The Ethics of Partiality

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Abstract: Partiality refers to the special concern that we display to ourselves and other people with whom we stand in some special personal relationship. It is a central theme in moral philosophy, both ancient and modern. Questions about the justification of partiality arise in the context of enquiry into the good life and the role of our personal commitments, the demands of impartial morality, equality and other moral ideals, or common-sense ideas about supererogation. This paper provides an overview of the debate on the ethics of partiality through the lens of focusing on the domain of permissible and required partiality. After outlining the conceptual space, I first discuss agent-centred moral options which concern permissions not to do what would be impartially optimal. I sketch the options that are commonly defended in the literature and discuss the objections that have been raised against them. I then focus on required partiality, which concerns associative duties that go beyond your general duties to others, and which require us to give special priority to people who are close to us. I discuss some notable features of associative duties and the two main objections that have been raised against them: the Voluntarist and the Distributive Objection. I then turn to the justification of permissible and required partiality, focusing on underivative approaches and reasons-based frameworks. I discuss the reductionism and nonreductionism debate: the question whether partiality is derivative or fundamental. I survey arguments for ‘the big three’ according to which partiality is justified either by appeal to the special value of projects, valuable personal relationships, or the special value of individuals. I conclude by discussing a new emerging area in the debate, namely negative partiality which concerns what we owe our moral adversaries as opposed to intimates.

Keywords: Partiality, Permissible Partiality, Required Partiality, Options, Prerogatives, Associative Duties, Supererogation, Reductionism, Nonreductionism, Projects, Relationships, Individuals
1. Introduction

The focus in this paper is partiality: the special concern that we display to ourselves and other people with whom we stand in some special personal relationship, both in terms of our actions and attitudes. The over-arching narrative question for us will be: “What, if anything, may justify partiality?”

Take a moment to reflect on those endeavours that are centrally important in your life. Like most people, you probably have personal commitments, goals, and hobbies as well as personal relationships with your family, friends, and colleagues that you value. You will see these endeavours as giving you good reasons for actions and attitudes that other people lack—you are partial to your hobby of playing the drums even though you could spend your time doing something better from an impartial point of view. And when it comes to your relationships, you will see yourself as owing more to your children, spouse, and friends than to people who are completely unrelated to you. You will feel joy and excitement when your pursuits and intimates fare well and sadness and grief when they fare poorly. Intuitively, partiality is an obvious and justified fact of life.

Partiality is a central theme in ancient and modern moral philosophy. ¹ At the same time, the literature is scattered across many sub-areas and debates, because the field has various entry points. One starting point into reflections on partiality begins with the perennial question of ancient ethics: How may I live well?² This may lead to a concern with the role of personal commitments in a good life. A second starting point begins with impartiality—roughly, the idea that we ought to promote the good impartially—and tries to resist it or harmonize it with partiality.³ In a sense, the impartial standpoint needs to have special grip on you, for you to fight for partiality. Impartial theories such as consequentialism have famously been charged with being too


² A good starting point is Aristotle’s NE bks VIII and IX. See also Annas (1993), p. 27, and Cottingham (1998).

³ Scheffler’s (1982) The Rejection of Consequentialism is a good example of this approach (the clue is in the book title). See also Williams (1981), Stocker (1976), Wolf (1992), and Jeske (1997).
demanding by turning us into nodes in a maximizing calculus of value or alienating us from ourselves. But also Kantian or other deontological theories may seem objectionably impartial, abstracting from the identity of persons and thereby failing to make room for a particular person’s agency.

Defending partiality can give us breathing space from the stringent demands of morality and make it a more human as opposed to be a distant and austere phenomenon. The stakes in this debate are high: insofar as some consequentialist or deontological impartialist theories are unable to justify partiality, we may face a seismic shift at the level of normative theorizing, being forced to move away from these theories in search for more plausible alternatives. In other contexts, partiality may put pressure on other important moral ideals such as those of moral equality and freedom. The ethics of partiality therefore sits at some of the very core issues in ethics.

In light of the heterogeneity of the partiality literature, I find it helpful to divide it into permissible partiality, on the one hand, and required partiality on the other. Permissible partiality concerns your permissions not to do what would be impartially optimal. Required partiality concerns associative duties which go beyond your general duties to others and which require you to give special moral priority to people who are close to you, such as your family, friends, or other intimates.

