**Value and Idiosyncratic Fitting Attitudes**

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ABSTRACT: Norm-attitude accounts of value say that for something to be valuable is for there to be norms that support valuing that thing. For example, according to fitting-attitude accounts, something is of value if it is fitting to value, and according to buck-passing accounts, something is of value if the reasons support valuing it. Norm-attitude accounts face the partiality problem: in cases of partiality, what it is fitting to value, and what the reasons support valuing, may not line up with what’s valuable. Buck-passers have a solution to this problem and may claim that this gives them an advantage over fitting-attitude accounts. In this paper, we show how fitting-attitudes accounts can offer a broadly analogous, and equally attractive, solution to the problem.

KEYWORDS: value, fitting attitudes, buck-passing account, partiality.

**1. Introduction**

Sarah and Stephen are in trouble; only one can emerge unscathed. If Sarah is your friend and Stephen is a stranger then, though you should be concerned about both, it also makes sense to be more concerned about Sarah than Stephen. It makes sense for you to prefer that it is Sarah who emerges unscathed, for example.

Cases like this illustrate the partiality problem for *norm-attitude* accounts of value. Very roughly, such accounts say that for something to be of value is for there to be norms that support valuing that thing. The problem is that in cases like this, the norms on valuing don’t seem to line up with what’s valuable. It wouldn’t be any better if Sarah escapes – we can suppose – but it still makes sense for you to prefer that she does.

The aim of this paper is to explore how norm-attitude accounts can respond to this problem. More specifically, we argue that our preferred such account – a *fitting-attitude* account – is just as well-placed to solve the problem as its central rival – the *buck-passing* account. This is important because the buck-passing account might seem to have an important advantage over the fitting-attitude account, when it comes to the partiality problem. We argue that this appearance is misleading.

After explaining norm-attitude accounts in more detail (§2), we present the partiality problem (§3) and explain how the buck-passer can solve it in a way that is not available to the fitting-attitude account (§4). We argue, however, that the fitting-attitude account can offer a broadly analogous solution (§5). We refine the solution in response to objections (§6), and close by discussing a more general family of challenges (§7).

**2. Norm-Attitude Accounts**

Norm-attitude accounts say that for something to be valuable is for there to be norms that support valuing that thing. There are different types of norms and thus different types of norm-attitude account. According to fitting-attitude accounts, something is of value if it is *fitting* to value. According to buck-passing accounts, something is of value if the *reasons* support valuing it. These are the two forms of norm-attitude account we will be concerned with.[[1]](#footnote-1)

These accounts can be specified in several respects. First, while norm-attitude accounts might apply to all forms of value, we will focus primarily on *goodness simpliciter*. More precisely, since it is most relevant for the partiality problem, we will focus on the comparative property of *betterness* simpliciter. Being better simpliciter should be distinguished from being *better for* (as something might be better *for* one’s health, or for trees, or for an engine) and from being *attributively better* (as in better toasters, better holiday destinations, and better assassins), as well as from *specific value properties*, such as being delightful, awesome, amusing, fearsome, or loathsome.

Second, different forms of value can be understood in terms of different forms of valuing. Examples of valuing include desire, taking pleasure in, being glad, certain emotions such as amusement and admiration, and certain actions, such as promoting and preserving. Betterness simpliciter is most naturally understood in terms of norms on preference: for something to be better is for preferring it to be fitting, or supported by reasons; for it to be equally good is for indifference to be fitting, or supported by reasons.[[2]](#footnote-2) We assume that preference – which we understand broadly, to include indifference – can be directed towards states of affairs that you know are not under your control, such as states of affairs that are in the past. We also assume that preferences need not involve thoughts about betterness.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Putting these points together, we can state the accounts we will be concerned with as follows:

(FA) For X to be better than Y is for it to be fitting to prefer X to Y; for X and Y to be equally good is for it to be fitting to be indifferent between X and Y.

(BP) For X to be better than Y is for the balance of reasons to support preferring X to Y; for X and Y to be equally good is for the balance of reasons to support indifference between X and Y.

Further specifications can be made. For instance, value can be *final* or *derivative*. Happiness is a plausible candidate for being finally good. The paradigm derivative goods are *instrumental*: if money, for example, is a means to happiness, this makes it derivatively good. Value can also be *pro tanto* or *overall*. An outcome in which happiness is equally distributed might be better in that respect than one in which happiness is unequally distributed, but worse overall because everyone is still miserable. These distinctions can be captured in terms of the corresponding distinctions in valuing. For example, a fitting attitude account can say that something is finally better if it is fitting to prefer it for its own sake and derivatively better if it is fitting to prefer for the sake of something else. Something is pro tanto better – better in some respect – if it is fitting to pro tanto prefer it – prefer it in that respect – and overall better if fitting to prefer overall. A buck-passing account can make parallel claims. These distinctions will be important later. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Why adopt a norm-attitude of betterness? We mention two attractions. First, an account of betterness should be expected to generalise to other value properties, and to illuminate the similarities and differences between them. Norm-attitude accounts are well-placed to do this. Specific value properties are evidently tightly connected to certain attitudes – the delightful to delight, the awesome to awe, and so forth. Norm-attitude accounts can offer an immediately compelling account of these connections: the delightful is just what merits delight; the awesome is just what is worthy of awe (Schroeder 2010).[[5]](#footnote-5) These properties are thus closely related to goodness simpliciter, which is plausibly identical to the specific value property of being desirable or valuable simpliciter.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Second, norm-attitude accounts can seem an attractive middle-ground between two other accounts of value. According to *primitivism*, values are basic, indefinable properties (Moore 1903). According to *subjectivism*, to be of value is to be valued under certain non-normative conditions – perhaps conditions of full information, coherence, reflection, or the like.[[7]](#footnote-7) The problem with primitivism is that it does nothing to illuminate value. Subjectivism offers such illumination, but only at the cost of first-order implausibility. To take a relatively benign example, subjectivism threatens to imply that money is finally good, since some people value money for its own sake, and might continue to do so under conditions of full information, coherence, and reflection.[[8]](#footnote-8) More generally, given the evident possibility of human perversity, it is plausible that for any non-normative conditions, there can be people who satisfy those conditions but fail to value only what is really valuable.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Norm-attitude accounts avoid these problems.[[10]](#footnote-10) They join with subjectivism in rejecting the primitivist’s postulation of a basic property of goodness and insisting upon an important connection between value and valuing. But since this connection is normative, it avoids the dubious implications of subjectivism. The cases of perversity which undermine subjectivism are precisely cases of valuing without adequate reason, or of unfitting valuing.

