’ of indifference is describable as ‘acting for reasons’, ‘having a purpose’, or ‘aiming at something’ in a way that makes it an appropriate target of ethical interpretation and criticism. Some things that are so describable (such as certain organizations) could be said to act for reasons, or to have purposes or aims, even if we do not think they are literally in possession of intentional states of their own, over and above the intentional states of their members (the matter is controversial).⁶ Although this will obviously affect how we should ethically evaluate them, it does not prevent us from describing them as either being concerned about or being indifferent. In this respect they arguably differ from things like kidneys or hearts, which, although they are functionally describable as having aims or functions, are not normally thought of as possible loci of ethical interpretation or criticism. In this paper I make no attempt to draw a strict line between things that can and things that cannot be a subject of indifference in an ethically interesting sense. For my purposes, it is more important

⁵ Foucault, 1991, p. 178.

⁶ Cf. List and Pettit, 2011.

that the definition is empirically tractable than that it is analytically determinate or fixed.

What an indifferent subject is indifferent to I call the *object* of indifference (where ‘object’ is also being used in a schematic sense). An object of indifference could be a human or some other individual, a group or collection of individuals, an irreducibly social entity, a fact, an event, a possibility or prospect, or an aspect of some actual or possible state of affairs, not all of which are possible subjects of indifference. (The domain of objects of indifference is larger than the domain of subjects of indifference, even on a permissive definition of ‘subject’.) Thus, you might be indifferent to your own pain, your hygiene, your neighbour, the suffering of your family, animal pain, global warming, the UK Research Excellence Framework, the Russian revolution, future Tuesdays, the mood swings of Sherlock Holmes, or the fate of the human species. Entities (or ‘objects’ in an ontological sense) such as people or headaches are obviously very different kinds of ‘thing’ than aspects of (actual or possible) entities or states of affairs. Even so, they are all potential objects of indifference, as I understand the term here.

To be an object of indifference is to be whatever it is that someone or something could be indifferent to. I shall assume that whatever someone is or is not concerned about can be specified in propositional form, such that if you are indifferent to something, this can be understood as you being indifferent towards some (or, indeed, all) aspects of that thing. (The range of your indifference could also be partly indeterminate.) Thus, if you care about your toothache you will care about it in some respect (e.g. its intensity) but not necessarily in others (e.g. its duration). And if you

care about your friends you will care about them in some respect (e.g. whether or not they are flourishing) but not necessarily in others (e.g. whether their left eye blinked an odd rather than an even number of times during the last twenty seven hours). Corresponding to the different respects in which something is or is not a matter of indifference to someone are different possible states of affairs towards which someone is or is not indifferent. Thus, I might concern myself with whether you have enough to eat but not with whether you will be given eternal life; take care to give you instructions if you ask me for directions but not care one way or the other about whether you get lost along the way; or consider your needs insofar as this is to our mutual benefit, but not purely for your own sake. In each case, the ethical interpretation or criticism of the state in question could be either more or less sensitive to the fine grain of the aspects of the world to which someone or something is indifferent. Finally, the aspects of the world to which a subject is indifferent will differ with respect to whether, and the extent to which, that subject is aware of them. On the one hand, it is possible for someone to cultivate a state of indifference towards a particular feature of another person's appearance because paying attention to it is known to be a cause of distraction. On the other hand, it is possible for someone be consistently indifferent towards a particular feature of another person's appearance for no other reason than that they never actually notice it. I say that states of indifference towards the same object differ with respect to whether, and to what extent, they are 'object sensitive'. I shall return to the significance of object sensitivity for the interpretation and evaluation of different states of indifference shortly.

