

Solving the Puzzle of Partiality

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Abstract

If each person is equally valuable and thus deserves equal treatment, why should the fact that we have a close relationship with someone permit or even direct us to treat her preferentially? We may call this the puzzle of partiality. This paper aims to analyze previous attempts to solve the puzzle of partiality and introduce my new approach. I first examine Simon Keller's individuals view, to show the difficulties of a view that puts each individual's equal worth at its center in making sense of the appropriate motives and reasons for partial behavior. Next, I explore two views that seem to capture the agent-neutrality of reasons of partiality better than the individuals view: the projects view, which focuses on the agent's own projects, and the relationships view, which focuses on the value of the relationship itself. Then I introduce my own relational activity view and explain how it can retain the merits of these two views while avoiding their difficulties. In particular, I suggest a picture of how special values are transformed, delivered, and created within intimate relationships and show how the characteristic structure in the intimates' concern for each other can shed light on the puzzle of partiality.

1. Introduction

It seems reasonable to claim that we should, or at least may, treat those who are near and dear to us preferentially.¹ If someone asks you why you go to great lengths to help your parents when their house is burned down, saying "They are my parents" seems sufficient to

¹ When I say "X treats Y *preferentially* [or in a *special* or *partial* way]," I mean that X prioritizes Y over others and treats Y in a way that X would not treat a stranger.

make sense of what you do. According to the prevailing modern conception of morality, however, each person is equally valuable and thus deserves equal treatment. If so, why should the fact that we share a close relationship with someone permit or even direct us to treat her preferentially? We may call it the puzzle of partiality.²

The biggest challenge in solving the puzzle of partiality is to explain the agent-relativity of the reasons of partiality while attributing equal value to each person. That is, an adequate theory needs to explain why we have stronger reasons to do what is good for our intimates than to do what is good for strangers, given that they are all equally worthy. Abandoning either of these considerations has a great theoretical cost. On the one hand, the impartialist view, which equates the ethical point of view with an impartial point of view, has been criticized on the grounds that it fails to do justice to the widely-accepted intuition that we ought to or at least may prioritize those with whom we share special or intimate relationships such as family members or friends. For example, John Cottingham even says that “any attempt to make impartiality a necessary feature of all ethical reasoning must lead to repugnant and absurd consequences which ultimately threaten the very basis of our humanity” (Cottingham 1983, 83). On the other hand, if I favorably treat certain people over others just because they share special relationships with me (e.g., *my* family or *my* friends), then such a partiality seems to need justification from a moral perspective. In this sense, the puzzle of partiality seems to ask us to have its cake and eat it.

This paper aims to analyze previous attempts to solve the puzzle of partiality and

² In this paper, I limit my discussion to the partiality involved in very close relationships such as those we share with family members and close friends. I also use ‘special relationship,’ ‘intimate relationship,’ and ‘a very close relationship’ interchangeably.

introduce my new approach. I first examine Simon Keller's individuals view, to show the difficulties of a view that puts each individual's equal worth at its center in making sense of the appropriate motives and reasons for preferential behavior. Next, I explore two views that seem to capture the agent-neutrality of reasons of partiality better than the individuals view: the projects view, which focuses on the agent's own projects, and the relationships view, which focuses on the value of the relationship itself. Then I introduce my own relational activity view and explain how it can retain the merits of these two views while avoiding their difficulties. In particular, I suggest a picture of how special values are transformed, delivered, and created within intimate relationships and show how the characteristic structure in the intimates' concern for each other can shed light on the puzzle of partiality.

2. The Individuals View

I believe Keller's *individuals view* is one of the strongest views among the views that attempt to solve the puzzle of partiality while putting each individual's equal worth at its center (Keller 2013, Ch. 4). After examining this view, I will show its difficulties in capturing the appropriate motives for preferential behavior and justification for being preferential to our intimates or those with whom we have special relationships. The individuals view holds that the reasons of partiality arise from facts about the ethical importance of the individuals who share special relationships with us. The gist of this view is that the *individual person* is the only thing that really matters.