Norm-attitude accounts thus have important attractions. But, as we have seen, norm-attitude accounts differ. In particular, FA and BP appeal to different normative statuses. FA understands betterness in terms of *fitting* preference, BP in terms of the *reasons* to prefer.

Reasons are very familiar in normative philosophy: a reason is a consideration that counts in favour of a response, with a certain strength. We will say that the balance of reasons – or ‘the reasons’ – support preferring X to Y when the reasons for preferring X to Y are together stronger than the reasons for preferring Y to X and stronger than the reasons for being indifferent between X and Y.

An attitude is fitting when it is merited by, worthy of, or appropriate to, its object. For example, it seems fitting to admire Mandela, fear an onrushing tiger, intend to phone your mother on her birthday, and believe that the Seine flows through Paris. In having these attitudes, you are getting things right. By contrast, it is not fitting to admire Idi Amin, fear an onrushing kitten, intend to ignore your mother on her birthday, or believe that the Thames flows through Paris. These objects are not worthy of, do not merit, and are not appropriate objects of, the corresponding attitudes. In having these attitudes you would be getting things wrong.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As these examples illustrate, fittingness is an *overall* rather than contributory status.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is thus distinct from the property of being supported by some reason. We will also take it that the fitting-attitude account takes fittingness to be distinct from being supported by the balance of reasons. This ensures that FA is a genuine rival to BP.

One way to see the distinction between fittingness and the balance of reasons is by considering examples of so-called ‘wrong kind reasons’. If a terrorist threatens to kill you if you admire Mandela, fear the tiger, or believe that the Seine flows through Paris, there seems a strong reason against these attitudes – strong enough to tip the balance of reasons. But they remain fitting – Mandela remains worthy of admiration, the tiger is worthy of fear, and so on. At the least, it seems entirely coherent and intelligible to claim that the threat gives you most reason not to admire Mandela but does not stop him being fit to admire. This suggests that at least the *concepts* of reasons and fittingness must be distinct. If such claims can be true, then the properties they pick out are also distinct.[[13]](#footnote-13)

As we have argued elsewhere, such examples reveal a significant advantage of fitting-attitude accounts over buck-passing accounts (McHugh and Way forthcoming: ch.4). When the terrorist threatens to kill you if you admire Mandela, this seems to give you a strong reason not to admire Mandela but he remains fit to admire. A buck-passing account of the admirable thus seems to imply that Mandela is not admirable. By contrast, a fitting-attitude account has no such implication. Or suppose the terrorist threatens to kill you unless you prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of your little finger. This seems to give you a strong reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world. But it does not make this preference fitting. The buck-passing account, but not the fitting-attitude account, thus seems to imply that it is better if the world is destroyed than if your little finger is scratched.

Of course, this is only the first step of an argument. Buck-passers have various ways of responding to this ‘wrong kind of reason’ problem. Some deny, for example, that the terrorist’s threat gives you a reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world. Others hold that this is a reason of the ‘wrong kind’ and that the buck-passing account needs to be restricted to reasons of the ‘right kind’. We discuss these responses elsewhere (McHugh and Way, ibid.). For present purposes, it is enough that it is an advantage of the fitting-attitude account that such responses are not even needed.

Of course, this is just one advantage of fitting-attitude accounts over buck-passing. Perhaps buck-passing also has important advantages. In the rest of this paper, we consider whether this is so with respect to the partiality problem. Buck-passers have an attractive response to this problem, one which might seem unavailable to the fitting-attitude account. That would be an important advantage of buck-passing.

**3. The Partiality Problem**

To understand the partiality problem, a further specification of our norm-attitude accounts is required. Norms apply to agents. Attitudes are not simply fitting or supported by reasons. Rather, there is a reason for some person, or it is fitting for some person, to have an attitude. So norm-attitude accounts must specify who the norms they refer to apply to. The natural way to do this is to appeal to norms which apply to all agents, as follows. (For brevity, the clauses about equal goodness are left implicit.)

(FA1) For X to be better than Y is for it to be fitting for all agents to prefer X to Y.

(BP1) For X to be better than Y is for preferring X to Y to be supported by the balance of reasons, for all agents.

This is the natural way to go because betterness simpliciter seems not to be relativised to individuals. To say that it is better simpliciter if benefits are distributed in proportion to desert is not just to say that this is better *for* those who are benefitted. Nor is it to say that this is better *from your perspective* or *given what you care about*. It is to say, if you like, that it is better from no perspective, or from the perspective of the universe. FA1 and BP1 give a way to capture this.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, these formulations run into a simple problem: what it is fitting to value and what the reasons support seem to vary between agents. The most discussed kind of example, and the kind we shall focus on, involves *partiality*.[[15]](#footnote-15) Recall our initial example: Sarah and Stephen are in trouble; only one can emerge unscathed. If Sarah is your friend and Stephen is a stranger, then, although it is fitting to be concerned about both, it also seems fitting for you to be more concerned about Sarah. Sarah’s being your friend makes her an appropriate object of your concern, in a way that goes beyond the concern you might have for a stranger; it thus seems fitting for you to prefer her to emerge unscathed. Likewise, the balance of reasons seems to support this preference. But Stephen’s wellbeing is no less valuable than Sarah’s, and it may not be better that Sarah emerge unscathed.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The claim that it can be fitting to be partial in this way is sometimes challenged. In a discussion of the partiality problem, Jonas Olson writes:

Advocates of FA analyses could maintain that it would be fitting to respond with equal disfavour to the suffering of one’s child… and the equal suffering of a stranger… [T]he intuition that we should respond with greater disfavour to the…suffering of people to whom we stand in personal relations is a moral intuition and it is not clear why moral intuitions should be taken into consideration in analyses of value. (2009: 374-5)

Chris Howard takes a similar line, defending the claim that if someone has better qualities than your beloved, it is fitting for you to love that person more.

