

***Impartiality in Moral and Political Philosophy.***  
**By Susan Mendus. Oxford: Oxford University**  
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Susan Mendus's book, *Impartiality in Moral and Political Philosophy*, is an attempt to reconcile the ongoing conflict between partial and impartial concerns both in everyday decision-making and in the context of political philosophy (p. 7). The thought is since we live in a pluralist society, along with people who do not share the same commitments as we do, we have to account for pluralism and when pluralism and justice conflict, we must be able to justify priority of justice for those who do not have any such commitments (p. 9, 11). Mendus is writing this book for those (in academic Philosophy) who already have a commitment to friendship and have concerns about the role that impartiality plays in those relationships, and not for the amoralist who does not commit herself or himself to any morality at all (p. 77).

Mendus argues that partial relationships set the grounds for impartiality. This is the idea that our partial concerns are foundations for impartiality. We first learn certain principles in partial relationships and through those, we learn to become impartial (p. 119). This idea is mainly cashed out in chapter two, the central chapter. All other chapters are either setting the stage for this view to emerge, or to "house" this new idea of impartiality.

Initially Mendus views impartiality as grounded in commitment to equality (p. 7), she later makes a rather interesting move and grounds impartiality in a commitment to "specific others whom we care about and whose needs and interests are directly motivating for us" (p. 76). This is useful because those who do not include impartiality in their comprehensive conceptions of the good can be motivated to accept impartial principles (of equality) at the societal level.

Most crucial and difficult, for anyone who holds an impartial view is solving the conflict between the demands of partial and impartial relationships. Mendus suggests that “the conflict is a difficult one precisely *because* impartiality contains within it a recognition of the significance of our partial concerns for particular others” (p. 126). This *recognition* is the salient factor here. We derive impartiality from understanding people’s partial relationships because partial relationships are motivating and have a moral dimension that ultimately outstrips its partialist birthplace. Suppose I ask a friend to lie for me and she does, although she might be reluctant. Some might suggest that this is a great example to illustrate why friendship and morality cannot mix (p. 81-82). Mendus disagrees. In an intriguing turn, she offers,

[T]he very fact that my friend will be reluctant to submit my request to moral scrutiny, and the very fact that to do so would be at odds with friendship, should make me reluctant to make the request in cases where acceding to it involves committing moral wrongs. The directly motivating character of friendship can itself prompt moral consideration, and we see how it can do that if we take up the perspective of the person making the request, rather than the perspective of the person who is the recipient of the request. (p. 83)

She shifts the burden of situation on the person asking, and not the person asked to commit some wrong. She argues that morality is grounded not on equality but on caring relationships (p. 86). Partial relationships motivate people to act justly. Because I know that my friend would lie for me, “what I can properly ask of her [should be]... in the direction of impartial considerations” (p. 89). This is a very interesting claim. One, however, wonders how we know what *impartial* treatments of others are. This sounds more like we know *impartial* obligations (knowing you should not ask people that you do not know to lie for you) first and then we try to integrate it in our *partial* relationships.

Further, the reader might still wonder how partial relationships are adequate grounds for impartial ones. Although I think Mendus’s

proposal of how this happens is extremely original and is perhaps one of the most important parts of chapter three, the topic never gets as much attention as one might expect. While we do learn *morality* from our partial relationships, there is still little reason to think that people would *learn impartial morality* from these partial relationships. Her proposal here inevitably sets the stage for much future development.

So far, we are also not told the answer to the important question that the debate rests on, as she too confesses, “where does legitimate partiality end and obligation of impartiality start?”

With the lying example, Mendus completely ignores the importance of the scenario where I do ask my friend to lie for me and *not* acknowledging her personhood in an impartial way (p. 81-82). Mendus interestingly turns the issue, not to what a “partial friend” should do, but rather what I should not have asked of my friend. This dilemma is crucial because the only reason I ask *her* is *because* we have a partial relationship. I did not just grab someone in the street and ask for his or her help.

Naturally to get *impartial* morality off the ground, Mendus gives an account of care and caring relationships, in chapter three. Caring is an objective matter that has a critical dimension. In caring we need to be aware of other people’s needs and interests, be “persistent”, and since the things that we care about motivate us, they should guide our actions (p. 105-108). It is essential for the caregiver to have agency and “second-order volitions” because caring appears as a second-order volition (p. 98-99, 103). If the amoralist is not concerned about which of her desires win then we cannot get morality off the ground with her, be it partial or impartial (p. 107). What about people who *do* care?

We get the answer in the final chapter. She argues “that grounding morality in what we care about renders it congruent with our own good” (p. 120). It will not leave us alienated, as moral theories tend to do. Also, “it is important for the reconciliation of pluralism and priority [of justice] which, after all, is the problem that motivated this book.” (p. 131) This claim might be surprising. In the first chapter she tells us that the aim of this book is to reconcile the tension between partial and impartial commitments.

The upshot is, we are able to argue for impartial morality, not by appeal to overlapping consensus of comprehensive conceptions of the good but by appeal to its congruency for one's own good. However, those whose comprehensive conception opposes impartiality should accept impartial morality based on a "*modus vivendi* status" (p. 162). With this point a tension appears; this reasoning is precisely what she intends to get away from in chapter one, where she expresses her intention to articulate a political theory that everyone can consent to and no one would have to be forced into acting in a certain way. But since she is giving up the whole idea here, she has to hold that we could coerce people to do things that do not fit in their comprehensive conceptions of the good. She ignores what she claims to be crucial in the modern societies, namely, pluralism, and its permanence. Her solution becomes what she has set out to reject from the beginning. At this point the reader is left wondering, because she appears to "give up" the worthy project at hand. I believe she was in the right direction and should have kept going that way.

Back to the issue of care, a couple of points remain. By focusing on second-order desires, namely caring desires, Mendus explicitly excludes non-human animals from the realm of care, at least as caregivers. This is implausible. Animals show great attachment to their offsprings and tend to their needs. While in danger, they will do anything to protect them; this is caring. On a more positive side, a very interesting point in her book is the discussion of the critical dimension of care. For instance, Isabel's upbringing has left her with no way of evaluating what is important. Mendus refers to her as "morally undone" (p. 115). In her quest to learn what she cares about, she meets her husband who she thinks is a free-thinking person as she, but really he is just after her money; "He displays, not his disregard for the values of society, but his total subservience to them" (p. 114). She marries him and after doing so, she comes to only care about what he cares about. The critical level of caring is missing in her caring. When she becomes informed of his wrong deeds and lack of character, Isabel tells him that, "you have made me as bad as yourself" (p. 115). Mendus, rightly, contends this shows her loss was not just a matter of happiness but also morality.

The book is marvelously detailed and thorough. She gives a detailed account of each alternative view, along with criticisms and responses to those, and offers her own view, as well as summaries in between chapters that often take us back to the original question relevant to the chapter. Among the book's virtues is that it is well grounded in the analytical tradition and the history of the ideas that are being explored in that tradition. I find it a valuable addition to the field of ethics, and political philosophy. I certainly recommend this book as a worthy fare to use for graduate and upper level honors undergraduate philosophy students.