Below I first describe the conceptual space available (Section 2) and then give an overview of the domains of permissible and required partiality (Section 3 and 4). I then review some of the most influential lines of defence for permissions and requirements (Section 5). I conclude with some recent trends in the ethics of partiality literature (Section 6).

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4 Williams (1973), pp. 116-17.
5 Williams (1981), ch. 1.
7 Brink (2009), for example, argues that consequentialist theories are unable to account for associative duties. A natural way to understand partiality in the context of consequentialist theorizing is hence the question: “How much can we modify the consequentialist value function?”
8 For an excellent discussion, see Nagel (1995) on impartiality, equality, and partiality. Another example of how partiality may come into conflict with liberty and equality is the justification of parental partiality; see Brighouse and Swift (2016), chs. 1 and 2.
2. Conceptual Space

We can distinguish four different positions on partiality:

**No Partiality:** Partiality cannot plausibly be defended.

On this view, there is no breathing space and escape from morality’s stringent demands. The most forceful defence of this can be attributed to Kagan (1991), though he argues for the stronger claim that no *moderate morality* understood as permissions to deviate from doing what would be impartially optimal as well as any *constraints* on doing what is impartially optimal, can be justified.\(^9\)

**Permissible Partiality Only:** There only exist permissions to deviate from doing what would be impartially optimal.

This picture says that you are sometimes permitted to forgo doing what is impartially optimal, but that you are never *required* to do so.\(^11\) For example, sometimes you might be permitted to focus on your interests or spending time with my good friend as instead of doing what impartial morality would demand. However, on this picture, you would never do anything wrong if you nonetheless chose to do what would be impartially optimal.

**Required Partiality Only:** There only exist associative duties to give special priority to your intimates (plausibly, in addition to other general duties).

Conversely, this view says that you can only be required to act partially, and never merely permitted to do so.\(^12\) Even though this view might sound a bit extreme, it does

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\(^9\) To be clear, this claim applies probably more to the absence of permissions as opposed to associative duties, since the absence of more stringent duties to look after our intimates may indeed, in one respect, give us more ‘freedom’.

\(^10\) Kagan (1991), chs. 1 and 2, gives a helpful overview; see chs. 5 and 6 on the (impossibility of the) justification options. See also Crisp (2018) for a more recent critique of partiality.


\(^12\) Theorists such as Ross (1930), Carrit (1947), and Prichard (2002) did not allow for supererogation and endorsed ‘duties only’ pictures. See Hurka (2014), ch. 8, for an insightful analysis, especially pp. 178-83. Some consequentialist views such as the one developed by Railton (1984) can also be construed as ‘required partiality only’ accounts. However, they account for partiality *indirectly* or in a self-effacing manner by maintaining that doing what is impartially required is extensionally equivalent with being partial. I return to the issue of
seem intuitively plausible when considering some special personal relationships. For example, we might think that the parents are mostly under special requirements to care for their children.

**Full Partiality:** There exist permissions to deviate from doing what would be impartially optimal and associative duties to give special moral priority to your intimates.

This picture is what most people intuitively endorse and what probably is most closely aligned with common-sense morality. On this view, you have permissions to deviate from doing the best, but in some cases, you will also be required to act in certain ways toward your intimates.

### 2. Permissible Partiality

A helpful way to think about the domain of permissible partiality is in the context of the previously mentioned fight for breathing space from morality’s stringent demands. Much of the literature here reacts to impartial theories such as maximizing consequentialism, trying to make room for the optionality of acting on our personal point of view.

#### 2.1 Options

More formally, permissible partiality concerns

**Agent-Centred Moral Options (henceforth just “options”):** A permission to bring about an outcome that is impartially suboptimal because it promotes your own or your intimates’ interests.

Options are also commonly referred to as ‘prerogatives’ or just ‘permissions’. They permit you to act non-optimally if you choose to do so, but they do not require that you act in a non-optimal way. ‘Interests’ here can be understood narrowly in terms of our self-concern, desires, or preferences, or more broadly in terms of objective goods such as valuable personal relationships.\(^{13}\) A central feature of options is that they are accounting for fundamental partiality in the context of the reductionism vs. nonreductionism debate in section five.