[T]he fittingness relation is the relation in which a response stands to an object when the object merits, or is worthy of, that response. So to say that it would be fitting for you to love someone else more than your beloved is to say only that that person merits or is worthy of more love than your beloved – i.e. that the relevant person is *more* *lovable*. (2019: 131, original italics)

Similarly, one might say:

To say that it would be fitting for you to be equally concerned for Sarah and Stephen is to say only that Sarah and Stephen’s interests merit or are worthy of equal concern – neither’s escape would be preferable to the other.

We do not find these arguments convincing. Perhaps Olson is right that partiality is a moral consideration. But moral considerations can bear on what is fitting. For example, outcomes can be bad simpliciter – and thus fitting to disfavour – because they are unjust, or because they involve suffering. And we agree that Sarah and Stephen’s interests merit equal concern. The question is how this is to be spelled out. Which agents does it apply to? Should we take it to mean that it is fitting for everyone to be equally concerned with Sarah and Stephen’s interests? Or should we understand it in a more restricted way? The interest of the case is that it suggests the latter.

We thus maintain that it may be fitting for you to prefer that Sarah escape – and more generally, that partiality can be fitting. Indeed, we take such cases to support a stronger claim: that it may be *unfitting* for you to be indifferent between equally good outcomes. So understood, such cases are counter-examples to FA1. Since they are also cases in which your reasons need not support indifference, they are also counter-examples to BP1. This is the partiality problem.

Before moving on, we note two corollaries. First, as noted above, many buck-passers hope to solve the wrong kind of reason problem by distinguishing between the right and wrong kind of reasons. Roughly, the right kind of reasons to value something are those which bear on the value of that thing, the wrong kind of reasons are those that don’t. Some hope that this distinction – however it is to be drawn – will also serve to solve the partiality problem (Howard 2019, Olson 2009). If what we have just said is right, then this hope is forlorn. One of the central ‘earmarks’ of the distinction between right and wrong kind of reasons is that right kind reasons bear on fittingness. It should thus turn out that a response is fitting just in case it is supported by the right-kind reasons – indeed, buck-passers may propose to analyse fittingness in this way (Schroeder 2010). But given that it can be fitting to be partial, it will follow that right kind reasons can support partiality. The partiality problem cannot be solved by appealing to right-kind reasons.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Second, several philosophers hold that fittingness should be analysed in terms of accurate representation. Just as belief is fitting just if true, other responses are fitting just if they accurately represent their objects (Rosen 2015, Tappolet 2016). On this view, it seems, a response cannot be fitting for you but unfitting for me; the content of that response, whatever it may be, is either accurate or inaccurate. But partiality seems to give rise to just such cases, as when it is fitting for you, but not for me, to prefer that Sarah escape. If preferring that Sarah escape is, say, representing Sarah’s escaping as better, then this representation cannot be accurate for you but not for me.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**4. The Buck-Passer’s Solution**

Several solutions to the partiality problem have been proposed. Some of these are available to both buck-passing and fitting-attitudes views.[[19]](#footnote-19) But one particularly attractive solution seems only to be available to buck-passers. This solution appeals to the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons.[[20]](#footnote-20) Agent-neutral reasons are reasons that are shared by everyone. Agent-relative reasons are reasons that only some of us have.[[21]](#footnote-21) For example, the fact that Sarah is in trouble is a reason to be concerned, and the fact that Stephen is in trouble is a reason to be concerned. Plausibly, these reasons are shared by everyone. The fact that Sarah is your friend is a reason for you to prefer Sarah to escape. This is not a reason that everyone shares. So other things equal, the reasons that are shared by everyone support equal concern. But your reasons support preferring that Sarah escape.

The buck-passer might thus suggest:

(BP2) For X to be better than Y is for the balance of agent-neutral reasons to support preferring X to Y.

BP2 avoids the partiality problem: in cases of partiality what is supported by your reasons comes apart from what is supported by the agent-neutral reasons.

This is an elegant response to the problem. The distinction it appeals to, between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, is one we need to make anyway, and can be drawn clearly and straightforwardly. And it maintains a natural way of capturing the non-relativity of betterness simpliciter, in terms of the non-relativity of agent-neutral reasons. Of course, we might want an explanation of the needed claims about agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons – for instance, of why your agent-relative reasons to prefer that Sarah escape outweigh the agent-neutral reasons to be indifferent. But the view has the right structure to solve the problem, and the substantive claims about reasons it appeals to are plausible.

Furthermore, this solution seems unavailable to the fitting-attitude account. The solution turns on the fact that some reasons for a response are shared among all agents while others aren’t, so that the overall status of that response varies between agents. It thus requires that the normative factors in terms of which value is defined are contributory. However, as we explained earlier, fittingness is overall, not contributory. Thus the fitting-attitude account seems unable to offer a parallel solution. This looks like an important advantage for buck-passers.

**5. A Fitting-Attitude Solution to the Partiality Problem**

The buck-passer’s attractive solution to the partiality problem looks like an advantage. We will now argue, however, that the fitting-attitude account can offer a broadly analogous solution by distinguishing between types of valuing attitudes.

