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Partiality and Meaning*

Benjamin Lange, LMU

Abstract: Why do relationships of friendship and love support partiality, but not relationships of hatred or commitments of racism? Where does partiality end and why? I take the intuitive starting point that important cases of partiality are meaningful. I develop a view whereby meaning is understood in terms of transcending self-limitations in order to connect with things of external value. I then show how this view can be used to distinguish central cases of legitimate partiality from cases of illegitimate partiality and how it puts pressure on the traditional way of thinking about partiality.

Keywords: Partiality, Permissible Partiality, Options, Meaning, Projects, Personal Relationships

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1. Introduction

A common way to think about partiality is to see it as *permitting*, as opposed to *requiring*, us to show a special concern to ourselves and others.

In such cases, we commonly have so-called

> ***Agent-Centred Moral Options (henceforth just 'options'):*** Permissions to bring about outcomes that are impartially suboptimal because they promote our own or our intimates' interests.[1]

Many people believe that options exist, and much debate has consequently focused on how, if at all, various moral theories can *justify* them.[2]

My focus here is different: I want to know what makes the central pursuits that support partiality different from ones that do not. That is, even though we have countless personal projects and personal relationships, only some of them give rise to options for us.

Why is this? Why do relationships of friendship generate options, but not relationships of hatred or commitments of racism?[3] Where does partiality end and why?

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[1] See Kagan (1989), pp. 6-10.

[2] The *locus classicus* for a defence of an agent-centred moral option is Scheffler (1982).

[3] See Kolodny (2010), p. 170, as well as Keller (2009), Heath Wellman (2000), and Cottingham (1986). Compare also Zangwill (2000), who writes on p. 280:

> A lot of ethical theorists are happy to notice the friends, family and community cases, but they do not see the problem of where it might end [...] How about my colleague, my tribesman, my countryman, my gender, my patient, my co-religionist or my species? These are all controversial and disputed. We need to ask the question: which loyalties are okay and which are not? When do indexical considerations contribute to

The intuitive answer that I pursue in this paper is that legitimate partiality is explained by the fact that it can give meaning to an agent's life. Pursuits that cannot be meaningful cannot support partiality.

Of course, I'm not the first to assert a connection between partiality and meaning.[4] My contribution here will be to take this connection more seriously than others have to date, both by developing a more fine-grained account of meaning and by examining in more detail what forms of permissible partiality it can explain.

Indeed, developing this intuitive *Meaning View* has more revisionist implications than one might at first have thought. For example, while the literature traditionally sees options as giving us 'breathing space'—that is, permission to do less whenever morality asks *too much* of us—the Meaning View entails that we have breathing space *only* if what we do instead is grounded in a pursuit that is meaningful. This means that most paradigmatic thought experiments commonly invoked to support the existence of options are indecisive without additional specification and that some options, like those to turn down *trivial* requests, are either ruled out altogether or much weaker than commonly supposed.

I begin in the next section to clarify my explanatory strategy. I then develop the Meaning View at an intuitive and then a more fine-grained level in sections 3 and 4 respectively. My account relies on the idea, inspired by Nozick (1981), of meaning as *transcendence* of the self's limits in order to connect with external things of value. I consider how this account may explain the kinds of options that are typically countenanced in the literature. This will also equip me with the resources to explain

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determining a moral property? This is a fundamental moral question—perhaps even the fundamental moral question.

[4] Scheffler (1997) and Wolf (1997) are examples.

why hatred or commitments of racism are illegitimate forms of partiality. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. The General Case

I now first make the intuitive case for the attractiveness of a fundamentally meaning-based account of partiality and then sketch a more technical proposal based on the intuitive case.

It seems to me that identifying paradigmatic instances of partiality with activities that have meaning has the right resonance. All our partial endeavours are unified by the fact that they are in some way or other centrally important to our life. Put differently, we might say that engaging in legitimate forms of partiality gives our life a sense of purpose and direction and that this is often captured by saying that these pursuits infuse our life with meaning.