\(^{13}\) It’s common to assume that the interests protected by options do not only refer to pure self-concern; see Kagan (1989), pp. 6-10. For an overview of different accounts of well-being, see Fletcher (2016).
They are indexed to you and your specific interests and consequently give you permissions to help your friend over a stranger, but not necessarily someone else to do the same.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{2.2 Options to do what?}

Hardly anyone who thinks that options exist, denies the existence of

\textbf{Self-Favouring Options}\textsuperscript{15,16}: Permissions to bring about an impartially suboptimal outcome because it favours your own interests;

and

\textbf{Other-Favouring Options}: Permissions to bring about an impartially suboptimal outcome because it favours your intimates’ interests.

For example, you might be permitted to give one unit of happiness to yourself as opposed to five units to a stranger, or you may permissibly give two units of happiness to your long-term friend as opposed to five to a stranger.

More controversial is the existence of so-called

\textbf{Self-Sacrificing Options}\textsuperscript{17}: Permissions to bring about an impartially suboptimal outcome because it discounts your own interests.

The idea here is that you can sometimes permissibly forgo a greater benefit to yourself for the sake of providing a \textit{lesser} benefit to someone else. For example, you might forgo five units of happiness to yourself to give your friend one unit of happiness.

\textsuperscript{14} On agent-relativity see Parfit (1984), p. 27, and Nagel (1986) ch. 9.

\textsuperscript{15} Early discussions of this permission are in Parfit (1977), Davis (1980), and Scheffler (1982).

\textsuperscript{16} My exposition of options here presupposes what I have called a List Picture (see Lange (2020), section 3). On this view, there is a list of different kinds of options, based on who enjoys the benefits or suffers the burdens—oneself, or others. This is not the only picture that you can endorse. According to the Agent-Neutral/Relative Picture, permissible partiality is understood as permissibly acting from an agent-relative point of view; see Bader (2020), section 3, on this. Kamm (1992), pp. 362-3, also seems to allude to this agent-relative picture.

\textsuperscript{17} Stocker (1976) first noted the existence of this option. See Slote (1984; 1985) for further discussion. For a detailed discussion of the relation between self-sacrificing options and options to favour your own interests, see Hurka and Shubert (2012). For an exploration of the relation between other-favouring and other-sacrificing, see Lange (2020) and Brandt and Lange (manuscript).
The reason why the existence of these self-sacrificing options is more controversial is that they appear *antithetical* to the idea that moral closeness increases our options to favour. It seems plausible that you can favour your intimates more than strangers, because your intimates are *closer* to you. Likewise, common-sense morality also thinks that you can significantly favour yourself over intimates and strangers, because you are ‘closest to yourself’—an ultimate intimate. But if this picture is true, then why should you ever be permitted to sacrifice your own interests for others?

More recently, some have additionally defended the existence of

**Other-Sacrificing Options**: A permission to bring about an impartially suboptimal outcome because it discounts your adversaries’ interests.

This option concerns permissions toward the moral opposite of your intimates: your moral *adversaries*. When dealing with your adversaries, you might sometimes be permitted to give lesser weight to the interests of your adversaries than to the interests of strangers. For example, you may permissibly give a stranger one unit of happiness as opposed to three units to your adversary. You might, for example, think that someone who is a jerk to you for no reason can be treated in this way.

One of the challenges for defenders of other-sacrificing options is to plausibly explain why the response to discount our adversaries is not an impartial phenomenon. We might think that the reason that your bully’s interests should be discounted should be explained by the agent-neutral notion of desert.

### 3. Required Partiality

Debate about required partiality can arise in the context of impartiality, but entry points are more diverse, ranging from the common-sense idea that ‘we owe more’ to people who are, in some sense, closer to us over to the justification of political obligation.

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19. See Brandt (2020) and Lange (2020) for defences of this option. See Eskens (forthcoming) for a critique.
20. For literature on associative accounts on why we must obey the law of our country or state, see Dworkin (1986), Horton (2006; 2007), and Scheffler (2018)
3.1 Associative Duties

Required partiality concerns

**Associative Duties**: Requirements to act in certain ways in virtue of the special relationships in which you stand to your intimates.21

Associative duties are also sometimes referred to as ‘special obligations’ or ‘duties of partiality’. In contrast to options, they are ‘presumptively decisive’ agent-relative considerations and require you to be partial to your intimates. Failing to discharge your duties accordingly means that you will have wronged your intimate.