As noted, we can value and disvalue things pro tanto – that is, in certain respects. You might desire to visit Sicily both for the food and the weather; you might prefer to visit Sicily over Devon in these respects but prefer Devon in respect of convenience. The same goes for other valuing attitudes. You might admire someone both in respect of their creativity and their generosity, or resent someone both for what they said and how they said it.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Return now to our case of partiality. If Sarah is in trouble, there are different respects in which you might desire that she escape. You might desire her escape in that this would involve *someone* escaping trouble. You might also desire her escape in that it would involve *your friend* escaping trouble. Both of these responses seem fitting. If Stephen is also in trouble, it is fitting to desire that he escape in that this would also involve *someone* escaping. But if Stephen is a stranger, then it isn’t fitting to desire that he escape in that he is your friend. So if only one can escape, it is fitting to be indifferent about who escapes in that both would involve someone escaping. But it is fitting to prefer that Sarah escape in that she is your friend. The fittingness of this latter attitude is *idiosyncratic*: while it is fitting for everyone to be indifferent in that two people’s interests are at stake, it isn’t fitting for everyone to prefer that Sarah escape in that she is your friend. More generally, we can say:

Preferring X to Y in respect R is idiosyncratically fitting for an agent A iff it is fitting for A, but not for all agents, to prefer X to Y in respect R. Indifference between X and Y in respect R is idiosyncratically fitting for A iff it is fitting for A, but not for all agents, to be indifferent between X and Y in respect R.

 Our solution to the partiality problem begins by excluding these idiosyncratically fitting attitudes:

(FA2) For X to be better than Y in respect R is for it to be fitting for all agents to prefer X to Y in respect R.

Since it’s not fitting for all agents to prefer Sarah to escape in the respect that she’s your friend, FA2 implies that Sarah’s being your friend is not a respect in which it is better if she escapes. This seems correct.

What about overall betterness? The partiality problem rests on the thought that, other things equal, Sarah’s and Stephen’s escaping would be equally good, overall. Since FA2 says nothing about overall betterness, it does not conflict with this thought. But we also need an account of overall betterness which accommodates it. Our first pass at such an account deploys the notion of a *neutral agent*:

A neutral agent in respect of X and Y is an agent for whom no pro tanto preferences between X and Y are idiosyncratically fitting.

 We can then say:

(FA3) For X to be better than Y overall is for it to be fitting for a neutral agent to prefer X to Y overall.

We take it that it is not fitting for a neutral agent to have an overall preference between Sarah and Stephen escaping. Rather, it is fitting for a neutral agent to be indifferent between these outcomes. Thus FA3 does not imply that it is better that either escape.

Why is it fitting for a neutral agent to be indifferent between Sarah and Stephen escaping? Well, the pro tanto preferences it is fitting for a neutral agent to have are the pro tanto preferences it is fitting for everyone to have. And it is plausible that the fittingness of overall attitudes is determined by the fittingness of pro tanto attitudes. Since we are assuming that other things are equal, and thus that any respects in which it is fitting for everyone to prefer Sarah to escape are balanced against respects in which it is fitting for everyone to prefer Stephen to escape, it is plausible that the overall attitude that is fitting here is indifference.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Note that, since the fittingness of overall preference is determined by the fittingness of pro tanto preferences, this account allows us to capture the plausible idea that overall betterness is determined by pro tanto betterness. Of course, it is difficult to say exactly how pro tanto betterness determines overall betterness. And similarly, it is hard to say exactly how fitting pro tanto attitudes determine fitting overall attitudes. But we take it that this is a task for first-order theory. Our proposal is simply that the way in which overall betterness is determined by pro tanto betterness is constituted by the way in which the fittingness of overall attitudes is determined by the fittingness of pro tanto attitudes, for a neutral agent.

This solution to the partiality problem is broadly analogous to the buck-passer’s solution. Whereas the buck-passer appeals to facts which are reasons for everyone to prefer, we appeal to facts which are respects in which it is fitting for everyone to prefer. Plausibly, these sets of facts are identical. If so, the views take pro tanto betterness to be determined by the same facts. And they can both agree that overall betterness is determined by pro tanto betterness. The two views thus share advantages. Both agree that the non-relativity of value is to be understood in terms of norms on attitudes that apply to everyone. Both appeal to distinctions which are independently needed and straightforward to draw. And both appeal to substantive claims – for buck-passers, the claim that agent-relative reasons for preference can defeat agent-neutral reasons, and for us, the claim that fitting idiosyncratic pro tanto preferences can make for fitting overall partial preferences – which are plausible, even if we would ultimately like a fuller explanation of them.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**6. Two Challenges**

**6.1. Which Preferences are Idiosyncratically Fitting?**

We said that it is fitting for you, but not for everyone, to prefer Sarah to escape trouble in the respect that she’s your friend. This might be challenged. Perhaps it is fitting for everyone to prefer, for your sake, that Sarah escape in that she’s your friend. After all, suppose that Stephen is Sam’s friend. A stranger to all parties might prefer that Sarah escape in that she’s your friend while also preferring that Stephen escape in that he’s Sam’s friend. These preferences might seem fitting.

The buck-passer faces a parallel issue. The buck-passer says that Sarah’s being your friend is a reason for you, but not for everyone, to prefer that Sarah escape. But Sarah’s being your friend might seem a reason for everyone to prefer, for your sake, that she escape.

In response, note, first, that these particular normative claims are not crucial. Our solution requires there to be some respects in which it is fitting for you, but not everyone, to prefer that Sarah escape. The buck-passer requires there to be some respects which are reasons for you, but not everyone, to prefer that Sarah escapes. The structure of the solutions requires there to be respects that play these roles. But it doesn’t specify which respects play these roles.

This point has an interesting upshot. Given natural further assumptions, both views imply that the respects which play these roles are ‘evaluatively empty’: they are not respects in which Sarah’s escaping is better, worse, or just as good as, Stephen’s escaping. To illustrate using our own view: if preferring X to Y in respect R is idiosyncratically fitting, then R is not a respect in which preferring X to Y is fitting for all agents (by the definition of idiosyncratic fittingness). Thus, R is not a respect in which X is better than Y (by FA2). Furthermore, if fitting pro tanto preferences and indifference *exclude* each other, R cannot be a respect in which it’s fitting for all agents to prefer Y to X or be indifferent between X and Y. Thus, R is not a respect in which Y is better than X or a respect in which X and Y are equally good.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This may seem to exacerbate the problem. It might seem that respects in which things are better, or of equal value, can nonetheless be respects in which idiosyncratically fitting attitudes are possible. To stick with our example, Sarah’s being your friend might seem like a respect in which it’s better if she escapes. And if it is not, it might seem a respect in which it’s equally good if she escapes. Yet our solution implies that it is neither.