Just like being concerned about something is to be concerned about it in some ways rather than others, so to be indifferent towards something is to be indifferent to it in

some ways rather than others. I shall refer to the way in which a subject is indifferent to an object as the *orientation* of indifference. The orientation of indifference is the (paradigmatically) attitudinal relation that connects a subject with the object of indifference. Thus, being indifferent could involve the absence of thought, belief, judgement, feeling, motive, disposition, a specific form of action, or an extended pattern of behaviour. Thus, we might worry about unfocused students; emotionally absent fathers; citizens who agree that it is their duty to help the needy but never show any sign of doing so; neighbours who consistently ignore the abuse that goes on next door; or institutions that exclude the many from legal protections provided for a privileged few, and so on. Because some potential subjects of indifference may be entities (such as corporations or disciplinary systems) that are incapable of having a number of the attitudes associated with concern or indifference in the case of individuals, it can be useful to include in the range of possible orientations of concern any kind of responsiveness to the world that is attributable to entities describable as acting for reasons, or as having beliefs, purposes or aims - whether they are individuals, groups, corporations, institutions, social systems, structures, or entire societies. The domain of indifferent orientations therefore extends beyond the domain of indifferent attitudes, if by 'attitude' is meant the mental states (such as thoughts and feelings) that make up the mental life of statistically normal human adults. On my definition, there is nothing essentially individual about the idea of an indifferent orientation. Nor is there anything essentially human.

Because indifferent orientations can coexist and come apart, a subject of indifference can be divided against itself with respect to its orientation towards the same object. Thus, you could be indifferent towards the rain outside in one way (e.g. you will go

for a walk no matter what), even if you care about it in another (e.g. you would rather not get wet). Of course, there are well-known limits to the extent to which certain attitudes of concern can coexist with other attitudes of not being concerned about the same object in a coherently integrated agent. Thus, it is notoriously difficult to cultivate an attitude of indifference in preference with respect to some aspects of others, such as their good looks, towards which we are naturally inclined to respond with an emotional bias. Even so, subjects of indifference undeniably display internally divided or ambiguous attitudes towards the same thing, whether in terms of their levels of attention, feelings of empathy, displays of concern, or attitudes of perceived hostility in different moments of possible action. (Consider the challenge posed by common forms of meditation, for example.)

The fourth aspect of indifference as I understand it is its *context*, or the circumstances in which the subject, object and orientation of indifference are jointly realized. As I shall use that term here, the relevant circumstances include facts both external and internal to the subject of indifference (I define ‘context’ this broadly as a matter of expository convenience, not in order to deny the significance of the distinction between social and psychological facts). Thus, I might be indifferent to whether I leave any money behind when I die in the context of either having or not having any descendants who would benefit from receiving the inheritance (facts external to the subject). Alternatively, I might be indifferent to whether or not I leave any money behind when I die in the context of not having any beliefs about whether I actually have any descendants, or whether I think my descendants are worthy of receiving an inheritance (facts internal to the subject).

Some features of the context of indifference are more closely connected to the other aspects of indifference than are others. In particular, some features of context could form a necessary part of the explanation of the emergence or persistence of those aspects in a certain configuration in a certain situation. For example, different cases of the same kind of indifference (e.g. a lack of concern for the poor) can vary with respect to their explanation, where the explanation might point to a personal belief (e.g. the cosmic justice of strict social hierarchy), a self-regarding motive (e.g. protecting one's own wealth), a social cause (e.g. class tension), or a historical function (e.g. ensuring social stability), in the absence of which it would not exist. In cases where the explanation of a state of indifference appeals to some intentionally articulated reason why its subject is indifferent, and where this reason is attributed either to that subject or to some other source of agency, I say that the indifference in question is 'motivated'. Motivated indifference is a subclass of a wider class of attitudes and orientations where indifference plays a causal or functional role in the emergence or persistence of a certain states of affairs without that function necessarily being one that the subject of indifference would either recognize or identify with. I refer to this wider category as 'dynamic indifference'. To be indifferent in this sense is to be indifferent with a certain aim, purpose or function. Clearly, not all states of indifference are dynamic in any ethically interesting sense. There are things (such as facts about the very distant past) that I could be indifferent to because I never have been, and never could become, aware of them. With respect to such things, it is unlikely that my state of indifference is either motivated or plays any other kind of dynamic role. I shall return to the ethical significance of dynamic indifference shortly.

