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Morality and Reasonable Partiality*

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I. Introduction

What is the relation between morality and partiality? Can the kind of partiality that matters to us be accommodated within moral thought, or are morality and partiality rival sources of normative considerations? These are questions that moral philosophy has struggled with in recent decades.¹ They may not have much intuitive resonance, because the term ‘partiality’ is not used much in everyday discourse. The June 2005 draft revision of the online *OED* offers two primary definitions of the word. The first definition is ‘[u]nfair or undue favouring of one party or side in a debate, dispute, etc.; bias, prejudice; an instance of this.’ The second definition is ‘[p]reference for or favourable disposition towards a particular person or thing; fondness; predilection; particular affection; an instance of this.’² To someone unfamiliar

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¹ See, for example, David Archard, ‘Moral Partiality’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1995), pp. 129–41; Marcia Baron, ‘Impartiality and Friendship’, *Ethics* 101 (1991), pp. 836–57; Lawrence Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); John Cottingham, ‘Ethics and Impartiality’, *Philosophical Studies* 43 (1983), pp. 83–99, and ‘Partiality, Favouritism, and Morality’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1986), pp. 357–73; Owen Flanagan and Jonathan Adler, ‘Impartiality and Particularity’, *Social Research* 50 (1983), pp. 576–96; Marilyn Friedman, ‘The Impracticality of Impartiality’, *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989), pp. 645–56, and ‘The Practice of Partiality’, *Ethics* 101 (1991), pp. 818–35; Barbara Herman, ‘Integrity and Impartiality’, *The Monist* 66 (1983), pp. 233–50; Diane Jeske, ‘Friendship, Virtue, and Impartiality’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LVII (1997), pp. 51–72; Troy Jollimore, ‘Friendship Without Partiality?’ *Ratio* 13 (2000), pp. 69–82; John Kekes, ‘Morality and Impartiality’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1981), pp. 295–303; Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); David Velleman, ‘Love as a Moral Emotion’, *Ethics* 109 (1999), pp. 338–74; Bernard Williams, ‘Persons, Character, and Morality’, in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1–19; and Susan Wolf, ‘Morality and Partiality’, *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992), pp. 243–59.

² <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50172138> (last accessed 15 June 2006).

with debates in moral philosophy over the last quarter century, these definitions might seem to give us all the tools we need to answer the question of whether morality and partiality are compatible with one another. If, by ‘partiality’, we mean bias or prejudice, then surely morality and partiality are not compatible, for bias and prejudice are antithetical to the kind of *impartiality* that is a fundamental feature of moral thought. But if, on the other hand, what we mean by ‘partiality’ is a preference or fondness or affection for a particular person, then surely morality and partiality are compatible. Notwithstanding the importance that it assigns to impartiality in certain contexts, morality cannot possibly condemn our particular preferences and affections for one another.

Like many others who have written on these topics, I believe that this simple, commonsensical answer is basically correct. Yet the second half of the answer has been the subject of a surprising degree of controversy in recent moral philosophy. It has been challenged, from the one side, by defenders of morality—and especially by defenders of certain moral theories—who see our particular affections and preferences for one another as being in serious tension with the forms of impartiality and universality that are essential to morality. The most extreme versions of this challenge construe our particular affections and preferences as tantamount to forms of bias or prejudice; in effect, they see partiality in the second of the *OED*’s senses as tantamount to partiality in the first sense. At the same time, the second half of the commonsensical answer has also been challenged by critics of morality, who believe that, in consequence of its commitments to impartiality and universality, morality cannot do justice to the role in our lives of particular attachments and affections.

The fact that the relation between morality and partiality is seen as problematic testifies in part to the influence within modern moral philosophy of highly universalistic moral theories, especially consequentialist and Kantian theories, which have seemed to many of their supporters, and to at least as many of their critics, to make the relation between moral norms and particularistic loyalties and attachments appear problematic to one degree or another. More generally, and more speculatively, it is perhaps not surprising that, in a world where rapidly intensifying processes of global integration coexist uneasily and at times explosively with a range of identity-based social and political movements, there should be a perceived need, both within philosophy and outside of it, to revisit the ancient issue of universalism and particularism in ethics.