Keller claims that the individuals view can best capture the phenomenology of

partiality or the experience of acting on the reasons of partiality. Consider the two famous cases of partiality independently offered by Bernard Williams and Michael Stocker. The first is Williams's "Saving Wife" case (Williams 1981). A man is at the pier and sees two people are drowning. One is his wife and the other is a stranger, and he can save only one. It seems to be a "thought too many" for the man to think about something like general utility or moral principles in deciding what to do. Instead, he should simply save his wife. The second is Stocker's "Hospital Visit" case (Stocker 1976). In this example, your friend visits when you are hospitalized. Stocker points out that, when you ask her about her motivation, the answer you may rightly expect is something like, "I came here because you are my friend!" rather than "Because it promotes general happiness" or "Because it is my moral duty." The point Williams and Stocker are trying to make in these examples is that the thoughts like "It's my wife" or "You are my friend" should be enough to motivate the agents to act as they do and that the references to any impartial consideration such as general utility or moral principles would be inappropriate as a motive in such a situation.

What is objectionable about the husband and the friend in these examples is that the reasons they act on here seem to conflict with what we are supposed to experience when we act well within special relationships. To illustrate how his individuals view can capture our reasons of partiality as we experience them, Keller introduces a modified version of Williams's example, which he calls the "Two-Leveled Pier" case (Keller 2013, 90-92). This example is specifically designed to show what kind of knowledge is required for a motive of partiality to be "fully shaped."³ In this example, you are on the lower level of the pier and I am on its

³ According to Keller, a motive is "fully shaped" when the motive fully "grips on" to the reason for

upper level. I am in a better position to gather information about the person drowning, while you are in a better position to save that person by throwing the life preserver. So you are motivated to save the person in question according to the information I provide. At this imaginary pier, I offer you further information piece by piece, increasing the level of its specificity:

(1) "You have a good reason to throw the life preserver!"

(2) "There is someone drowning in the water!"

(3) "Someone you care about is drowning in the water!"

(4) "A good friend of yours is drowning in the water!"

(5) "Donald is drowning in the water!"

[Suppose you have exactly one good friend called Donald.]

(6) "Donald is drowning by inhaling water through his nose, not his mouth!"

Keller claims that your motive is fully shaped or "grips on" to the reason for saving him at stage (5), that is, when you discover which particular friend of yours is drowning (i.e., Donald). Here your motive to save Donald is your concern for him, and any further information (e.g. one that offered at stage (6)) would be irrelevant insofar as this motive is concerned. Based on this thought experiment, he concludes, "It is only when we can think directly of the person for whom we act that we can have a clear sense of why we act. So far as

performing the act. Thus, if the agent acts in a certain way while lacking full knowledge of what reason she has for performing that act, her motive to act so is not "fully shaped" (see Keller 2013, 87-89).

our motives of partiality are concerned, then, our reasons of partiality make essential reference to *particular, specified individuals*” (Keller 2013, 94; emphasis added).

I am not sure, however, that Keller’s ‘Two-Leveled Pier’ case adequately explains the phenomenology of partiality. First, he says that this example’s point is “to show that a motive of *partiality* becomes fully shaped only when we are aware of the identity of the individual for whom we are performing the act in question” (Keller 2013, 94; emphasis added). However, if this were his point, the example should have involved at least two potential victims: one who is your friend (i.e., Donald) and one who is not. And the question should be at which stage your motive to save one *over the other* is fully shaped. Otherwise, the example only shows the degree of vividness or concreteness of your motivation to save the given person.

According to his individuals view, “Your reason to give special treatment to a friend is grounded in the ethical significance of your friend” (Keller 2013, 98). However, although the ethical significance of the individual himself may ground your reason to treat your friend *well*, it does not ground the reason to treat him preferentially, that is, in the way you would not treat strangers. The fact that the individual in question is a person with intrinsic value would not explain this reason for preferential treatment since it does not distinguish her from other similarly situated individuals, insofar as they are also persons with equal intrinsic value.

In fact, in Keller’s original example, your act of saving the victim can be adequately explained with the information given at the stage (2): “There is someone drowning in the water!” And the information added would increase at best the degree of vividness or concreteness of your motivation to save the given person. I believe what actually explains your preferential treatment, as opposed to a mere good treatment, to Donald in Keller’s example is

the fact that he is your *friend* or someone you especially care about. It is crucial to note that, at the stage (5) in the two-leveled pier case, he does not just say, “Donald is drowning in the water!” but also adds, “(Suppose you have exactly one good friend called Donald.)” (Keller 2013, 91). Without the information that Donald is your friend, the fact that Donald is drowning would not add anything to your motivating reason.