Paradigmatically meaningful activities correspond to activities that centre forms of partiality. Consider the lives of Mandela, Mother Teresa, Einstein, Darwin, and Picasso, which embody admirable kinds of achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation.[5] These lives have in common an immersion in some form of self-transcendence that prioritises certain actions, whether in the course of helping a specific group of people more than others, engaging in intellectual inquiry, or producing valuable forms of art. Of course, meaningfulness goes beyond the lives of

[5] See Metz (2013), Ch. 1, for this taxonomy of 'the good, the true, and the beautiful' as paradigm examples of meaningfulness.

some of the most admired characters in human history; everyday pursuits such as being a good parent, forming and engaging in loving relationships or friendships, or even reading a book to learn about a new subject matter are meaningful and represent the kind of pursuit that defenders of partiality aim to defend as legitimate.

Moreover, meaningfulness intuitively has the right *normative pull*. Approaches in the literature typically ground options either in a conflict between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, together with some claims about their incommensurability, or by stipulating the existence of underivative entities that exist in addition to, for example, a duty to promote the overall good impartially.[6] Whatever the correct framework to account for options, what underlies the existence of agent-relative reasons or underivative permissions must be robust enough to hold up against the value of doing what is impartially optimal. It seems that the notion of meaning, understood as a distinct category of value, is in principle a promising candidate for the job.

That said, even though there appears to be a strong *prima facie* intuitive case for explaining partiality by the meaningfulness of the pursuits that motivate it, the mere identification of central cases of partiality that are somehow related to the value of meaning does not tell us very much.

At best, it moves the request for explanation a layer further back, prompting us to offer a closer analysis of what conditions determine whether a given pursuit qualifies as *meaningful*. That is, a partiality principle of the following form must provide a more detailed analysis of what it is for some *X* to *be* meaningful.

Meaning View

[6] See Hurka and Shubert (2012), sections 1 and 2.

(MV) Instances of an option to act from [or in accord with] partiality motivated by [or derived from] doing *X* are instances where doing *X* makes an agent's life meaningful.

As mentioned in the introduction, some maintain that the special relationships that provide reasons for partiality are just those that we have reason to value non-instrumentally.[7] But the equation of central instances of justified partiality with those of positive value, again, remains unhelpful without an account of what makes any pursuit positively valuable.[8]

I want to fill this gap by developing an account of what makes a pursuit meaningful. To this end, let's take two data points as a springboard for showing how a substantive analysis of meaning can explain partiality.

The first is an observation about what paradigmatic instances of legitimate partiality have in common. Call this data point

Partiality: Being justifiably partial to an object of concern *X* necessarily involves

i) an attitude of special concern in terms of your actions and feelings toward *X;* and

[7] See Scheffler (1997). Kolodny's (2010) resonance principle is, of course, another attempt to explain what he calls the List, though, as we shall see, his *structural* approach differs from the *substantive* one favoured here.

[8] See also Kolodny's (2010), n. 9, remarks on the same point:

> 'This connection to well-being or meaning is plausible, and it may even be useful in identifying, or justifying belief in, the principles on the List. But it does not help to explain why those and only those principles are on the List. On the most plausible views, when activities and experiences contribute to well-being and meaning, they do so because they are independently valuable. So, the challenge recurs: why are these relationships, and no others, independently valuable?'

ii) *X*'s being worthy of that attitude.

I take this first observation about the phenomenology of being partial to be uncontroversial, but let me say a few words in support of its plausibility.

Being justifiably partial involves acting and caring *disproportionately* about something that is worth caring about. In my own case, I might care especially about advancing my own career, my intimates' happiness, or the performance of my favourite football club. I will care about these things more than I would care about other careers open to me, strangers, or a different football club. Whatever the fine-grained phenomenology of the caring might look like—i.e., whether it is best described as intentional, a form of valuing, a certain motivational impetus, and so on—at the very least it will entail my acting and feeling in certain distinctive ways (here understood generally as encompassing wide-ranging responses) with regard to the object of my concern.[9] This will result in such things as my benefiting my relatives in preference to strangers and watching my favourite football club rather than some random one. I will feel joy and pleasure when my children succeed in their projects, grief and sadness when they fail.

So much for the first data point.

What would an account of meaning have to look like to be congruent with *Partiality*? I suggest it would probably look something like this:

Meaning:[10] Some pursuit *P* is meaningful for an agent *A* when and because

[9] Some of these responses may entail valuing (Scheffler, 2010), love (Kolodny, 2003; Wolf, 2010), or caring (Frankfurt, 1982).