As I said, the commonsense view of the relation between morality and partiality seems to me largely correct, but of course I have given only a crude statement of that view. And then there is the question of how to argue for it, since there are some who are not impressed by the authority of common

sense, and still others who do not find the view commonsensical at all. In this essay, I cannot hope to discuss all of the relevant issues. What I shall try to do is to extend a line of argument I have developed elsewhere that bears on some of those issues. The general aim of this line of thought is to establish that what I shall call ‘reasons of partiality’ are inevitable concomitants of certain of the most basic forms of human valuing. This means that, for human beings as creatures with values, the normative force of certain forms of partiality is nearly unavoidable. If that is right, then for morality to reject partiality in a general or systematic way would be for it to set itself against our nature as valuing creatures. And that, I believe, would make morality an incoherent enterprise. My ultimate conclusion is that any coherent morality will make room for partiality, not merely in the sense that it will permit or require partial behaviour in some circumstances, but also in the sense that it will treat reasons of partiality as having direct moral significance.

These are ambitious claims. I shall not be able to give anything approaching a complete defence of them here. But I hope to take some steps toward such a defence. The structure of this chapter will be as follows. In the next section, I shall make some brief preliminary points about the nature and significance of the notion of valuing. In Section 3, I shall summarize arguments I have given elsewhere about the reason-giving status of personal projects and interpersonal relationships. Projects and relationships are among the most fundamental categories of human value, and to value a project or relationship is to see oneself as having reasons for action of a distinctive kind: ‘project-dependent reasons’ in the one case, and ‘relationship-dependent reasons’ in the other. In a sense to be specified, these reasons amount to ‘reasons of partiality’. In Section 4, I shall extend this line of thought by introducing another category of reasons of partiality, which I shall call ‘membership-dependent reasons.’ In Section 5, I shall attempt to account for an asymmetry between the normative force of project-dependent reasons, on the one hand, and relationship-dependent and membership-dependent reasons, on the other. In the sixth and longest section, I shall consider the proposal, which is implicit in the work of a number of philosophers, that morality itself may be interpreted on the model of relationship-dependent reasons and membership-dependent reasons. This proposal suggests a radical extension of the line of argument developed in earlier sections of the chapter, and has the potential to cast debates about morality and partiality in a new light. It implies that the very impartiality that we rightly see as a defining feature of morality has its roots in the same structures of normativity that give rise to legitimate reasons of partiality. More generally, it supports a ‘relational’ conception of morality—a conception that stands in contrast to the kind of impersonality associated with consequentialist

conceptions. I shall discuss several different versions of the proposal that moral reasons can be interpreted on the model of relationship-dependent reasons. I shall articulate a number of questions and reservations about each of these versions, in the hope of identifying some of the issues that need to be addressed if some version of the proposal is ultimately to be vindicated. In Section 7, I shall consider some general issues bearing on the prospects for a compelling relational view of morality. Finally, in Section 8, I shall explain how, in the absence of a fully satisfactory relational account, I see my discussion of project-dependent, relationship-dependent, and membership-dependent reasons as bearing on the issue of morality and partiality. As I have indicated, my claim will be, not merely that morality permits or requires partial behaviour in some circumstances, but, in addition, that morality itself actually incorporates reasons of partiality. By this I mean that such reasons bear directly on the rightness or wrongness of actions.

2. Valuing

Much of the distinctiveness and appeal of utilitarianism derives from the fact that it gives priority to the good over the right, or to the evaluative over the normative. In the utilitarian view, moral norms that do not serve to advance the human good are to that extent pointless or arbitrary or worse: this is the meaning of the famous charge of ‘rule-worship’.³ To insist on obedience to a set of rules, however securely entrenched in custom and tradition they may be, is irrational and inhumane if it does not serve to secure for people the kinds of lives that they aspire to lead. Rules lack any legitimate purpose or normative significance, the utilitarian claims, if they do not serve to promote human well-being: if they fail to maximize value.