Associative duties are duties that you owe to people that are close *qua* the special relationship (be it in virtue of a personal history, affection, love, or group membership) such as your children, parents, siblings, spouses, friends, colleagues, peers, compatriots, or even same members of your species. They go beyond our general or natural duties to others and may require that you do distinctive things for your intimates, give extra weight to them, or do more of what you would have to do for strangers.

3.2 Strength of Associative Duties

Associative duties are not only more extensive than general duties to other people, but also have much greater strength. The strength of associative duties can be understood in terms of three other features.22

(1) **Stringency**

First, associative duties are not so easily overridden than positive duties to others by considerations of cost to oneself. For example, although you may be expected to bear some cost to provide assistance to a stranger, you may be expected to bear greater costs in order to provide comparable assistance to my brother or my child. So, you might have to risk your life to save your child from drowning in a river, but you might not be required to incur the same risk to your life if the person at risk would just be a stranger.

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21 The term ‘associative duties’ is commonly adapted from Dworkin (1986), p. 196, who speaks of ‘associative obligations’ to refer to ‘the special responsibilities social practice attaches to membership in some biological or social group, like the responsibilities of family or friends or neighbours.”

(2) Gravity
A second feature of associative duties is that they often take precedence over general duties in cases where the two conflict. If both a sister and stranger need assistance but you can only help one of them, you might be required to help the sister even if you would have been required to help stranger had they been the only person in need of assistance. This holds even if the sister’s need is less urgent than that of the stranger.

(3) Overridingness
Third, associative duties are sometimes considered to have a different threshold at which they can override other duties. For example, the threshold at which a positive duty can override a negative duty is sometimes lower if the positive is to an intimate, than it would be if the positive duty were to a stranger. For example, you might be sometimes required or permitted to harm some person in order to provide a badly needed benefit for your sister or child, though this might be wrong for you to do in order to provide a comparable benefit to a stranger. Conversely, the threshold at which positive duty can override negative duty is sometimes higher if negative duty is to a family member than it would be to a stranger. It may be that it is sometimes permissible to inflict a lesser harm on one stranger to prevent a much greater harm to another stranger, though this would be wrong if the person to inflict lesser harm were your sister or child.

3.3 Two Objections to Associative Duties
There’s lots to say about associative duties. If there are two objections to them that you should you learn more about, it’s the following two. They highlight how a commitment to partiality can come into conflict with other ideals such as freedom and equality.

Voluntarist Objection
The voluntarist objection is an objection against the special responsibilities that are supposed to arise out of non-consensual actions. It is, in effect, an objection on behalf of the individual who is supposed to be bound by associative duties. As a child I might be required to impose much greater cost on myself to help my parents than the cost that I would have to impose on myself in order to help a stranger, yet I did not choose to become their child. Associative duties, if they can apply to agents absent of any

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relevant consensual act, would, according to the voluntarist, therefore constitute an unreasonable constraint on the individual in question.

If we are not prepared to deny that children have associative duties towards their parents, there are three main ways to reply: (i) attempt to show that all of the associative duties that they defend really are contractual or promissory in nature, or (ii) show that while not all associative duties are contractual, they nevertheless are similar in a relevant respect, (iii) bite the bullet and maintain that, in some cases, associative duties can arise absent an agent’s consent.24

**Distributive Objection**

The distributive objection focuses not on the unreasonable burdens that being bound by associative duties seem to impose on an individual, but instead on the objectionable feature of supplying participants in special relationships with benefits that appear to be unreasonable.25 This is, in effect, an objection on behalf of the individuals who are neither bound by nor benefit from associative duties.