To be concerned about something is to be more or less concerned about it. To be indifferent towards something is not to be concerned about it at all (in at least some relevant respects). Thus understood, indifference is an all-or-nothing thing. It might be vague or indeterminate where concern ends and indifference begins. Yet indifference, as I shall understand here, does not admit of degrees. As the examples of motivational indifference discussed in the previous paragraph illustrate, this implies that there could be less genuine indifference of certain particular kinds around than meets the eye, for example because one actually present concern is dominated by another in such a way as to rarely, if ever, manifest itself in consciousness or observable behaviour. There is also another respect in which there could be less genuine indifference of some particular kind around than meets the eye. Whether we describe someone as indifferent or not will depend on how we think they would respond in a range of possible situations. Thus, you might ignore my sadness completely if I am prepared to suffer it in silence. This does not mean that you would continue to ignore it if I were to complain about it, ask for your help, or offer you a suitable payment. To be concerned (or not to be concerned) about something is to display (or not to display) a concern for it in a relevant range of actual or possible circumstances. Indifference, just like caring, is inextricably bound up with ‘what-would-happen-if’. This raises the question of how counterfactually robust someone’s lack of care or concern must be in order for us to count them as genuinely indifferent with respect to a given orientation. Suppose I actually ignore your sadness, but would pay you attention if you were to complain. Am I then really indifferent to your sadness? Suppose I actually ignore your sadness and would continue to do so if you were to complain, but not if you asked me for help. Am I then really indifferent to your sadness? What if even a request for help would leave me cold, but a suitable

offer of payment would make me pay attention? Perhaps it is now tempting to say that I am really indifferent to your sadness and only care about the payment. But then, where does that leave your diligent psychiatrist?⁷ In sum, it is clearly possible to apply the term ‘indifference’ in more or less restrictive ways, some of which may feel more natural than others in different circumstances. In particular, the counterfactual conditions we place on ‘genuine’ indifference are likely to depend on our other beliefs and commitments, at least some of which may involve our ethical convictions about what is normally acceptable; good or bad; right or wrong; permissible or impermissible. Thus, the degree to which counterfactual claims about my attitudes in response to your sadness affect whether or not you choose to describe my actual ignorance of that sadness as a state of indifference could depend on your views about the ethical relevance of someone being sad, their complaining about this fact, their sincerely asking someone for help, the beliefs or motivations of people who respond to their behaviour, and the social context in which the sadness occurs. If so, your classification of someone as indifferent or not would itself be ethically laden in virtue of how you decide to evaluate the relevant counterfactuals. Perhaps most (if not all) our descriptions of people as caring or indifferent are ethically laden in this way. Whether they are or not, it remains true that describing someone as indifferent to something depends on possible as well as actual facts about them, and that people may choose to take account of these facts in more or less restrictive ways. This does not, however, mean that indifference admits of degrees. What it does mean is that it is

⁷ Another question relevant here is the fact that someone could be indifferent to something under one mode of presentation (e.g. ‘The person over there’) but not under another (e.g. ‘My long lost friend’). This fact is of particular significance to the attribution of indifferent orientations conceptually articulable contents. For discussion of the logic of such attributions, see e.g. Salmon and Soames (1988).

often vague, indeterminate, uncertain, contested and dependent on context whether we should describe someone or something as ‘really’ indifferent in a certain respect.