Put most generally then, the problem for our solution is that it requires that in cases of partiality,

1. there is a respect R such that it’s idiosyncratically fitting for the partial agent to prefer the outcome in that respect, and
2. R is not is a respect in which the outcome is better, worse, or equally good.

It’s not obvious that there are good candidates to fill this role.

However, we suggest that, properly understood, our illustrative suggestion – that Sarah is your friend – is indeed a good candidate to play this role. ‘That Sarah is your friend’ is ambiguous between what we can call an indexical and a non-indexical respect. The indexical respect is that which you would express by saying ‘Sarah is my friend’. The non-indexical respect is that Sarah is, say, Suzy’s friend (where you are Suzy). We suggest that it is fitting for you to prefer that Sarah escape in the first, indexical respect – that Sarah is, as you would say, my friend. But it is not fitting for all agents to have this preference (indeed this preference is arguably not even available to agents other than you). By contrast, it may be fitting for you, and for all agents, to have the same attitude – be that preference or indifference – in the second, non-indexical respect – that Sarah is Suzy’s friend.

Furthermore, it is plausible that Sarah’s being your friend, understood indexically, is, as we put it, evaluatively empty. Sarah’s being Suzy’s friend might be a respect in which it is better if Sarah escape, or one in which this is equally good. But Sarah’s being, as you would put it, *my* friend does not seem a respect in which it is better, worse, or equally good that Sarah escape. As we have emphasised, betterness simpliciter does not seem to be relativised to agents. It is thus hard to see how respects which are so relativised could contribute to betterness simpliciter.

These claims commit us to de se propositions and to a role for the de se in some cases of fitting partial concern. That the de se can make this sort of difference is independently plausible – for instance, that an event will happen to *me* is widely thought to make it fitting for me to care about it in a distinctive way.[[26]](#footnote-26) The idea also fits naturally with the thought that fitting partiality depends on who you are, how you are related to others, or where and when you are located.[[27]](#footnote-27) And while de se propositions are not uncontroversial, even their opponents recognise the need to capture the de se at some level; our claims could be reformulated to fit such views.[[28]](#footnote-28)

There might seem a residual problem. Suppose it is granted that it is fitting for you, but not for everyone, to prefer Sarah to escape trouble in the respect that she’s (indexically) your friend. And suppose it is granted that this respect is evaluatively empty. Nonetheless, one might still be sceptical that all respects in which preference is idiosyncratically fitting are evaluatively empty. Suppose we thought that Sarah’s being Suzy’s friend is in fact a respect in which it’s equally good that Sarah and Stephen escape.[[29]](#footnote-29) On our account, it must thus be fitting for all agents – including you – to be indifferent between Sarah and Stephen escaping, in this respect. This might seem wrong. After all, since you know you are Suzy, it might seem incoherent for you to both prefer that Sarah escape in that she’s your friend while also being indifferent in that she’s Suzy’s friend. And this might suggest that these attitudes can’t both be fitting.[[30]](#footnote-30)

However, there is no incoherence here. Compare: it seems fine to prefer that Sarah escape in that she is your friend and be indifferent in that she is the friend of the tallest person in the room, even if you know that you are the tallest person in the room. Why? Because what *matters* is that she is your friend, not that she is the friend of the tallest person in the room.[[31]](#footnote-31) Similarly, what matters is that she is your friend rather than that she is Suzy’s friend, and your preferences can coherently track this. Any further intuition that it is fitting for you to prefer that Sarah escape in that she is Suzy’s friend, is, we suggest, captured by our claim that it is fitting for you to prefer that she escape in that she’s your friend.

To sum up: we have argued that our illustrative claim – that it is idiosyncratically fitting for you to prefer Sarah to escape in the respect that she’s your friend – is defensible, so long as it is understood appropriately – that is, indexically. Furthermore, understanding it this way makes it plausible that this respect is not one in which it is better, worse, or equally good if Sarah escape. More generally, respects of betterness or equal value are always such that the corresponding attitude in that respect is fitting for all agents; idiosyncratically fitting preferences are always preferences in other respects.

**6.2. Overall Betterness and Neutral Agents**

We said that

(FA3) For X to be better than Y overall is for it to be fitting for a *neutral* agent to prefer X to Y overall,

where a neutral agent is one for whom no pro tanto preferences between X and Y are idiosyncratically fitting. This appeal to neutral agents might raise concerns. For instance, in many cases there will be no guarantee that any actual neutral agent exists. Thus it seems that the account must appeal to merely possible agents – but this raises questions about how to understand claims about what is fitting for merely possible agents to prefer (Reisner 2015). It also seems that these neutral agents might need to have some peculiar properties – for instance, to account for temporal partiality (see below) they might have to be atemporal.[[32]](#footnote-32) One might doubt whether atemporal agents are possible.[[33]](#footnote-33)

However, we suggest that the appeal to neutral agents can be understood without raising such difficulties. Roughly it can be understood in terms of the fittingness for *all* agents of preferences that take only certain respects – those for which no attitude is idiosyncratically fitting – into account. The appeal to neutral agents can thus be cashed out as an appeal to the fittingness of these attitudes.

To see how this might work, consider that, just as you can prefer something in certain respects but not others, or not overall, you can prefer it in certain (non-singleton) sets of respects but not others, or not overall. These sets can include individual respects in which you disprefer it.

For example, when choosing a holiday destination you prefer Devon in respect of convenience and in respect of cost, while you prefer Sicily in respect of food and of weather. We can ask which you prefer in respect of the set {convenience, cost, food} – that is, just taking the members of this set into account. It might be that you prefer Devon in respect of this set – you take the convenience and cost to outweigh the food. But perhaps in respect of the set {convenience, cost, food, weather} you prefer Sicily – the weather tips the balance in favour of Sicily.