By way of illustrating the distributive objection, imagine a three-person society that consists of A, B, and C. Imagine that all three owe general duties toward each other. Suppose now that A and B start to form a special personal relationship. This relationship brings them a number of beneficial rewards. One of these rewards is that participation in the relationship itself may be inherently rewarding and contributing to their participants’ flourishing. It also changes the structure of their duties, providing A and B with associative duties to one another. Once A and B enter into a special relationship, C is disadvantaged in at least in three ways: (1) where A and B might have benefited C supererogatorily, their focus will now be on each other; (2) when it is impossible for them to perform their general duties both to each other and to C, it is C who will always lose out; and (3) sometimes the associative duties that A and B owe to one another will override their general duties to C.

The distributive objection thus sees associative duties as providing additional advantages to people who have already benefitted from participation in rewarding groups and relationships, and it views this as unjustifiable when the provision of these additional advantages is to the disadvantage of those who are needier, either because they

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24 See Jeske (2019), section four, for an overview of different responses available.
are not themselves participants in rewarding groups or relationships, or because they have significantly fewer resources of other kinds to begin with.

One response to the distributive objection is to insist that upon acquiring associative duties, you do not owe less to others, but simply more to your intimates. So, for example, in addition to our duty of benevolence, you might have additional duties to your intimates. But discharging these duties need not mean that you are required to do less for strangers.  

4. Justifying Partiality

The literature on justifying partiality can be confusing. One reason for this is that it is not always clear if the aim is to justify permissions or requirements, or both. A second reason is that the debate about justification takes place at different levels. Before we discuss the particular grounds of associative duties and options, let’s consider two ‘high level’ frameworks within which it can be justified.

4.1 Underivative and Reasons-based Approaches

According to

**Underivative Approaches**, agent-centred options and associative duties are grounded in independent and underivative permissions and duties (as opposed to normative reasons).  

These approaches justify partiality not by appeal to more basic factors such as normative reasons or ‘ought other things equal’, but in fundamental notions that are themselves permissive or deontic. For example, a version of this approach might say that there is a prima facie duty of beneficence for you to promote the interests of everyone impartially, but in addition to this duty, you have permissions to either pursue or not pursue your own interest. In some cases, your permissions outweigh your duty of beneficence, and this grants you options not to bring about the impartially optimal

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27 Examples of underivative views are Raz (1975), Gert (2004), and Hurka and Shubert (2012).
outcome. In the case of required partiality, underivative approaches might hold that your associative duties are strengthened general duties of beneficence.\textsuperscript{28}

According to

\textbf{Reasons-based Approaches}, options and associative duties are grounded in normative reasons.

The starting point of this approach is typically to say that there are two fundamental kinds of reasons: agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons.\textsuperscript{29} In the case of permissible partiality, options are then grounded in the conflict of agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons. For example, according to one view you have agent-neutral reason to do what is best from the impartial perspective and agent-relative reason to do what is best form the agent-relative perspective. You have a permission to act impartially suboptimally in some situation just in case your agent-neutral and agent-relative reason favour conflicting courses of action. If this is the case, then you are permitted to take on either perspective and do what is either agent-neutrally or agent-relatively optimal.\textsuperscript{30}

In the case of required partiality, reasons-based approaches ground associative duties in ‘presumptively decisive’ agent-relative normative reasons to act in a in special ways with respect to our intimates. These approaches must then give a story for why certain grounds give rise to such particularly strong reasons. For example, as we shall see below, we might think that certain valuable personal relationships based on mutual intimacy and love can give rise to reasons of this sort.

\textbf{3.4 The Reductionism and Nonreductionism Debate}

A central issue in the partiality debate is whether partiality can be justified reductively by appeal to more basic moral principles or non-reductively by appeal to \textit{sui generis} options or duties. The importance of this issue goes back to the stakes mentioned previously in the introduction about the correct moral theory. If partiality can be

\textsuperscript{28} Hurka (2016), section 5, defends this view.

\textsuperscript{29} You can dig deeper: Why are there two distinct kinds of reasons? According to one view, agent-relative reasons are grounded in the intrinsic value in permitted projects (Nagel 1989), or in the more general value of having ‘space’ in which to pursue our personal lives (Scheffler 1982).

\textsuperscript{30} See Bader (2020) for a recent defence of a decision-theoretic form of dual-ranking act-consequentialism based on this framework of normative reasons. Another dual-ranking act-consequentialism is developed by Sen (1982) and Portmore (2003).
accounted for derivatively, then we might be able to keep our commitment to impartial theories such as consequentialism; however, if partiality must be accounted for non-derivatively, we might face a seismic shift at the level of normative theorizing.