[10] See Wolf (1997a), p. 211; see also Hepburn (1965); Kekes (1986; 2000); Wiggins (1988); Wolf (1997b; 2002; 2010); Dworkin (2000), Ch. 6; Raz (2001), Ch. 1; Schmidtz (2001); Starkey (2006); and Mintoff (2008).

i) *A*'s actions and feelings display a special attitude of concern toward *P,* and

ii) *P* is worthy of that attitude.

I anticipate that some readers will be sceptical of this particular account of meaning. That is fine. My aim here is not to convince the reader of the truth of this conception of meaning. I merely want to illustrate a previously unrecognised and, I think, quite appealing conceptual link between the two data points. The explanatory merits of this link may then themselves reinforce the plausibility of this analysis of meaning.

According to so-called *objective naturalism*, we can achieve meaning in life, which is a distinct category of value that differs from moral value and happiness. On this account, achieving meaning requires both that an agent display a special attitude of engagement in a pursuit and that this pursuit be worthy of that attitude. This latter objective condition contrasts with *subjective naturalism*, according to which the achievement of meaning is independent of an object of concern and entirely dependent on an agent's attitude toward a pursuit.[11] It also contrasts with forms of non-naturalism, according to which the question of meaning in life is understood as a question about the point of the existence of humankind.[12]

With the *Partiality* and *Meaning* data points in hand, we can now make explicit the following link: Insofar as being justifiably permissibly partial involves a special subjective attitude characterised by a range of responses toward an object of concern, and insofar as achieving meaning through engagement in some pursuits involves a special attitude of engagement toward an object of objective worth—an attitude characterised by a range of the responses similar to that characteristic of paradigmatic partial behaviour—we are in a position to map the second onto the first.

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[11] See Frankfurt (1982; 2002; 2004) for influential statements of this view.

[12] See Metz (2013), Chs. 5–8, for an overview.

3. The Specific Case

3.1 Meaning as Transcendence

To show that *Meaning* can in fact be mapped onto *Partiality*, we need to get some more machinery on the table and spell out their convergence at a finer level of granularity.

The objective naturalist account I want to explore here is inspired by Nozick (1981). For Nozick, meaning is about transcendence, which in turn is understood as overcoming our agential self-limitations to connect with external value in various ways:

> The particular things or causes people find make their life feel meaningful all take them beyond their own narrow limits and connect them up with something else. Children, relationships with other persons, helping others, advancing justice, continuing and transmitting a tradition, pursuing truth, beauty, world betterment—these and the rest link you to something wider than yourself... [M]eaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value, a transcending of your own limited value. Meaning is a connection with an external value.[13]

The view that Nozick outlines can be put more precisely as follows:

Transcendence

> Some pursuit *P* is meaningful for an agent *A* when and because
>
> **a.** *P* is objectively valuable (*external element*), and
>
> **b.** *A* displays a special mode of engagement toward *P* (*internal element*).

[13] See Nozick (1981), pp. 595, 610–611.

The starting point of this approach is the idea that meaning is fundamentally about the integration of how an agent structures her life with how she relates to objects of external value, which are understood as objects that bring complexity and structure into a single whole.[14] To determine whether an agent's life has meaning is to reflect on how her agency connects to other things of value and to carefully examine the nature of these connections: 'Your connection with the value, then, is itself valuable, and meaning is gotten through such a valuable connection with value.'[15] The nature of the connection is the *mode* of linking to value.

Transcendence therefore has an *internal* as well as an *external* element. Firstly, the object of the connection matters. An agent gains less meaning through connecting with things that unify little complexity and structure than through connecting with things that unify greater complexity. Secondly, the connection also depends on the *mode* of linking to value, which refers to a special agential attitude of engagement. There are various modes, and often several are at play when linking to value: these can include attitudes such as loving, caring, cooperating, thinking of, imagining, creating, and enjoying.

To illuminate this approach, it is helpful to contrast it with an alternative account. Niko Kolodny (2010) offers a structural principle that he considers as a candidate to explain partiality:

> ***Resonance:*** One has reason to respond to X in a way that is similar to the way that one has reason to respond to its counterpart in another dimension of

[14] Nozick (1981), pp. 417, 445, 460–469, 517–522. This does not mean that all connections with external value need to be objectively valuable.

[15] Nozick (1989), p. 168.