Now consider a pair (X, Y). There will be a set S of respects in which it is fitting for all agents to prefer X to Y, or fitting for all agents to prefer Y to X, or fitting for all agents to be indifferent between X and Y. (That is, each member of S satisfies this disjunction; it’s not that there is a particular disjunct they all satisfy.) Thus, S excludes those respects of preference that are idiosyncratically fitting – those such that different preferences are fitting for different agents. Then we can say that for X to be overall better than Y is for it to be fitting for *all* agents to prefer X to Y in respect of S. Thus:

(FA4) For X to be better than Y overall is for it to be fitting for all agents to prefer X to Y, taking into account only those respects in which no attitude is idiosyncratically fitting.

The idea is that overall betterness is betterness in the respects that do not make for idiosyncratic fitting preferences.

In the case of Sarah and Stephen, S will include respects such as that Sarah’s interests are at stake and that Stephen’s interests are at stake. It will exclude respects such as that Sarah is (indexically) your friend. In this way we will get the result that it is overall equally good that Sarah escape and that Stephen escape. Taking into account only those respects of preference that are fitting for all agents, indifference is fitting.

Thus we can cash out talk of neutral agents in terms of respects of preference which are non-idiosyncratically fitting. Our account of overall betterness does not require any resources over and above what we require to account for betterness in respects. But we can still use talk of neutral agents as a convenient shorthand. We therefore treat FA3 and FA4 as equivalent.

**7. Related Challenges**

The partiality problem is an instance of a more general problem. There are a range of cases in which it seems fitting to value things in a way that does not correspond to their value. In this section, we consider whether our solution to the partiality problem helps with these other cases, and if not, whether this gives the buck-passer any advantage.

A first kind of case involves *temporality*. Suppose that you know that you either had a very painful operation in the recent past or are due to have a less painful one in the near future. Both operations induce amnesia: if you had the very painful operation, you cannot now remember it, and if you are to have the less painful operation, you will not later be able to remember it. Here it seems fitting to prefer, and the balance of reasons seems to support preferring, that you had the more painful operation in the past – the one that is *over*. But the more painful operation is worse; things would be better simpliciter if you were instead due to have the less painful operation.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Our solution to the partiality problem handles this case too. You might prefer the less painful operation in respect of its being less painful while also preferring the more painful operation in respect of its being past. Both of these preferences seem fitting. But the latter preference is idiosyncratic. It is fitting for you now to prefer the more painful operation in that it is past.[[35]](#footnote-35) But that attitude was not fitting for you when it was not past. So the fact that the more painful operation is past is not a respect in which it is better than the less painful operation. By contrast, it is always fitting to prefer the less painful operation in respect of its being less painful. So its being less painful is a respect in which it is better. And while it seems fitting for you now to prefer overall that you had the more painful operation, it seems fitting for a neutral agent to prefer that you have the less painful operation. So FA3 implies that the less painful operation is better. (Of course, it might be fitting for a stranger now to prefer, for your sake, that you had the more painful operation. But this preference is idiosyncratic, depending as it does on the stranger’s temporal location.)

Other cases challenge fitting-attitude accounts of specific values.[[36]](#footnote-36) In particular, there seem to be cases in which the fitting response to an object changes even though the object doesn’t. For example, it is fitting to be more amused by a joke when you first hear it than three weeks after you hear it. But the joke doesn’t change, so it doesn’t seem to become less funny. It is fitting to grieve a friend who has just died, but also fitting for grief to subside, although the death does not lose the features that make it sad. Fitting regret and anger seem to follow similar trajectories, at least sometimes, although the mistakes or wrongs they correspond to do not change. In such cases, it’s clear that the fitting responses change, but not so clear that the specific values do.[[37]](#footnote-37)

These cases raise a host of interesting and difficult issues. Here we can only offer a few brief remarks about their bearing on the choice between fitting-attitude and buck-passing accounts. Our central claim is that these cases differ significantly from the cases involving partiality and temporality, and so we should not expect a uniform account of them.

First, the cases involving partiality and temporality involve fitting attitudes which run counter to value: they are cases in which it is fitting to prefer the worse (or the equally valuable). These cases do not. It is not, for instance, that it becomes fitting to disdain the joke or delight in your friend’s death. Rather, it is no longer fitting to be amused by the joke, or saddened by the death, in the way that you were.

This means that our response to the partiality problem is inapplicable here. It would not be plausible to say that it is still fitting to be amused by the joke in some respects or to grieve your friend’s death in some respects. The problem is precisely that this seems false. The buck-passer’s solution also seems inadequate. It’s not that, once you have grieved, you still have a reason to grieve your friend’s death, but one that is outweighed. More plausibly, your reason to grieve has gone – you have done what it called for. So neither account can explain the values here by appealing to norms which apply in all circumstances.

Second, the cases involving partiality and temporality involve a value – betterness simpliciter – which is not relativized to agents. The values in these cases are not so naturally understood in this way. Plausibly, an event can be sad for me but not for you, a joke can be funny in one context but not another, and an act may be initially regrettable but not now, years on. Similarly, tragic events, at least sometimes, get less sad over time. The non-relativity of betterness simpliciter was an important part of the partiality (and temporality) problem – it is what motivated the thought that this value should be accounted for by norms on attitudes which apply to all agents. Insofar as the values involved in these cases differ in this way, there is not the same pressure to analyse these values in terms of such norms.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Plausible norm-attitude accounts of specific values will thus require care in specifying the circumstances under which the norms on attitudes which constitute these values apply. Exactly how this is to be done will vary between the different specific values. The only way to proceed is by detailed considerations of these different values and the corresponding responses. This is not, in our view, a problem that casts doubt on the plausibility of the norm-attitude approach. Rather, it’s a reflection of the complexity and subtlety of specific values and the corresponding norms, which in turn reflects the complex role that these values and the associated attitudes play in our lives.