Furthermore, I do not think his strategy successfully meets the main challenge against the individuals view, which is to explain why we have stronger reasons to do what is good for our intimates than to do what is good for strangers, given that they are all equally worthy. Keller adopts Jonathan Dancy’s conceptual distinction between a *favorer* and an *enabler* to defend his individuals view (Keller 2013, 133-136). According to Dancy, a favorer is a fact that provides reasons for the given action, while an enabler is a fact that enables another fact to give a reason without being itself a reason-giving fact (Dancy 2004, 38-40). For example, the fact that you promised me to give me a ride to the airport is a favorer that gives you a reason for giving me a ride to the airport, and the fact that your promise is not made under duress is the enabler that enables this favorer to give a reason to do so.

Keller applies this conceptual distinction to the case of reasons of partiality, aiming to “explain why you should have reasons that others lack, just because you participate in certain special relationships” (Keller 2013, 18). According to him, only the facts about the value of individuals serve as favorers, while the facts about the relationship are mere enablers. He says, “[W]hen you give special treatment within a special relationship your reason for acting is that your act would be good for the person with whom your relationship is shared,” and the fact that “you share a relationship with someone is *not itself a reason* of partiality, but it *enables*

other facts to be reasons of partiality” (Keller 2013, 135; emphasis added). By categorizing them as mere enablers, as opposed to favorers or ‘reason-giving facts,’ he seems to aim to explain the reasons of partiality in terms of something other than the special relationships themselves. If this move is successful, he would be able to hold onto the individuals view, according to which reasons of partiality are explained only by the facts about individuals’ value, without appealing to any fact about our relationships.

I am not sure, however, that the distinction between a favorer and an enabler would allow him to achieve this aim. The main worry is that the facts about the special relationships seem to play a central role in making sense of one’s preferential actions toward those who share such relationships. Suppose that you helped your friend fix her car, and someone asks you, “Why did you help her fix her car?” You may answer by referring to some facts about the value of this individual: “Because she is valuable and my helping her is good for her.” But suppose that the questioner further asks, “Okay. But why did you do that only for *her*, and not for someone else in a similar situation? Aren’t they equally valuable human beings?” To give an adequate answer to this question, you would need to refer to some facts about the special relationship you share with her. You would need to say, for example, “Because she is my friend,” which amounts to saying that you share friendship with her. The thoughts like “She is my friend!” are to be understood as thoughts of the particular individuals in question as special and precious *in the light of* the given relationship (i.e., friendship).

It seems the second question (i.e., “Why her, not others?”) demands the reasons of *partiality*. For the puzzle of partiality is not about why we do good things for any individual at all, but about why we give *partial* or *preferential* treatment to those with whom we share

special relationships. The fact that she is your friend in this example is a consideration that counts in favor of your treating her preferentially. At least, this fact is what you normally perceive as a *reason* to prioritize fixing her car over fixing a similarly situated stranger's car. Thus, in this and similar cases, the reference to facts about the special relationships shared seems essential for making sense of the preferential treatment.

In fact, Dancy's own conception of enabler does not suggest that enablers play such a crucial role in explaining or justifying the action in question, at least not in normal circumstances. Take Dancy's own examples of enablers (Dancy 2004, 38-40). What makes sense of, say, your giving someone a ride to the airport is that you promised to do so, which is a favorer. Dancy says enablers—such as that your promise was not given under duress, that you are able to do so, or that there is no greater reason not to do so—do not give you any additional reason to give a ride to the person to the airport and thus does not play a significant role in making sense of our action. This suggests that the role of an enabler is to keep the ground from becoming obstructed so that the favorer can play its *normal* role of giving reasons to act. The name 'enabler' in this sense is somewhat misleading. The existence of an enabler is usually better described negatively as the *absence of a disabler*. In explaining or justifying what one did, the default seems to talk only about favorers, unless the possibility of the existence of a particular disabler happens to be salient in the given context.

By contrast, in Keller's application, enablers play a crucial role in making sense of the given action. That is, while he takes the fact that the person involved is your friend as a mere enabler, this fact plays an important role in explaining and justifying your preferential treatment toward that person. What his individuals view suggests as favorers or reason-

giving facts of preferential treatment are facts about the value of individuals, namely, that “your act would be good for the person with whom your relationship is shared” (Keller 2013, 135). But offering only the facts of this sort is inadequate for explaining or justifying the preferential treatment unless we also refer to some facts about the special relationship shared. If the facts about relationships are indispensable for explaining or justifying our preferential treatment towards those who share special relationships with us, it seems more reasonable to regard them as favorers or *reason-giving* facts, rather than as mere enablers.