> importance, but that reflects the distinctive importance of the dimension to which X belongs.[16]

This principle maintains that we have reason to respond to certain partial pursuits based on our history of engagement with them in a way that mimics whatever reason we have to respond to them in general without such a history, but where the reason to be partial is not just a sum of the individual instances of engagement that form part of that history and where that sum reflects the distinctive importance of that history. In this way, the individual response to something of agent-neutral importance *resonates* with the response to something of agent-relative importance.

So, while a history of encounters among friends might consist, among other things, of specific interactions of mutual beneficence, the overall explanation of why friendship is a legitimate form of partiality is not merely a derivative one that appeals to the sum of the beneficial acts of which it is composed. The history of encounters that characterises legitimate partiality amounts to more than just the sum of its individual discrete interacting parts.

In contrast to this interesting structural approach, the Meaning View follows an identificatory strategy. It makes a claim about the kinds of pursuits associated with the value of meaning and then says that those pursuits give rise to important cases of legitimate partiality. So, according to the Meaning View, friendship is a legitimate form of partiality because in the pursuit of friendship, friends connect with each other's value and thereby transcend their individual self-limitations.

3.2 Breathing Space

At the outset of this discussion, I mentioned a creeping scepticism that we face about partiality in the absence of a principled account that demarcates pursuits that can give

[16] Kolodny (2010), p. 181.

rise to legitimate instances of partiality from those that cannot. According to the view that I have outlined, a principled answer is to be found in meaning. Demarcating central cases of legitimate partiality from illegitimate partiality is a matter of identifying what kinds of pursuits could amount to transcendent connections with external value.

But this explanatory virtue also has a revisionist character. The Meaning View puts pressure on the ordinary way of thinking about options. Traditionally, options are considered to give us what we might call *breathing space* to evade the stringent demands of impartial morality. Since impartial morality can sometimes demand a lot and impose unreasonable costs on us and our interests, we are, so the line of thinking runs, in such cases permitted to favour our interests and do what would be impartially suboptimal.

The Meaning View can buy into this idea, but it adds a qualification: the cost that the demand of impartial morality imposes on us must concern a potential loss of meaning in our life for us to be permitted to evade it. In other words: we have breathing space *only if* the demand of impartial morality concerns a meaningful commitment. Whether we have options in a given situation therefore depends on the contextual details. This, in turn, means that some of the paradigmatic cases often invoked to justify options are indecisive without further specification or even ruled out entirely as instances of legitimate partiality.

One reason for this is that the Meaning View naturally aligns with defences of options that construe the salient interests that they protect as *ground projects*, commonly understood as central life commitments that entail a certain amount and continuity of goal-oriented agency.[17] Further, it is tempting to characterise the overcoming of agential self-limitations for the purpose of connecting with value as engaging in

[17] See Williams (1981).

ground projects of this sort. If this is true, then the Meaning View maintains that options exist in cases where an agent is engaged in a valuable ground project.

But we might think that not all options concern the loss of or interference with ground projects. For example, consider options to refrain from doing small favours or other trivial beneficial acts.[18] When a stranger asks us what time it is, it does not seem that we are required to answer the request, even though doing so could plausibly bring about an impartially optimal outcome. But how could this option be grounded in a potential project? The act of telling a stranger the time seems so minimal that it seems unnatural to characterise it as the loss of, or even interference with, a central life commitment. And if this option is not grounded in a project, it seems that it is not a form of meaningful transcendence and hence represents an illegitimate form of partiality.

A first mistake in the above line of thinking is the assumption that transcendence necessarily requires the engagement in ground projects. Even though there is some overlap between the two, we can connect with external value on the spur of the moment, and it does not seem true that all forms of meaning-giving transcendence require the kind of temporal continuity that the engagement in a ground project requires. For example, the act of briefly but positively interacting with a stranger at a dinner party who subsequently becomes an acquaintance might not yet amount to a ground project, nor may the early phases of beginning a new hobby, but these acts are nonetheless meaningful for the agent.

So, sometimes refraining from doing a small favour would indeed allow us to continue a pursuit that is not a ground project but is nonetheless a form of meaningful transcendence. Accordingly, if the stranger interrupts us on the street while we are intensely studying a new book on chess or talking to a new acquaintance just made by

[18] Kagan (1989), p. 243.

picking up their dropped glasses, we might still be permitted to refrain from helping. So, the Meaning View does not categorically rule out the existence of trivial options.