Note further that, among norm-attitude accounts, the buck-passer again has no clear advantage here. Fitting-attitude accounts will say that specific values are constituted by the fittingness of valuing something under certain circumstances. Buck-passers will say that specific values are constituted by reasons to value something under certain circumstances. We see no reason to think that it will be any more straightforward for buck-passers to specify the relevant circumstances than for proponents of fitting-attitude accounts.

**8. Conclusion**

Norm-attitude accounts of value face the partiality problem. Buck-passers can offer an attractive solution to this problem. We have argued that the fitting-attitude account can offer a broadly analogous and equally attractive solution. And we have argued that other sorts of case where value and norms on valuing diverge pose similar challenges for both sorts of norm-attitude account.[[39]](#footnote-39)

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1. There are also prominent accounts which analyse value in terms of what it is rational to value, given full information (Brandt 1979, Smith 1994). However, proponents of these accounts characteristically understand rationality in terms of coherence. So understood, these views count as subjectivist (see below). If rationality is instead understood in terms of reasons (as in Parfit 2010), these views would be a form of buck-passing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For simplicity we treat preference as a sui generis attitude, subject to its own norms. One might instead regard preference as reducible to desire, e.g. to prefer X to Y is to desire X more strongly than one desires Y, to be indifferent between X and Y is to equally desire X and Y. In that case betterness simpliciter might ultimately be understood in terms of norms on these desires, e.g. for X to be better than Y is for the fitting level of desire for X to be greater than the fitting level of desire for Y. This would complicate some of our arguments but not affect them substantively. Finally, note that indifference between outcomes does not imply that you don’t care about these outcomes: indifference is compatible with strongly desiring each. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thus the accounts we will be concerned with avoid the objection that norm-attitude accounts are circular because they define goodness in terms of thoughts about goodness. (For a version of this objection, against certain norm-attitude accounts, see Ross 1939: 278-9.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A further question is how norm-attitude accounts should be extended to account for incommensurable value (Chang 1997). This will not be crucial here, but we tentatively suggest that X and Y are of incommensurable value when the norms don’t support preferring X to Y, preferring Y to X, or being indifferent between X and Y. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In light of such analyses, one might claim that ‘specific value properties’ are better classified as, say, fittingness properties (Berker, this volume). We maintain that being analysed in terms of fittingness does not prevent them from being value properties, but nothing here turns on this classificatory question. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mill 1863, Scanlon 1998, Schroeder 2010, Zimmerman 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Influential proponents of sophisticated subjectivism (though not always focusing on goodness simpliciter) include Firth 1952, Brandt 1979, Lewis 1989, Railton 1986, Smith 1994, and Street 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alternatively, if subjectivism is the view that what is finally good is what is valued for its own sake by everyone, then the view seems to imply that nothing is finally good. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Of course, some subjectivists have argued that their views can avoid any such revisionist implications – see e.g. Korgaard 1996, Smith 1994, Markovits 2014. But their arguments have not been widely accepted. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. McDowell 1985, Wiggins 1987. For discussion, see D’Arms and Jacobson 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For more on fittingness, see e.g. Howard 2018, McHugh and Way forthcoming: ch.3, as well as the other contributions to this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. At any rate, the fittingness we are interested in here is overall – perhaps there is also contributory or *pro tanto* fittingness. We also take fittingness to be categorical rather than gradable (see Maguire 2018), but this assumption plays no essential role. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a fuller case for regarding these concepts and the corresponding properties as distinct, see McHugh and Way forthcoming: ch.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ‘All agents’ means all possible agents in all circumstances – or at least, all circumstances in which any general conditions on the relevant norms applying (e.g. being able to prefer X to Y) are met. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In particular, we focus on *positive* partiality. There may also be appropriate negative partiality (Brandt 2020). As far as we can see, everything we say could be adapted to apply to negative partiality. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For an influential statement of this objection, see Blanshard 1961: 287-8. As Blanshard notes, the problem was already discussed by Ewing (1939: 18ff; 1947: 191ff).