Sometimes the term ‘indifference’ is used to describe a ‘subject as whole’, as opposed to a ‘subject considered with respect to a given orientation’. Thus, it is possible for someone to have no interest in social media but nevertheless to be describable as a caring person. Likewise, it is possible for an investment banker to be very concerned about her annual bonus but also come across as a socially indifferent member of the team. As I understand it here, talk about indifferent persons, like all talk about indifferent ‘subjects as a whole’, is a function of the range and extent of their various concerns. In particular, it is a function of the range of things they are indifferent to and the range of ways they are indifferent to them in different circumstances. No living person (or no indifferent ‘subject’) is indifferent to everything conceivable in every conceivable way. In this sense, there is no such thing as someone being indifferent *simpliciter* (short of ceasing to be a subject in the relevant sense). In an extended sense, however, my account does allow for someone to be described as indifferent *simpliciter*. Thus, we can in principle define a minimal threshold of the range and extent of interests and concerns for a certain range of things that someone would need to have in a given context in order to be classified as not being an indifferent person in that context (similarly for other subjects of indifference). No doubt, it would sometimes be vague, indeterminate, uncertain, contestable and highly dependent on context whether we should describe someone as really indifferent in this sense. Yet given a suitable specification of the relevant range and the relevant threshold, indifference in the extended sense would still be an all-or-nothing thing. On my analysis, indifference in the original sense (of ‘subject considered with respect to

a given orientation’) is explanatorily prior to indifference in this extended sense (of ‘an indifferent subject as whole’), the notion of the latter being constructed on the basis of our notion of the former. To the extent that my discussion in this paper relies on the idea of ‘an indifferent subject as a whole’, this is to be understood as indifference in the extended sense just explained.⁸

When I say that to be indifferent to something is to display an attitude or orientation towards some aspect of that thing, where that orientation involves the absence of concern, this might sound mysterious. (‘So: is indifference some kind of strange ‘negative’ relation?’). On reflection, I do not think there is any mystery here. As previously explained, we start with the idea of being concerned about, or taking an interest in, something (as in something making a difference to someone). When I say that a person is concerned about something what I mean is that some state of that person would change in certain ways depending on the state of that thing. When I say that a person displays a lack of concern about (e.g. a non-caring orientation toward) something what I mean is that some state of that person would not change depending on the state of that thing. (Parallel descriptions can be formulated for the case of subjects that are not persons.) In other words, you are indifferent to something (in a

⁸ It might also be tempting to define a ‘basic’ sense of ‘indifference’ in terms of some ‘standard’, ‘paradigm’, or ‘canonical’ case: e.g. that someone is indifferent to someone or something if and only if they are actually aware of that someone or something (or could easily become aware of that someone or something); and they actually show no significant attitudinal response to that someone or something (or would not (easily) show any significant attitudinal response to that someone or something were they to become aware of it). The employment of such a definition (or something more precise still) would clearly be useful for a range of theoretical purposes. It would also go some way to address the worry (if it is a worry) that on the account given in the main text everyone will be indifferent to everything in at least some respect. Nevertheless, I resist the temptation of pursuing this definitional project for the purposes of exposition in this paper.

certain way) just in case it makes no difference to you (in that way) whether it is the case or not. Thus, if you are completely indifferent to the suffering of animals slaughtered for food, for example, then whether or not there is animal suffering involved in the slaughter of animals for food will make no difference to what you think, or feel, or do. For you it is a matter of indifference, whatever significance it may have for others, or ‘genuinely’ or ‘objectively’.

A ‘state’ of indifference is the default condition for most subjects with respect to most things in their environment. Given that I am simply ignorant about most facts about the universe, I can hardly be said to be concerned about them. Even for an unusually committed person, therefore, it will be true that they are indifferent to most things in most ways. Far from being a problem with any analysis of indifference, this implication is a trivial implication of it. The ethically interesting question is which, among the comparatively narrow range of things that someone could be concerned about, they should be concerned about, and in what ways they should be so.