One response to utilitarianism is to point out that ‘value’ is a verb as well as a noun. We can talk about value or values, but we can also talk about what *we value*. In asserting that right acts are those that maximize aggregate value, utilitarianism in effect privileges the noun over the verb. But the general idea that the evaluative has priority over the normative does not by itself dictate this choice. Since it is not obvious that the maximization of aggregate value coincides with what we do in fact value, it is reasonable to ask about the relation between these two notions. Is the maximization of aggregate value

³ See J. J. C. Smart, ‘An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics’, in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. J. J. C. Smart and B. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 3–74, at p. 10.

itself something that we do or should value? Is it at least compatible with what we value? Positive answers cannot be ruled out *a priori*, but to make such answers compelling would require sustained attention to questions about the nature of valuing, and these are questions that utilitarianism, with its emphasis on maximizing ‘the good’, has tended to neglect. If utilitarianism says that the right thing to do is at all times to maximize aggregate value, and if doing this is incompatible with what people actually—and not unreasonably—value, then utilitarianism may itself be vulnerable to a version of the charge of ‘rule-worship’. For, on these assumptions, the norm of rightness on which utilitarianism insists is disconnected from basic human concerns, from what people themselves prize or cherish. And if that is so, then the utilitarian’s allegiance to the norm may begin to look like a case of venerating the rule for its own sake, in isolation from any contribution it may make to the fulfilment of basic human purposes. It may begin to look, in other words, like an instance of the dreaded rule-worship.

Of course, one need not be a utilitarian for questions about the nature of valuing to be significant. Indeed, my position will be that questions about the nature of valuing lead us away from utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism. To that extent, I am in agreement with the position defended by Thomas Scanlon in chapter 2 of *What We Owe to Each Other*.⁴ But Scanlon is also interested in the nature of valuing because he regards it as a ‘helpful stepping-stone’⁵ in the development of his ‘buck-passing account’ of goodness and value. By contrast, I shall not be presenting any account of goodness—or of ‘value as a noun’—and, as far as I can see, my arguments are neutral with respect to the truth or falsity of the buck-passing account.

I take valuing in general to comprise a complex syndrome of dispositions and attitudes. These include dispositions to treat certain characteristic types of consideration as reasons for action. They also include certain characteristic types of belief and susceptibility to a wide range of emotions. For the purposes of the arguments I shall be developing in this chapter, the connection between valuing and the perception of reasons for action is particularly important. However, the role of the emotions is also important and must not be overlooked. To value something is in part to be susceptible to a wide range of emotions, depending on the circumstances and on the nature of the thing that is valued. We learn what people value by attending not merely to what they *say* they value but also to the emotions they say they experience in different circumstances. Someone

⁴ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

⁵ *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 95.

who values a personal project, for example, may feel anxious about whether the project will be successful, frustrated if it encounters obstacles, depressed at not having enough time to devote to it, ambivalent if forced to choose between it and other valued pursuits, defensive if other people criticize it or regard it as unworthy, exhilarated if the project goes better than expected, and crushed or empty if it fails.⁶ We expect someone who values a project to be vulnerable to emotions of these types. A person may sincerely profess to value something, but if he does not, in the relevant contexts, experience any of the emotions characteristically associated with valuing something of that kind, then we may come to doubt that he really does value it, and upon reflection he may himself come to doubt it as well.

What is involved in valuing a particular thing will depend to some extent on the type of thing that it is. For example, certain emotions presuppose that the object of the emotion has the capacity to recognize and to respond to reasons. Valuing one's relationship with another person involves a susceptibility to experiencing towards that person emotions that carry this presupposition. By contrast, valuing an inanimate object—a work of art, say, or a beautiful rock formation—does not. This illustrates the point that what it is to value something is conditioned by the nature of the object that is valued. It follows that any account of valuing *in general* must remain highly abstract and limited. To make further progress in understanding what is involved in valuing, we need to proceed in a more piecemeal way by reflecting on the specific kinds of things that people value. That will be how I proceed in this chapter. I shall ask: what is involved in valuing a personal project? What is involved in valuing a personal relationship? What is involved in valuing one's membership in a group, community, or association?