3. The Projects View and the Relationships View

The analysis of Keller suggests that we need to find the source of the reasons of partiality somewhere other than our intimate’s value as an individual person. The projects view and the relationships view offer two ways for doing this. The former puts the agent’s own commitments at the center, while the latter regards the value of relationships themselves as the source of the reasons of partiality.

The projects view holds that the reasons of partiality arise from the deepest commitments of the agent whose reasons they are (Keller 2013, Ch. 2). Bernard Williams, for example, grounds the reasons to give special or preferential treatment to those who are in special relationships to us in the fact that our commitment to them is part of our ‘ground projects,’ which is constitutive of the agent’s personal identity (Williams 1981, 12-18). Susan Wolf, Sarah Stroud, and communitarian political philosophers can also be said to fall under this category (Wolf 1992, Stroud 2010). The distinctive feature of the projects view is that it

explains why we have reasons of partiality by referring to the agent's own self-constituting commitments.

The strength of the projects view lies in the fact that the *agent-relativity* of the reasons of partiality it generates can explain why we have reasons to give special treatment to our own intimates (i.e., those who are in special relationships to us) although other people have equal intrinsic value. That is, according to the projects view, I have reasons to treat my friend preferentially while you don't have such reasons because the commitment to my friend is constitutive of *my* personal identity but not of yours. Likewise, I do not have special reasons to treat your friend preferentially, even if my friend and your friend are equal in their objective or intrinsic value. If so, it seems that the projects view can give its own answer to the puzzle of partiality: "I have reasons to treat my intimates preferentially because the commitments to them are constitutive of *my* personal identity."

Despite its strength, the projects view has its own problems. First, the projects view fails to explain the normative force of special relationships, given that the commitments to one's own projects do not seem to have comparably binding. Special relationships seem to generate not only special reasons for preferential treatment but also certain kinds of special duties. For example, the fact that I am my parents' son seems to impose on me the duties, say, to take care of them in their old age. But our ground projects do not seem to generate such duties in a comparable way. As Keller says, "No matter how great your investment in a project, your investment itself cannot bind you morally to the project" (Keller 2013, 36-37).

The projects view also has difficulties in capturing the phenomenology of partiality. As Keller points out, the experience of being motivated by thoughts of your ground projects

is quite different from being motivated by the thoughts of your intimates. That is, when you think of your own projects, you think about *yourself*; but when you think of your intimates, you think about *them*. It seems to be too self-centered as moral psychology of a person who treats one's family or friends for their own sake. Such discordance between reasons and motives of partiality would render this view revisionist, which undermines its intuitive appeal.

The relationships view is different from the projects view in that it finds the source of our reasons of partiality in the relationship itself, rather than the agent's commitments. According to this view, "special relationships are intrinsically valuable, and the intrinsic value of special relationships explains why they generate reasons of partiality" (Keller 2013, 49).⁴ While proponents of this view ascribe different sorts of value to special relationships,⁵ they share the claim that the special relationships themselves hold a sort of value that is not derived from something else. They hold that we should value those relationships for their own sake, not because of the good things they provide. This view seems to avoid the main challenges against the projects view. First, the value of shared relationships may explain the binding force of reasons of partiality, since such value is to be shared by one's intimate, not just oneself. It can also avoid the charge of self-centeredness because it suggests that the agent focuses on the relationship itself rather than on one's own projects.

However, the relationships view is not without difficulties. One arises from the fact

⁴ This description only captures what Keller calls the value-based version of the relationships view. I focus on this version and do not discuss the *reasons-based* relationships view, according to which the fact that a certain special relationship holds between me and some other people itself can count as a reason for me to treat them preferentially. Proponents of this version, such as Diane Jeske and Thomas Scanlon, take facts about the special relationships as themselves fundamental reasons, which defy any further explanation by more basic terms (Jeske 2008, Scanlon 1998).