However, as noted before, this breathing space must be meaningful. Insofar as some believe that mere preferences, desires, or wants can ground options—according to the motto, 'I just don't feel like it'—the Meaning View disagrees and maintains that these kinds of things cannot ground instances of legitimate partiality. And for those people, the Meaning View requires a significant revision of their moral outlook and will rule out some *trivial* options.

Of course, one way to interpret these implications is simply to conclude that the Meaning View is implausible. Another is to recognise that if we take the intuitive connection between meaning and partiality seriously, options do not come cheap. And that might be a good thing.

So, whether you have an option to remain outside the burning house and not save a stranger indeed depends on the details of what the alternative is for you.

3.3 Option Strength

Another implication worth examining involves the Meaning View's implications for the strength of our options concerned with our *own* interests vis-à-vis the strength of our options concerned with our *intimates'* interests. Some think that options concerned with our own interests are *significantly* stronger than options concerned with our intimates' interests. Accordingly, we can favour our own lesser interests significantly over the much greater interests of a stranger, but we cannot favour our intimates' interests over a stranger's by as much as we are permitted to favour our own over a stranger's.

However, it appears that it is the other way around for the Meaning View: the strongest form of meaning lies in the engagement with the external value of other individuals—since meaning lies in *externally* directed pursuits. Assuming that the

strength of justified partiality correlates with the degree of a given endeavour's meaning, this would suggest that we have more breathing space when concerned with others, but less breathing space when we are concerned with our own interests. And this might seem an implausible misconstrual of the nature of options. The Meaning View therefore appears to require a second revision to our moral outlook: the strongest forms of legitimate partiality concern the priority we can give to our intimates, not to ourselves.

This objection presents an opportunity to clarify the Meaning View a little further. Even though meaning lies in the connection with *external* value, this does not mean that all endeavours that are concerned with oneself are therefore *internal* and therefore less meaningful or not meaningful at all. Engaging in a non-social activity such as the pursuit of knowledge or truth can, as Nozick points out, be a radical form of connecting with the wider world and concern unifications of form, content, and technique in a single object.[19] So, meaningful connections involving personal relationships with others need not mitigate the meaningfulness of self-regarding pursuits. Pursuing a valuable project can also be a tremendous source of meaning for an individual.

The upshot of this is that even the breathing space concerned with our self-regarding interests can have considerable strength—though, as mentioned above, this breathing space will likely be *less* far-reaching than some will have traditionally thought since it does not encompass desires, wants, and the like. However, a further revisionist feature appears to be reflected in the Meaning View's *leaving open the possibility* that options concerned with others are stronger than options concerned with oneself, depending on the substantive question which of these carry more meaning.

3.4 Lives of partiality

[19] Nozick (1989), pp. 168–170.

Let me conclude this section by offering some reflections on the implications of the Meaning View for how we ought to live our lives.

The notion of meaning is plausibly normatively loaded. It is not just that meaning is important; there is a sense that we *ought* to strive for meaning in our life. An influential argument that we ought to live meaningful lives appeals to the importance of harmonising our subjective experience with the seeming insignificance of our existence from the point of the universe.[20] To live in a way that is significantly focused on, engaged with, and concerned to promote or realise value whose source comes from outside of oneself does seem to harmonise with this, whereas living a purely egocentric life without trying in any way to overcome the limits of one's self does not.

Suppose that an argument such as the above can be made and that we have reason to live a life filled with meaning. It seems to follow that insofar as we have reasons to seek lives that overcome our self-limitations and connect with things of external value, we have reason to live lives of partiality. The Meaning View therefore says that we have reason to act on our options when faced with a choice of doing the impartially optimal thing instead.

Now, this does not mean that dedicating our lives to doing what is impartially optimal is ruled out or misguided, since it is plausible that we might be *partial* to helping others or advancing a just cause. And insofar as these forms of transcendence converge with doing the impartially optimal thing, they could still be a source of meaning for an individual.

However, there is a more interesting case to consider. Consider the life of someone who, *whenever* faced with a choice between doing the impartially optimal thing and acting on their option, decides to do the impartially optimal thing—they never act on their options, even though they could. The Meaning View implies that this person's

[20] See Wolf (2011), pp. 100–109.

life may be less meaningful than the life of someone who at least sometimes acts on their options. The most meaningful life, according to the Meaning View, is therefore not the life that always does what is impartially optimal when the choice of acting on one's options is available.