The reductionist-nonreductionist debate occurs more in the arena of required as opposed to permissible partiality. The reason for this is that derivative approaches for the existence of options, do not really account for options but rather debunk them. For example, according to Railton’s (1994) self-effacing view, there exist agent-neutral reasons to promote the good impartially, but it turns out that, as a matter of fact, being partial to our intimates will accomplish what is impartially best. But this does not give us options, but just a requirement to be partial as a matter of what impartial morality demands.

For required partiality, there are two camps available. According to

**Reductionism**, associative duties are reducible to more basic special duties.

This camp says that associative duties are reducible to more basic duties that morality typically countenances, and which are themselves are grounded in more basic moral principles. These may have to do with the moral significance of i) promises and contracts, ii) compensating benefactors through expressing gratitude, or iii) providing aid to those whom we have made particularly vulnerable to our actions, or iv) a general duty of beneficence.

According to

**Non-reductionism**, there exist *sui generis* associative duties.

This camp says that some of our associative duties are duties that are irreducible to other more basic moral duties in the way that the reductionist suggests. For example, some nonreductionism views maintain intimate personal relationships between two people may ground *sui generis* duties of love.

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31 Jackson (1991) is arguably another derivative account of partiality.
32 See Goodin (1985), Sommers (1986). Simmons (1996) and Wellman (2001) for contemporary reductionist accounts of special duties. For a further overview see Seglow (2013), ch. 1. Early modern theorists such as Ross (1930), Carritt (1947), and Prichard (2002) could also be understood as reductionist.
A prominent starting point for nonreductionism proceeds by appeal to the phenomenology of being partial. Versions of nonreductionism often say that, in paradigmatic instances of legitimate partiality when we are discharging our associative duties are, our motives are, at the very least, an indication to the ground of associative duties. Others maintain that it is important harmony between our motives and reasons is in itself a good thing and that self-effacing theories that maintain a discrepancy between the to cannot be appropriately action-guiding.

The debate between reductionist and nonreductionist is at an impasse. Reductionist typically flat-out deny that what motivates our adherence to our associative duties must also be the ground of its justification. Others may suggest that our motives indicate that our existing basic moral duties ought to be discharged to a greater degree. Progress could be made by better distinguishing the content of our associative duties from alleged supposed general duties to determine to what extent what we owe our intimates cannot be captured reductively.

### 4.2 The Big Three

The previous section considered partiality at the level of inputs and outputs, but there is also the further substantive question: what are the things that give us reasons or underivative permissions/duties? What are the grounds of partiality?

Three main contenders are available: The Project View, The Relationship View, and the Individuals View.

According to the

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34 See, for example, Keller (2013), p. 27: “It would be depressing if in paradigmatic cases of partiality, we are systematically misperceiving our reasons. [...] It is difficult to see what sort of philosophical argument could convince you that when you act out of your special concern for your intimates, the things that really provide you with reason are different from the things that seem to provide you with reasons [Therefore,] our motives can sometimes be guides to our reasons.”


36 See Wallace (2012), p. 183, who notes that “[...] there is, in my view, no knock-down argument in favour of the non-reductionist position.”

37 Bazargan-Forward (2018) develops an account along these lines. Hurka (2016) argues that love can be a *sui generis* strengthener of basic moral duties.
**Project View**, partiality is justified by appeal to the special value of ground projects.

Bernard Williams (1981) has famously suggested that at least some of an agent’s ground-projects are fundamental components of the agent’s identity and give meaning to our lives. Projects a certain amount and continuity of goal-oriented agency, since they would otherwise not be distinguishable from mere preferences, desires, or wants. Thus, for an agent to have a parental project with central importance for their life, it must necessarily be the case that a certain set of its constitutive elements is sufficiently pervasive within that life.

One challenge that the Project View faces is that it cannot account for associative duties. If your project is to play the drums, then you may permissibly do so instead of doing other impartially better things, but it does not seem that you would be doing something wrong if you decided to give up this project. In response, the Project View can say that some joint projects may generate duties and that many of our personal relationships can be construed as such joint endeavours. Alternatively, we might think that associative duties are justified reductively; for example, the fact that you may have put someone in a vulnerable position with regard to you may create certain duties on your part toward them.