⁵ For example, Joseph Raz (1989): intrinsic value; Samuel Scheffler (2001, 2004): noninstrumental value; Niko Kolodny (2003): final value.

that this view assigns intrinsic value to the relationship itself. Even if we focus on minimally decent relationships that are not dysfunctional, it seems odd to attribute intrinsic value to the intimate relationship itself understood independently from how it contributes to its participants' flourishing.⁶ For example, it would be absurd to say that a parent-child relationship is valuable independently of how it makes the parent and the child happier. Moreover, if the relationship in the abstract is regarded as a bearer of intrinsic value, it seems hard to capture the phenomenology of partiality. This is because, as Keller suggests, the thoughts of our *relationships themselves* are not what characteristically motivate us when we act on the reasons of partiality. One who *is* motivated by the thoughts of relationships in the abstract would not be the one we want as our family or friend. I will discuss the difficulties the relationships view more in detail in the next section.

4. The Relational Activity View

4.1 Relational Activities and Intrinsic Value

Let me now introduce my *relational activity* view as an alternative to the views discussed above.⁷ This view understands virtuous activities among intimates as special cases of virtuous activities that are constitutive of human flourishing. Such activities as exchanging

⁶ Keller makes the criticism that dysfunctional relationships do not have intrinsic value (Keller 2013, 56). For brevity, I do not consider such relationships here.

⁷ My relational activity view focuses on the partiality in *intimate* relationships such as parent-child relationship or close friendship rather than partiality in general.

gifts or materials with love or having good conversations together are examples of relational activities. Virtuous relational activities are exercises or expressions of what I call *relational virtues*, by which I roughly mean the virtues required for each participant of intimate relationships such as filial piety and the virtue of friendship.⁸ I believe the relational activity view retains the strengths of the projects view and the relationships view while avoiding their main difficulties.

To begin with, like the projects view, the relational activity view holds that the reasons of partiality at least partly arise from the deepest commitment of the agent whose reasons they are, which is the commitment to living a flourishing human life. This captures the agent-relativity of reasons of partiality by explaining why I have reasons to act partially in favor of my intimates while strangers do not have comparable reasons to treat them in such a way. Unlike the projects view, however, the relational activity view can capture the normative force of special relationships. For example, parental virtue understood as the virtue of a good parent demands the agent to take good care of one's child. Thus, while engaging in a parental activity is the agent's own project, it is in an important sense what she is morally demanded to do in relation to her child. Also, my view does not fly in the face of the phenomenology of partiality, since it does not imply that the focus in benefiting the parent's child is mainly on the agent herself or the relationship itself. For it is constitutive of being a good parent to have genuine care and concern and pay enough attention to the child for her own sake. Therefore, it can avoid the charge of self-centeredness against the projects view.

Like the relationships view, the relational activity view regards intimate relationships

⁸ See [redacted for anonymity] for a more detailed account of relational virtue.

as a source of our reasons of partiality. However, my view is different from the relationships view in that it attributes intrinsic value to the *relational activities* between the participants, not to the relationships themselves. One challenge to the relationships view is that a relationship does not seem to have any value if it is deprived of all the extrinsic values it produces. I think we can avoid this problem if we hold that virtuous relational activities—the activities of virtues required in intimate relationships—are *constitutive* of human flourishing. In this picture, one's virtuous activities at least partly constitute of one's own flourishing. Activities of relational virtues, like those of non-relational virtues such as courage and temperance, are constitutive of human flourishing. It is not as if those activities are exploited as a means for something called 'well-being' or 'flourishing' which is external to those activities. These activities constitute the flourishing in question. Thus, according to the relational activity view, an intimate relationship owes its value to its being part of the relational activity. This is why it is hard to capture the value of an intimate relationship if one assumes the conceptual dichotomy between intrinsic value and values that contributes to it. We can avoid the challenges to the view that attributes that intrinsic value to the relationships themselves if we attribute intrinsic value to the relational activities as part of what constitutes the well-being or flourishing of the participants.

To better understand the values in virtuous relational activities, let me clarify my view on how values are transformed, delivered, and created within intimate relationships and how those relationships are related to human flourishing. A good is not the same good when it is given *through* intimate relationships since it becomes *special*. Suppose that Jayden gets a gorilla doll as a Christmas present from his father. It is more than just a toy that he can play with; it

is also an expression of his father's love for him. He spent a lot of time thinking about what Jayden would like and put efforts to work to afford the gorilla doll. Suppose, on the other hand, Alice gets the same gorilla doll from an anonymous benefactor and that she is as interested in having this type of gorilla doll as Jayden is. But she is not in any special relationship with the benefactor and does not even know who that benefactor is.⁹ While the same objects are distributed to Jayden and Alice, only Jayden gets it *through* a special relationship. In this sense, such a relationship can be understood as a sort of *specializer*, which make things exchanged special, rather than a bearer of intrinsic value in itself.