The Meaning View thereby puts pressure on the traditional picture of options that often subsumes them under the category of moral value. (For example, on some accounts, acting on our options still does what would be agent-relatively morally optimal from our perspective.) By contrast, the alternative picture that the Meaning View suggests is that the two can come apart: there is the category of the meaningful and the category of the moral.

4. Transcendence and Options: Convergence

The previous section made the general case for the Meaning View. This section considers at a more fine-grained level how this view can explain the existence of various options of legitimate partiality and why it rules out commitments of hate or racism as partiality-generating pursuits.

4.1 Positive Partiality

Consider the most straightforward case: positive partiality which includes partiality to oneself as well as partiality to intimates. Partiality to oneself is often conceptualised in terms of

> ***Self-Favouring Options:*** Permissions to bring about an impartially suboptimal by making choices that favour your interests.

What kind of pursuits fall under self-favouring options? Self-favouring options paradigmatically, though as we have seen not always, concern engagement in ground

projects that are central and important goals and pursuits in a life.[21] One of the most important distinguishing features of these activities is that they are non-social in that they do not necessarily require a form of reciprocal social interaction.[22]

Self-favouring options paradigmatically, though as we have seen not always, concern engagement in ground projects that are central and important goals and pursuits in a life.[23] One of the most important distinguishing features of these activities is that they are non-social in that they do not necessarily require a form of reciprocal social interaction.[24]

Accordingly, I think the Meaning View identifies the pursuits that can give rise to self-favouring options with connecting with things of external value that do not concern other individuals. Theorising about fundamental laws of nature, pursuing a book project about a piece of fiction, or even less 'grandiose' pursuits such as going for a hike to admire nature concern engagement with valuable objects in the universe such as galaxies, solar systems, or ecosystems or concern the unification of form, content, and technique in a single object.[25]

The modes of connecting with value associated with pursuits that give rise to self-favouring options are attitudes of engagement that are unlike the modes of connecting with the value of individuals. Without giving an exhaustive list, they may range from

[21] On this see Williams (1984) as well as Scheffler (1982).

[22] Though this, of course, is not to deny that ground projects can be shared or *social* in their nature. See also Stroud (2010).

[23] On this see Williams (1984) as well as Scheffler (1982).

[24] Though this, of course, is not to deny that ground projects can be shared or *social* in their nature. See also Stroud (2010).

[25] See Nozick (1989), p. 169.

'thinking of' or 'enjoying' to 'creating' and others, and they characteristically involve a special subjective attitude of non-social agential engagement.

Consider next partiality to intimates. This form of partiality is typically conceptualised with the following two kinds of options:

> ***Self-Sacrificing Options:*** Permissions to bring about impartially suboptimal outcomes by making choices that discount your interests.
>
> ***Other-Favouring Options:*** Permissions to act impartially suboptimally by making choices that favour your intimates' interests.[26]

Pursuits that fall under other-favouring and self-sacrificing options are social in character. They concern your positive personal relationships with your family, friends, and other acquaintances with whom you enjoy a positive personal relationship. For example, they might include putting your child to bed instead of attending a concert in the evening for which you have been waiting for a long time, or helping your friend refurbish their home instead of volunteering at a homeless shelter to foreseeably save a homeless person from suffering severe hunger.

The Meaning View associates the interactions that fall under self-sacrificing and other-favouring options with positive personal relationships that engage the complexity of other individuals. Connections with individuals in the form of personal relationships are meaningful because individuals unify within themselves a wide array of experiences, beliefs, desires, emotions, and other mental states. This can explain why pursuits such as raising children, maintaining loving and intimate personal relationships, helping others, and treating others well can justify partiality. For

[26] Other-favouring options are distinct from of self-sacrificing options, since self-sacrificing may involve the deliberate disregarding of one's own greater gain in well-being for the sake of a lesser gain on the part of an intimate. By contrast, other-favouring may, for example, involve the favouring of a lesser gain in well-being for relatives over a greater gain for strangers.

example, many believe that loving relationships with other individuals or in the context of a family give rise to the most paradigmatic instances of justified partiality. According to the account that we are exploring here, many also think that, intuitively, these pursuits are among the most meaningful endeavours.

The modes of engagement that pertain to positive personal relationships with family and friends might be attitudes such as 'caring' and 'loving' or 'valuing' in the case of intimate personal relationships and interactions such as 'cooperating', 'aiding', and 'showing gratitude' in less intimate cases. This need not mean that intimate relationships are not also constituted by these other interactions.