3. States of indifference: two dimensions of variance

For purposes of interpretation and criticism, states of indifference can be classified by dividing them into four classes by means of two aforementioned criteria, namely whether a given state of indifference is ‘dynamic’ on the one hand, or ‘object sensitive’ on the other. I say that a state of indifference is dynamic when it plays a strategic or otherwise instrumental role in the pursuit of either the ends of its subject, or the ends of some collective of which the subject is a part. There is more than one

way in which an indifferent attitude or orientation could be dynamic in this sense. Here I shall mention six. First, a subject could consciously adopt an indifferent orientation for some purpose or end (e.g. getting rich). Second, a subject could adopt an indifferent orientation for some purpose or end, but do so unconsciously (e.g. to get back at a rival). Third, the indifferent orientation could serve a purpose or end of its subject without that subject having considered this fact either consciously or unconsciously (e.g. because it they are just doing what everyone else does). Fourth, and regardless of its place in the mental life of its subject, an indifferent orientation could serve a purpose or end of some collective of which the subject is a part (e.g. to maintain a universally beneficial system of co-operation). Fifth, and regardless of its place in the mental life of its subject, an indifferent orientation could serve a purpose or end of some collective of which the subject is a part, but to the exclusion of the purposes or ends of that subject (e.g. to maintain a widely, but not universally, beneficial system of cooperation). Sixth, and regardless of its place in the mental life of its subject, and regardless of its purposes or ends, an indifferent orientation could serve a purpose or end of some collective of which the subject is not a part (e.g. to maintain the oppression of one group by another).

Whether a state of indifference is dynamic in the sense just described will also in some cases depend on what it means to say that there is a collective of which that subject is a part. Once more, there is more than one way in which a collective could be said to have a subject of indifference as a part. Here I shall mention three. First, the collective could be one that the subject either identifies with, or otherwise considers themselves a part of (e.g. a member a club). Second, the collective could be one that someone else considers the subject to be a part of (e.g. the member of a hated clique).

Third, the collective could be one in the workings of which the subject plays a causal or otherwise explanatorily significant part, whether this fact is recognized or not (e.g. the carrier of some contagious disease).

I say that a state of indifference is object sensitive when its existence is in some way dependent on the nature of its object. There is more than one way in which an indifferent attitude or orientation could be object sensitive in this sense. Here I shall mention three. First, a subject could display an indifferent orientation towards something because that thing has a certain intrinsic feature (e.g. where someone fails to show any concern for a piece of mud they are standing on because it is nothing but an inanimate object). Second, a subject could display an indifferent orientation towards something because that thing has a certain extrinsic feature (e.g. where someone fails to show any concern for the disappearance of wildlife in their local surroundings because it is irrelevant to their pursuit of short term profit). Third, a subject could display an indifferent orientation towards something because that thing itself plays a significant part in promoting some end the indifferent orientation in question serves (e.g. where an Olympic skier fails to show any concern for the fact that their main competitor has accidentally put the wrong kind of wax on their skis, thereby placing that competitor at a serious disadvantage).

A state of indifference can be either a) dynamic and object sensitive; b) dynamic and object insensitive; c) non-dynamic and object sensitive; or d) non-dynamic and object insensitive. Thus, you might fail to pay attention to the pre-movie adverts because a) you find them stupid and would rather talk to your partner; b) you are too busy talking to your partner to notice them; c) you simply find them stupid; or d) you are too tired

to notice them. Apart from the fact that there is more than one way in which a state of indifference can be either dynamic or object sensitive, the distinctions between these four classes of indifference are neither entirely sharp, nor always easy to draw in practice. This does not mean that every state of indifference has any interesting aim or function. Thus, I could fail to notice that the TV is on by pure accident. Nor does it mean that every state of indifference is interestingly object sensitive. Thus, I could ignore the TV news in complete disregard of the TV's existence.