The love and concern involved in this case of present-giving are what make the present itself so special. It is about *how* to give the present, not just *what* to give. To Jayden, the gorilla doll that his father gave to him is never the same as other dolls. It can be even more valuable to him than other more expensive and fancier toys. And one who shares no loving relationship with anyone cannot get a present in this way. What is exchanged *through* a genuine loving relationship is given and taken *with love*. In a sense, this is how *love itself* is exchanged. Since love itself is not an object that can be exchanged visibly, love is exchanged through something more tangible such as gifts. While one may give a loaf of bread to a person in need of it, one cannot give love—especially special love as opposed to general love for humanity—to someone just because she needs it.

So understood, love cannot be exchanged among people in no intimate relationship with each other, as in the case of Alice and her anonymous benefactor. Similarly, no stranger's

⁹ I'm assuming here that the benefactor is not someone like 'Daddy-long-legs,' in that he or she also does not know who the beneficiary of the gift will be.

visit can have the same meaning to you as your dear friend's visit. Thus, intimate relationships transform the goods exchanged through those relationships into the kind of goods that are hardly found anywhere else. No matter how valuable a certain good is, independently considered, it cannot simply replace the good exchanged through an intimate relationship with love. The exchange of goods among intimates in this way constitutes virtuous relational activities and thus become special by being part of such activities.

Let me emphasize how this understanding of the value in intimate relationships can avoid the relationships view's difficulties. On the one hand, unlike what the relationships view holds, it would be hard to say intimate relationships themselves are *intrinsically* valuable, since it may not be valuable when it is stripped of its function of transforming goods into a special kind. In this sense, the value of intimate relationships relies on the goods exchanged through such relationships and the relational activities that involve those goods. So it may be right to say that its value is derived from other more fundamental values. On the other hand, however, it would be a mistake to say that intimate relationships are mere *means* for the flourishing of those involved in them. I believe the view that intimate relationships have value in themselves is motivated by the thought that it is inappropriate to see them as mere means to other things that are external to the relationships themselves. For example, if I take such relationships merely as an instrument for my own flourishing, the way I take the relationships does not seem to manifest a relationally virtuous person's attitude.

Note that my view is different from Keller's view on the special goods of a special relationship. According to him, the goods of parenting or those of having a healthy relationship with a parent are special in that they are "unique in kind, meaning that there are

no other sources, or not many easily accessible other sources, from which they can be gained” (Keller 2006, 265). Thus, he says, two kinds of goods can come from a healthy parent-child relationship: “generic goods, which could in principle be received from anyone, and special goods, which the parent can receive from no one (or almost no one) but the child, or the child can receive from no one (or almost no one) but the parent” (Keller 2006, 266). On this taxonomy, the examples of generic goods include medical care, financial support, or physical help, since these goods can also be provided by someone other than your parent or child. In contrast, special goods in a parent-child relationship are something you can receive (almost) exclusively from your parent or child. For example, special goods you can get from your child include “the good of having your child, the one you raised, love and care about, make an effort to keep in touch. Similarly, there is, beyond the good of having people around for Christmas, the good of having your children around for Christmas” (Keller 2006, 266). According to him, having someone who has such a special concern for your well-being and needs is a good that is special to the parent-child relationship, since it occurs naturally within such a relationship while it is hardly found in other relationships.

But Keller’s view does not clearly explicate how the *specialness* of the special goods is supposed to be related to the relationship in question. While I agree that the goods exchanged in a healthy parent-child relationship are *special* in the sense that there hardly is any other kind of source for such goods, the way he distinguishes special from generic goods seems misleading. In my view, what he calls ‘special goods’ are special not because they themselves form a distinctive category of goods, but because they are exchanged *within a special relationship*. In other words, the special goods are special not because it happens to be such

that only the child is in a position to provide certain goods that could have been provided by other people; rather, they are special because they constitute the virtuous relational activities between the intimates. In principle, for example, a sick old lady can receive physical care from professional caregivers, not just from her own child. However, even if the treatments and materials—which Keller would describe as *generic* goods—the caregiver and her child provide to the lady by the caregiver and the son are the same, those that are provided by her own child is something *special* to her. That is, the fact that they are given by the child makes a difference and renders it hardly replaceable. The sources of the specialness are the history of their relationship and the attitude the child has when giving the care. In this sense, the medical treatment itself is not special goods even if it happens so that the child is the only one who is in a position to provide it to her parents.