4.2 Neutral Partiality

Though this is rarely discussed, it is possible to have a relationship with someone that is extensionally equivalent with the relationship one has with a stranger. In such a case, the considerations for positive partiality toward intimates detailed in the previous subsection apply: the partiality is justified by one's engagement with the value of that individual.

4.3 No Partiality

4.3.1 Trivial Projects and Relationships

The Meaning View explains why some trivial projects cannot give rise to options. However enthusiastically someone may be counting blades of grass on their lawn, the value of this sort of pursuit is questionable. Accordingly, the Meaning View maintains that this kind of pursuit does not give rise to strong forms permissible partiality.

Is this a shocking implication? We might have thought that even trivial pursuits, like counting blades of grass or just binging on a badly produced TV show, are normally covered by options. In reality, I don't think these pursuits are entirely worthless assuming a gradable account of value, which leaves open the possibility that the Meaning View could account for them as option-grounding pursuits.

The Meaning view also captures why trivial personal relationships with strangers are not relationships that give rise to strong forms of justifiable partiality. The reason is that insofar as an agent does not connect with a stranger's value, no meaning in the agent's life arises from the relationship. The absence of a meaningful connection with the stranger explains why that relationship is not one that can justify positive partiality beyond the general call of duty.

4.3.2 Hateful Pursuits

Some endeavours do not relate to things of positive value.

Consider the pursuit of harmful projects. Imagine a sadist whose project it is to hurt other people culpably just for the sake of it. Or consider a fascist group that is 'partial' to the common aim of discriminating against other people. Neither the object of their engagement nor their mode of connecting with it is valuable as both involve hostility, hatred, and ill-will and cause significant harm to other people.

In the same way, some personal relationships cause severe suffering to other people, and as such do not fulfil the minimal conditions under which parties involved could have reason to be partial. An agent who abuses and assaults their partner in a toxic relationship does not connect in a relevant way with the external value in that person. A relationship of this sort could therefore never give rise to justifiable partiality on the part of the perpetrator. (Though, of course, a relationship of this sort can give rise to reasons to dissolve or otherwise end the relationship for both participants or for the perpetrator to make amends and seek forgiveness.)

These are clear paradigm cases of illegitimate partiality. But there are messier ones. Some interesting cases involve seeming connections with external things of positive value that involve indirect harm to others.[27] For example, consider projects like the

[27] I thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

forced removal of communities to build a dam that generates a recreational area and abundant electric power or the case of an artist who neglects their family to pursue the creation of great works of art. These projects seem meaningful by virtue of their connection to something of external value (e.g., the additional welfare that is created with the dam or the value of artistry). However, at the same time, they cause considerable, though unintended, harm to others. We might wonder whether these apparently meaningful projects can still constitute cases of permissible partiality due to their harmful effects.

Whether the Meaning View will rule out these pursuits as option-grounding will depend on the contextual features of the cases. In the case of the removal of communities, additional considerations of justice might come into play. Perhaps considerations of justice provide countervailing reasons for why we should not forcefully remove the community to build the dam despite the apparent meaning of this project. In the case of the artist, the fact that the artist's creative project may detract from the meaningful relationship with their family, may significantly weaken their self-favouring option. Moreover, in addition, the option might then be overridden by the artist's associative duties of care and giving priority toward their family.

4.4 Associative Duties?

The Meaning View provides a demarcation of central pursuits that can give rise to permissible partiality, not *required* partiality. Required partiality typically refers to *associative duties*, which are special duties owed to our intimates in virtue of the special personal relationships we have with them.

I do not want to rule out that the Meaning View might also be able to account for duties of these sorts. For example, we might think that certain kinds of personal relationships can give rise to the *dissolution* of self-limitations, which might result in special forms of connections associated with associative duties that feature in that relationship. But, I think, the issue is not so clear.

Partiality is often explored in the language of 'reasons of partiality', which does not clearly indicate whether permissions or duties—or both—are meant. But since the two have very different normative structures, it may not be feasible to explain them both by appeal to meaning in the same way.

5. Conclusion

I have developed an account that demarcates justifiable from unjustifiable partiality. This account relies on the intuitive notion of *meaning*. I have explored how this account may distinguish important cases of permissible partiality from illegitimate ones. As we saw, taking this intuitive idea seriously has some revisionist implications.

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