The fact that the distinctions between these four classes of indifference are neither sharp nor easy to draw in practice does not undermine their value so long as they serve to identify a range of attitudes or orientations that have actually been the focus of ethical attention and concern. In particular, by distinguishing between these four classes of indifference it might be possible to show both how, and why, certain states of indifference that have been the focus of ethical criticism are normatively significant in ways that are not always obvious either to their subjects, or to those who wish to ethically judge them.⁹

4. Evaluating indifference: the ethics of care and empathy

The ethics of indifference is an ethics of a variety of possible orientations characterized by not being concerned about something, such as not caring about it or not being interested in. The flip side of at least some forms of indifference is therefore caring about something. It is therefore natural to think that an ethics of indifference

⁹ I apply this fourfold distinction to the ethical evaluation of different kinds of indifference in XXX.

would be closely related to what has come to be known as ‘the ethics of care’. As defined by some of its proponents, an ethics of care evaluates persons, actions and states of affairs in terms of how they manifest an attitude of concern or empathy towards ethically significant others. Thus, in *The Ethics of Care*, Virginia Held writes that ‘the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral significance of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility’.¹⁰ A parent can manifest a caring attitude towards their child by nursing it through the early stages of life. A charitable action can manifest a caring attitude in the way the agent reaches out to someone in mortal danger and recognizes them as an ethically significant Other. A state of affairs can also manifest caring where different individuals show themselves as being empathetically connected, as when a group of people each feel personally affected by the misfortune that has befallen some of its members. Perhaps for this reason, some proponents of an ethics of care define ‘care’ (at least among relatively mature persons) as a symmetrical relation, as exemplified by Held when she describes it as a ‘relation in which carer and cared-for share an interest in their mutual well-being’.¹¹

In *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, Michael Slote distinguishes between two approaches to the ethics of care. A ‘partial’ ethics of care is an attempt to understand the ethics of certain aspects of human interaction (such as personal, familial or community relationships) in terms of empathetic caring as the basic value. A ‘total’ ethics of care is an attempt to understand the ethics of all human interactions (or ‘all of individual and political morality’) in terms of empathetic caring as the basic

¹⁰ Held, 2006, p. 10.

¹¹ Held op. cit. p. 35-5.

value.¹² Some proponents of an ethics of care have argued in favour of a ‘partial’ approach. Slote, on the other hand, argues in favour of a ‘total’ ethics of care. Somewhat less ambitiously, Held argues that care ‘is probably the most deeply fundamental value’ on the grounds that although there ‘can be care without justice’, there ‘can be no justice without care’.¹³

There is more than one way of thinking about the attitudes involved in an ethics of care.¹⁴ First, there are different ways of understanding their object. Thus, there is a way of thinking about caring according to which genuine caring essentially involves an affectively engaged attitude towards some particular Other. On another way of thinking about caring, it is possible to care about individuals or groups of people one has never met, who have long since passed away, or who are yet to exist. Second, there are different ways of understanding the orientation involved in caring. Thus, there is a way of thinking about caring according to which it essentially involves being absorbed in the way another individual experiences the world, and thereby being ‘engrossed’ in that person’s life or experience. On another way of thinking about caring, it involves having the feelings of another individual aroused in oneself, as when the pain of another person has a contagious effect. According to Slote, this latter way of thinking about care allows us to distinguish between empathy (as in ‘feeling someone’s pain’) and sympathy (as in ‘feeling *for* someone who is in pain), the latter being possible in the absence of the former (as when you feel sorry for someone who suffers without experiencing that suffering as your own).

¹² Slote, 2007, p. 2.

¹³ Held op. cit. p. 17.

¹⁴ Slote op. cit.

Corresponding to these different possible orientations of caring are different subjects of caring for whom these orientations either are, or are not, possible. Thus, it has been argued that the experience of empathy as ‘contagion’ requires less in the way of psychological and social development than the experience of empathy as ‘engrossment’, or ‘mediated identification’. It follows that there are ethically significant differences between these different ways of caring with respect to the subjects from whom they might, or might not, be reasonably expected or demanded. The case is even clearer when we move from individual to potentially collective or corporate subjects of care. Insofar as these kinds of ‘subjects’ are incapable of experiencing feelings of sympathy or empathy, our ability to ethically evaluate them cannot depend on the idea that they are capable of experiencing such feelings.