4.2. The Reflexive Structure in Intimate Relationships

I believe we can find another key to solving the puzzle of partiality if we take a closer look at how self-regarding and other-regarding interests are woven together in intimate relationships. The boundary between self and other is blurred in such relationships, which is why any account of partiality that focuses excessively on either the agent or her intimate as individuals are likely to fail. Anyone who is in a genuine intimate relationship would take the good of one's intimate as *part of one's own good*. To put it in another way, her attitude is like, "What is good for you is also good for me" or "Making you happy makes me happy." This aspect is a key observation of rational egoists like David Brink, who attempts to ground

reasons to care for others by claiming that the good of others can be partly constitutive of the agent's own care. The version of rational egoism that Brink introduces attempts to justify "the sort of other-regarding concern characteristic of morality by arguing that the good of others is *part* of the agent's own good in the appropriate way" (Brink 1990, 342). Brink illustrates this view with the example of a parent who cares about her child:

Because her child's good is *part of her good*, she will be concerned about how her child fares after her death and will have reason to make sacrifices before her death so that her child will fare better. And because the child's good is part of hers, these sacrifices will not be uncompensated, and the egoist can justify them. And these sacrifices and other forms of concern further cement the psychological continuity between parent and child and so reinforce the *extension of the parent's interests through the child's welfare*. (Brink 1990, 352; emphasis added)

The way this view tries to integrate self-regarding and other-regarding concerns may sound similar to my approach. However, my view is different from Brink's rational egoism in important ways. First, his rational egoism is discussed as a way of explaining how the demand of *morality in general*—namely, how we can make sense of benefiting others and refraining from harming them given our propensity to prioritize our own self-interests. In contrast, my relational activity view is aimed at explaining the reasons of *partiality*, which justifies our being partial or preferential to our intimates such as family and friends. While rational egoism may find the rational ground of morality in the agent's altruistic desire for benefiting other people, it does not justify partiality for some over others. This is because the altruistic desire

to benefit someone else for her own sake is found not only in the heart of a generally benevolent person but also in the heart of a person who genuinely cares about her intimates. For this reason, even if rational egoism can offer a rational ground of morality for an egoistic person, it does not explain why it is at least permissible for us to prioritize our intimates over strangers. Nor does the mere psychological fact that the agent prefers to benefit her intimate over a stranger seem to generate the reasons of partiality by itself.

As Brink himself admits, this version of rational egoism fails as an account of morality in general, which “requires that I benefit and be concerned about a wider net of people than my friends and family” (Brink 1990, 357). However, even as a theory of partiality, rational egoism still has problems. It is because it would be too self-centered if the reason we should treat our intimates preferentially is that it is necessary for our own well-being. Consider a well-known argument that altruism is reduced to egoism if one enjoys altruistic activities too much. Suppose that Harold, a rich philanthropist, enjoys donating money to Oxfam. Whenever he donates, he feels very good about himself. But the problem is that he does not even care who is benefited by the money he gives. In this case, the primary reason for his donating is egoistic rather than altruistic.

However, my relational activity view offers more than such self-regarding reasons for preferential behaviors. It finds another aspect of intimate relationships that renders the relational activities more valuable, which is the fact that your intimate also wants you to satisfy your interests. Because your intimate wants you to be happier by making her happier, your satisfying your interests by benefiting her also satisfies *her* interests. In a healthy reciprocal intimate relationship, your well-being is at least partially constitutive of your

intimate's well-being and vice versa. On my view, there is some value added by the fact that the beneficiary, too, wants the benefactor to be benefited by benefiting the beneficiary.

We may call this characteristic structure found in an intimate relationship the *reflexive structure* of concern for one's intimate's well-being. This structure explains the added value of relational activities among intimates. While making my wife happy makes me happy, my wife herself, who is the beneficiary of my activities, would also want me to feel that way as well. That is, as a person who shares a loving intimate relationship with me, as opposed to a simple give-and-take relationship or a one-sided loving relationship, she would rather be disappointed if she discovers that my contributing to her well-being is not part of my self-interest at the same time. Thus, again, the fact that I enjoy making her happy is part of what makes her happier. In other words, in such a reciprocal intimate relationship, it is desirable, if not required, that my *other-regarding* activities toward my intimate are at least *partly self-regarding* at the same time. In this sense, what solves the problem of partiality is not just the fact that the agent's benefiting the individual in question is part of her own interests but also that the *recipient* of such altruistic acts wants the agent to be happier through such acts. It is because this other-regarding aspect of relational activities further justifies an agent's treating her intimate preferentially.