Note that the partiality problem is not about how to capture the appropriateness of partiality (for recent discussion see Keller 2013, Lord 2016). The problem is rather how to account for the ‘impartial’ value facts, given that some agents are appropriately partial. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This point is supported by the other ‘earmarks’ of the right-/wrong-kind reason distinction offered by Schroeder (2012). For example, wrong kind reasons for an attitude cannot straightforwardly be your (motivating) reason for that attitude. But there is no problem in, e.g. preferring that Sarah escape for the reason that she is your friend. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This problem might be avoided by claiming that our preferences have different contents – for instance, that yours represents Sarah’s escaping as better from your point of view and mine represents it as better from my point of view. But to make such claims, not only about preference but about all attitudes that can be fittingly partial, would be a significant, and not obviously plausible, further commitment. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For example, Oddie (2005) argues that value should be understood in terms of what it is fitting to favour when at ‘zero distance’ from an object. Orsi (2013) argues that value should be understood in terms of what it is fitting to favour when behind a ‘veil of ignorance’. While we will eventually agree with these authors that value needs to be understood in terms of what it is fitting for anyone under certain restrictions, we do not think either of these restrictions are acceptable. It is obscure what it is to be at ‘zero distance’ from an object (Bykvist 2009, Orsi 2013). And we take fittingness to be ‘objective’, in the sense that whether a response is fitting need not depend on your epistemic situation (McHugh and Way forthcoming: ch.3). In that case, being behind a veil of ignorance may make no difference to what it is fitting to favour. We discuss a third solution, due to Zimmerman (2011), below (n.24). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a solution along these lines, though not quite in these terms, see Lemos 2011. Schroeder (2010) suggests a solution like this for the parallel problem of temporal partiality (see §7). The claim that reasons of partiality are agent-relative is common in the partiality literature; see, e.g., Keller 2013: 23, Brandt 2020: n.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Again, ‘everyone’ here means ‘all possible agents in all circumstances in which any general conditions on reasons are met’. For discussion of different uses of the terminology of ‘agent-neutral’ and ‘agent-relative’ reasons, see Ridge 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. What are respects? We take them to be propositions. Thus, when we say, for instance, that you prefer Sicily to Devon in respect of the food, we mean that you prefer it in respect of some proposition about the food (e.g. that it is tastier). One advantage of taking respects to be propositions is that, assuming that reasons are (true) propositions, it allows us to maintain that the respects in which it is fitting to prefer X to Y are also reasons for preferring X to Y (compare McHugh and Way 2016 on the ‘linking principle’). We leave open what else having an attitude in a respect involves, e.g. whether it requires believing the relevant proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. As a reminder, we do not take fittingness to be contributory. Thus the respects here (and throughout) are respects of preference, not of fittingness. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Our solution bears some resemblance to Zimmerman’s (2011). Zimmerman suggests that we distinguish between the states of affairs that it is fitting to value. To simplify, he suggests that it is fitting for everyone to be indifferent between the states of affairs of Sarah escaping (S1) and Stephen escaping (S2). But it is not fitting for you to be indifferent between the states of affairs of Sarah, your friend, escaping (S1\*) and Stephen, a stranger to you, escaping (S2\*). He then suggests that the fitting-attitude account be restricted only to states of affairs like S1 and S2, and not those like S1\* and S2\*. However, Zimmerman’s claims about fittingness do not seem plausible. Suppose you are initially indifferent about who escapes, but then remember that Sarah is your friend – perhaps your temporary amnesia lifts. You may then come to prefer that Sarah escapes. It seems that what has happened here is that you have acquired a preference between states of affairs – S1 and S2 – between which you were previously indifferent. And this seems appropriate. Furthermore, it is hard to understand what it means to be indifferent between S1 and S2 while preferring S1\* to S2\*. This combination of preferences seems inconsistent. By contrast, it is clearly consistent and plausibly fitting to prefer Sarah to escape in one respect but not in another. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Fitting pro tanto preferences and indifference exclude each other if at most one of preference, dispreference, and indifference (in a certain respect) can be fitting for a particular agent. This assumption might be questioned, but we will grant it for the sake of discussion; it plausibly holds in at least some cases of the sort we’re considering. The corresponding assumption for the buck-passer is that a consideration can be a reason for at most one of preference, dispreference, and indifference. For useful discussion of assumptions of this sort, see Snedegar 2017: ch.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Nagel’s (1970) initial characterisation of the distinction between (what came to be known as) agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons can be understood as marking the significance of the de se. See Pettit 1987 and Darwall 2021 for presentations of Nagel’s distinction along these lines. See Guillot and O’Brien forthcoming for a recent defence of the normative significance of the de se in response to a challenge from Setiya (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See, e.g., Brandt 2020: 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Ninan 2016 for a helpful discussion and references on the de se. Note that we do not claim – though it is perhaps an attractive conjecture – that *all* respects in which preferences are idiosyncratically fitting have a de se or otherwise indexical (e.g. de nunc – see our discussion of temporal partiality in §7 below) character. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. We have been non-committal about whether Sarah’s being Suzy’s friend is a respect in which it is better if Sarah escape or one in which it is equally good. Our solution is neutral on this – as noted, it does not require any particular normative claims. However, one way to reconcile conflicting intuitions is to distinguish different respects: first, that Sarah is Suzy’s friend and Stephen is not Suzy’s friend; second, that Sarah is Suzy’s friend and Stephen is someone else’s (say, Sam’s) friend. Perhaps it is fitting for all agents to prefer that Sarah escape in the first respect and fitting for all agents to be indifferent in the second respect. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Compare our criticism of Zimmerman’s (2011) solution (n.24). But note that our claims here are importantly different from Zimmerman’s: he distinguishes objects of overall preference, we distinguish respects of pro tanto preference. We do not claim that it is coherent to prefer overall that Sarah, your friend, escape, and yet be indifferent about whether Sarah or Stephen escapes. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. These points still apply if we ‘rigidify’ the description to ‘the actual tallest person in the room’; they do not turn on the fact that you might not have been the tallest person in the room. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. This might not be required if temporal partiality is a first-person phenomenon, as Parfit 1984: 181ff suggests. But it is not clear if Parfit is right. See Hare 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Such difficulties are standard worries about views which appeal to ‘ideal agents’. This includes some norm-attitude views (Suikkanen 2008, Kauppinen 2014). If the argument to follow succeeds, this is thus an advantage over such views. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. This case is due to Parfit 1984. For discussion of such cases in connection with norm-attitude accounts, see Oddie 2005, Heathwood 2008, Bykvist 2009, Schroeder 2010, Lemos 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. And note that indexicality seems essential here – it is in respect of its being *past*, rather than of its being on, say, 8th September 2019, that preferring it is fitting. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Bykvist (2009) suggests that modal considerations also challenge norm-attitude accounts of goodness. For example, whether it is fitting to regret an outcome depends not just on how bad it is but how ‘close’ better outcomes were – thus it is fitting to regret the rain at the picnic more than failing to win the lottery. Such cases are not counter-examples to the norm-attitude accounts of goodness stated here (Lemos 2011). They do raise issues for norm-attitude accounts of specific values, of broadly the kind we discuss below. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. On amusement, see D’Arms and Jacobson 2010. On grief, see Marušić 2018. On anger, see Callard 2017, Srinivisan 2018, Marušić forthcoming. For discussion in connection with norm-attitude accounts, see Bykvist 2009, D’Arms and Jacobson 2010, and Lemos 2011. For helpful general discussion, see Na’aman 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. To be clear, we are not claiming that, e.g. events get less sad in a way that directly correlates with it being fitting to be less sad. Perhaps it can cease to be fitting to grieve even when the outcome you grieved for remains sad. Our point is just to illustrate that an account of specific values was always going to be relativized to circumstances or time in a way that betterness simpliciter was not. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. We received helpful comments on earlier drafts of this material from Rachel Achs, Selim Berker, Chris Howard, Thomas Hurka, Alex King, Oded Na’aman, Richard Rowland, and Philip Stratton-Lake. The paper draws on work from our book *Getting Things Right*; we are also grateful, therefore, to the many people who helped with the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)