Some of those who favour an ethics of care explicitly distinguish between actions that display caring and actions that display indifference, and then go on to classify the latter as ethically lacking by default. Thus, Slote writes that ‘[a]ctions... that display indifference or malice toward (relevant) others count, ethically, as wrong or bad.’¹⁵ Held’s articulation of an ethics of care is defined in opposition to the ‘emotional indifference’,¹⁶ the ‘calculated self-interest and moral indifference’,¹⁷ and the ‘indifference to the welfare of others’ that she claims is both assumed and encouraged by liberal political theories, such as that formulated by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*.¹⁸ These statements make it look as if the claim that indifference can be a virtue is necessarily in tension with the ethics of care. If virtuous indifference is virtuous lack of empathy and there is no virtuous lack of empathy, then there can be

¹⁵ Slote op. cit. p. 10.

¹⁶ Held op. cit. p. 77.

¹⁷ Held op. cit. p. 83.

¹⁸ Held op. cit. p. 83. Cf. Rawls, 1971. See also Vetlesen 1994.

no virtuous indifference. In fact, I think this claim is implausible.¹⁹ Yet even if it is not, there is more than one way in which it is potentially misleading. Here is shall mention three.

First, on my account of indifference, an empathetic (or otherwise affective) attitude is only one possible orientation the absence of which can amount to a state of indifference. There is also the ‘care’ potentially embodied in awareness, attention, plan, intention and action. Thus, I could be disposed to feel empathy towards another person but stop short of doing so by not thinking about them in a situation where so doing is the only way to complete a vital task. Alternatively, I could feel empathy towards a person yet refuse to let that empathy affect my action if I think that expressing my true feelings towards that person is likely to give them an unfair advantage over others, or to ruin a professional relationship I have been trying to cultivate for a long time. If in the former case an ethics of care might refuse to see any genuine virtue in my behaviour, in the latter case there is no conflict between the claim that all virtuous action involves empathy and the claim that some virtuous action is a manifestation of indifference. For in this latter case, the ethically significant properties of ‘caring’ and ‘non-caring’ are associated with distinct attitudes or personal orientations.

Second, the absence of empathy does not entail indifference in all ethically relevant respects. Thus, you might fail to show empathy with my suffering in the sense that you fail to experience my suffering as your own. Yet you could still be concerned about my suffering in the sense that you feel sorry for me, and therefore decide to

¹⁹ See XXX.

help me on that account. (This point is implicitly accepted in Slote's discussion of empathy as the basic value in an ethics of care.) Or you might eventually decide to help me most reluctantly, having come to believe that on balance I don't deserve to be left in the lurch. An ethics of care might refuse to classify such forms of helping behaviour as truly (or maximally) virtuous, wishing to reserve that label for actions that display all the features of 'mediated associative empathy' (in Slote's words). Even so, it had better rate such intermediate forms of helping behaviour higher on a scale of ethical value than either a complete failure to help, a failure to notice, or forms of behaviour that display either 'hostility' or 'malice'. It follows that not all ethically acceptable (or even admirable) forms of concern involve the expression of empathy (or any other strongly affective attitude). A person who does her duty only for duty's sake might or might not be less admirable than someone who does it out of sympathy, empathy or love (the point is controversial). Yet no one could seriously deny that she is doing better, ethically speaking, than someone who fails to do her duty at all, either because she has malicious motives, or because she is generally indifferent, across some arbitrary range of orientations, to what duty demands.