According to the **Relationship View**, partiality is justified by the appeal to the special value of personal relationships.

There are different versions of the Relationship View. Some say that personal relationships are valuable (or valued) for their own sakes and this fact explains why they can

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38 Williams (1981) pioneered the project view. Other writers who have defended it include Wolf (1982, 1992), MacIntyre (1984), Sandel (1982), and Stroud (2010). Sandel and MacIntyre especially focus on the commitments to the political community that has formed one’s identity and to which one owes one’s allegiance.


40 Stroud (2010), pp. 143-149.

41 Wolf (1992), p. 247, gives a defence along these lines. For critique see Keller (2013), ch. 2.
justify partiality (permissions or duties, or both); others focus more about relationship facts and their reason-giving force.

The Relationship View has strong common-sensical support, but it also faces challenges. One worry is that in paradigmatic cases where we show special concern for our intimates, it does not seem that we are thinking about the relationship but rather about the individual to whom we are partial. This might suggest that the Relationship View does not fully accommodate the phenomenology of partiality. One way to defuse this worry is to draw attention to the fact that even the Relationship View can still make intimates the focus of value (valuing)—the person to whom you are partial.

According to the

*Individuals View*, partiality is justified by the appeal to the special value of the value of individuals.

The Individuals View says that partiality is justified by the individuals with whom our special relationships are shared. Rather than acting as reasons for treating those persons better than others, our relationships act as enablers—that is, background conditions that explain why some facts count as reasons for a given agent.

A main challenge for the Individuals view is that it seems to accomplish too much. It does not seem that it can explain why we should give more moral priority to our intimates over strangers but instead denies that strangers have claims on in the first place. This might seem to ‘throws the baby out with the bath water.’

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43 Views of this sort are put forward by Scanlon (1998) and Jeske (2008).
44 Keller (2013), p. 63-4, presses this criticism.
46 Keller (2013), p. 79 Implicit variants of this view can be found in Blum (1980), Friedman (1993), and Velleman (1999). Jollimore (2011) defends the view in a related debate about the reasons of love.
47 For similar views, see Jollimore (2011) and Lord (2016).
5. Conclusion

In this article, I have given an overview of the ethics of partiality literature, making clearer the various entry points ranging from questions about the good life, impartialist moral theories over to common-sense morality and supererogation.

I have discussed the domain of permissible partiality, which concerns our moral options to act suboptimally and the domain of required partiality, which concerns our associative duties to act in certain ways toward people with whom we stand in a special personal relationship. At the level of justification, I sketched two main ‘high level’ frameworks to generate partiality, as well as the three main contenders at the finer-grained level of what grounds options and associative duties.

Let me conclude with some general remarks about the future of the ethics of partiality debate.

As I alluded to previously, recently scholarship has turned to the negative mirror image of partiality to our intimates: the realm of negative partiality to our moral adversaries.49 To recognise its existence, suppose that you conceive of yourself and your personal relationships as existing in a kind of moral space. You are closest to yourself. The moral distance between you and someone else is a function of your personal relationship, which is in turn constituted by histories of various forms of morally significant positive encounters: intimates are closer to you (and hence you can prioritise their interests more) than two loosely associated colleagues, who are in turn closer to you than strangers. Strangers represent how you may act independent of any special personal relationship. We can think of this relation as setting a baseline characterization of morality (or moral midpoint), relative to which you may be more or less partial depending on your positive or negative personal relationships. If intimates are located closer in moral space and strangers represent a moral midpoint, then there may also be people who are more distant than strangers. These people are your adversaries by virtue of a negative personal relationship with them.

Negative partiality raises various new issues for in the ethics of partiality debate: What forms of negative partiality exist? Are there options to discount our adversaries or could there also be duties to do so? Can ‘the big three’ account for negative partiality in the same way in which they are invoked to justify positive partiality? What is the

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49 See Brandt (2020) and Lange (2020) on negative partiality. See Eskens (forthcoming) for a critique.
relationship between positive and negative partiality? Can you favour your friends as much as you can dis-favour your enemies?

I hope to have left you with an appetite to dive in.
References