I think it reveals a very important feature constituting desirable intimate relationships. They are not relationships in which each participant's interests are to be considered separately; for intimates, the interest of each is part of that of the other. That is, insofar as the intimate relationship maintains, one's own interests affect the others, so self-interests and those of others are not sharply divided. For this reason, it is hard to draw a clear line between self-

regarding and other-regarding concerns in an intimate relationship. One important sort of virtuous activity that is constitutive of human flourishing would be one that unifies self-regarding and other-regarding in this way: virtuous relational activities.

I believe this reflexive structure can also overcome the limitations of John Cottingham's principle of *philophilic* partialism, which asserts that "in deciding whether to promote the interests of X or Y, I may legitimately assign a certain moral weight to the fact that X is *my* loved-one" (Cottingham 1986, 368). He emphasizes that love, while being genuinely altruistic, has "a non-eliminably self-referential aspect" (Cottingham 1986, 369). Then, he says, insofar as personal relationships based on love are crucial for a good human life, partiality to loved ones should claim its place in our moral consideration. I find this principle touches on an important truth of partiality. Given that the partiality involved in personal relationships is something in between simple altruism and simple selfishness, emphasis on it can draw our attention to the unique moral status of personal relationships. He says, "To love someone is to desire his/her happiness *for its own sake*, and in this sense the emotion involved is genuinely altruistic" (Cottingham 1986, 368).

However, the fact that a person's desire for her intimate's well-being for the intimate's own sake is not sufficient to ground the reasons of partiality. For it still relies on the agent's own preferences or special attachments to the intimate. On the one hand, if altruism is doing all the work, it does not explain why altruistic actions for this particular individual—i.e., one's intimate—are more morally significant than those for other individuals, who are supposed to have equal moral worth. On the other, if the agent's own preferences or attachments alone explain the special value in activities between intimates, it seems hard to avoid the criticism

that it is too self-centered or lacks normative justification. As I said, I believe the value of the activities with one's intimates best explains the reasons of partiality. I think the reflexive structure can do justice to this issue by showing how the activities among intimates defy the dichotomy between self and other.

One might wonder if my relational activity view can also make sense of our partiality toward people in a larger circle, such as associates or compatriots. I am certainly aware that partiality is often taken to work as a set of concentric circles, the widest circle of which is often taken to be the citizens who share one's political community. Although I am open to the possibility that what I say about the partiality in intimate relationships may work for partiality in such broader relationships, I see some important differences between, say, family relationships and civic relationships. A notable difference is that co-citizens are not likely to show the reflexive structure I described above and many of them do not even know each other personally. Thus, at least some features that ground the reasons of partiality in my view may not apply to the case of broader civic relationships. It would be a worthwhile future research project to explore the similarities and differences between the partiality in an intimate relationship and that in a broader one.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the previous attempts to solve the puzzle of partiality and proposed my relational activity view as an alternative theory, suggesting a new way of understanding intimate relationships and their value. I believe the main reason why partiality

is puzzling for many moral philosophers is that they tend to focus on the individual themselves either as an agent or a recipient of preferential treatments. However, there are many aspects of human life that we cannot fully understand unless we overcome such individualism and take a closer look at the chemical reactions in the relational activities between people who are near and dear to each other.

Intimate relationships are crucial for human flourishing. These relationships shape our lives as individuals and serve as a source of distinctive social value. Despite their importance, they have not been adequately addressed by moral philosophers, partly because they do not fall neatly under the timeworn dichotomy between self and other. On the one hand, some of our intimates are so close that we even identify ourselves with them in some sense, and thus their happiness serves as a great source of our own happiness. On the other, they are 'others' in a strict sense, and thus making them happy seems to fall under the category of morality. In this sense, intimate relationships have been a topic in a 'grey area' elusive to those who base their view on this old dichotomy. I hope my relational activity view can serve as a useful conceptual tool to explore this grey area of partiality.

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