The third point relates to Slote's claim that it is wrong or bad to display indifference towards 'relevant others'. This claim contains a crucial qualification suggesting that there are some 'others' towards whom a non-empathetic attitude could be ethically appropriate, at least in certain circumstances. (Perhaps some 'others' would be excluded because they fail to possess the requisite capacities, such as a capacity for sentience.) This claim can be generalised to cover not only people, but also objects of indifference that are not individual people, as well as attitudes of non-concern that go beyond the absence of empathy and other affective attitudes. Thus, the range of

sensible objects of empathy is limited by the kinds of things with which it makes sense to stand in an empathetic relationship. (There are difficult issues here about our relationship to humans at the margins of life, non-human animals, and sophisticated robots, for example.) And there are possible objects of full-scale empathy (such as extremely manipulative human adults) with whom it might be judged better in certain circumstances to not stand in empathetic relations because they have behaved in ways that either display a lack of basic respect for others, or that is otherwise judged to be morally beyond the pale. None of this is to deny that some caring relationships between human beings are intrinsically desirable, or even supremely good. The point is rather that there are more than accidental obstacles to the pursuit of such relationships in a wide range of interactions between human individuals and other potential objects of indifference or concern - a fact that could make the pursuit of mutual empathy undesirable, unrealistic, wrong, or impossible in a wide range of circumstances.

There is no deep tension between a plausible ethics of indifference and a ‘partial’ ethics of care in Slote’s sense. Indeed, any plausible ethics of indifference could be embedded within a wider ethical framework that assigns a fundamental role to the relations of ‘sympathy, empathy, sensitivity and responsiveness’, as championed by Held and other proponents of an ethics of care.²⁰ A partial ethics of care should be able to explain how and why some indifferent attitudes or orientations are ethically appropriate in a range of contexts where empathetic caring is either not possible, or is ethically inadvisable or misguided in the circumstances.

²⁰ Held *op. cit.* p. 10.

There is, however, a genuine tension between a plausible ethics of indifference and a ‘total’ ethics of care. I seriously doubt whether a plausible ethics of indifference can be embedded within a wider ethical framework that classifies empathetic caring as the uniquely fundamental value (even as restricted to interactions between human individuals and ethically significant Others). I shall not attempt to address in detail here the arguments of those (such as Held and Slote) who may seem to think otherwise. I shall, however, briefly state my two main reasons for being sceptical about the universal ambitions of the ethics of care.²¹

First, although the ethics of care has obvious advantages in the evaluation of direct, close, or otherwise proximate relationships between individual human beings, the obviousness of those advantages disappears once our focus changes to relationships between potential subjects (such as collectives or management systems) and objects (such as non-human nature or states of affairs) of indifference or concern that arguably fail to meet the necessary conditions for mutual empathy and concern. Thus, it is less than obvious that mutual empathy and concern are the most helpful concepts in which to articulate the ethical relationships between corporations and the natural environment. (This is not to say that these concepts will have no role to play in thinking ethically about such relationships.) The problem here is that a total ethics of care would be too narrowly focused to capture the full range of questions that a comprehensive ethics of indifference has to address.

Second, although an ethics of care that describes relationships of mutual empathy and concern as an ethical aspiration or ideal can allow that in many situations the

²¹ See also XXX

conditions for either realising or aspiring to that ideal are not met, it will struggle to make sense of the fact that in a wide range of circumstances the parties to these relationships would reasonably consider a change of their conditions to promote this ideal as counterproductive, undesirable, or simply wrongheaded.²² A less than total ethics of care can make sense of this fact, on the assumption that there are ways of not being concerned about someone or something that can be ethically virtuous, good, or even required. The problem here is that a total ethics of care would be insufficiently sensitive to the various aspects and evaluative dimensions of at least some states of indifference in a significant range of circumstances. Both the problem of focus and the problem of insensitivity are illustrated by the schematic examples given in this paper of the various ways that some indifferent attitudes and orientations have historically been evaluated in a wide range of circumstances.²³

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²² The point is controversial. See e.g. Baron-Cohen 2011, 126ff.

²³ XXX

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