3. Relationships and Projects

In a series of earlier essays, I have argued that to value one's relationship with another person non-instrumentally is, in part, to see that person's needs, interests, and desires as providing one, in contexts that may vary depending on the nature of the relationship, with reasons for action, reasons that one

⁶ This sentence is taken, with slight alterations, from my essay 'Projects, Relationships, and Reasons', in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, ed. R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 247–69, at pp. 253–4. Elizabeth Anderson makes a very similar point in her *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 11.

would not have had in the absence of the relationship.⁷ Of course, the needs and interests of strangers also give one reasons for action. The fact that I lack a relationship with you does not mean that I never have reason to take your interests into account or to act on your behalf. But if I do have a relationship with you, and if I attach non-instrumental value to that relationship, then I shall be disposed to see your needs, interests, and desires as providing me, in contexts of various kinds, with reasons that I would not otherwise have had, and with which the needs, interests, and desires of other people do not provide me. This means that I shall see myself both as having reasons to do things on your behalf that I have no comparable reason to do for others, and as having reason to give your interests priority over theirs in at least some cases of conflict. This is part of what valuing one's relationships involves. If there are no contexts whatsoever in which I would see your needs and interests as giving me reasons of this kind, then it makes no sense to say that I value my relationship with you, even if I profess to do so. Of course, not all of your needs, interests, and desires give me these *relationship-dependent reasons*, and even those that do may at times be silenced or outweighed or overridden by other considerations. Still, if I value my relationship with you non-instrumentally, then I shall treat that relationship as a source of reasons that I would not otherwise have. To value one's relationships is to treat them as reason-giving.

This does not mean that to value a personal relationship is to regard the person with whom one has the relationship as more valuable than other people, or to regard the relationship itself as more valuable than other people's relationships. On the contrary, valuing one's relationships is fully compatible with a recognition of the equal worth of persons and with a recognition that other people have relationships that are just as valuable as one's own. Yet, at the same time, there is more to valuing one's relationships than simply believing that they are instances of valuable types of relationship. To value one's relationships is not to regard them as more valuable than other people's relationships, but neither is it merely to believe that they are valuable relationships that happen to be one's own. To value one's relationships is also to see them as a distinctive source of reasons. It is, in other words, for the needs, desires, and interests of the people with whom one has valued relationships to present themselves as having deliberative significance, in ways that the needs and interests of other people do not.

⁷ The relevant essays are: 'Relationships and Responsibilities', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26 (1997), pp. 189–209, reprinted in *Boundaries and Allegiances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 97–110; 'Conceptions of Cosmopolitanism', *Utilitas* 11 (1999), pp. 255–76, reprinted in *Boundaries and Allegiances*, pp. 111–30; and 'Projects, Relationships, and Reasons'. My discussion in this section draws on these earlier essays.

There are clear parallels between what is involved in valuing a personal relationship and what is involved in valuing a personal project. Valuing a personal project, like valuing a personal relationship, involves seeing it as reason-giving. In other words, to value a project of one's own is, among other things, to see it as giving one reasons for action in a way that other people's projects do not, and in a way that other comparably valuable activities in which one might engage do not. Again, this does not mean that one sees one's projects as being more valuable than anybody else's projects or than any other activity in which one might engage. Nor does it mean that one's *project-dependent* reasons always take priority over other reasons. Still, if I value my projects non-instrumentally, then I shall see them as a distinctive source of reasons for action, and there will be contexts in which I see myself as having reasons to pursue those projects even though doing so means passing up opportunities to engage in other equally valuable activities or to assist other people with their equally valuable projects. This is simply what valuing one's personal projects non-instrumentally involves. If I do not see myself as having any more reason to attend to my own projects and goals than I do to engage in other activities or to attend to the projects and goals of other people, then it no longer makes sense to think of them as my projects and goals at all, still less to think that I value them non-instrumentally.

There are few things to which people attach greater value than their personal projects and interpersonal relationships. I take this claim to be uncontroversial. Our projects and relationships are among the primary things that we value. They give purpose and shape to our lives. Of course, particular projects and relationships are open to criticism of various kinds. A project may be pointless, misguided, shallow, corrupt, or evil. A relationship may be unhealthy or exploitative or oppressive. The fact that someone values a particular project or relationship does not mean that it is worth valuing. Yet any suggestion that people should in general cease to value their personal projects and relationships would be difficult to take seriously. From what vantage point might such a claim be put forward? And on what authority might one presume to tell people that they should abandon these basic categories of human value? There are religious ideals that hold that one should strive to detach oneself from worldly concerns and to transcend the self altogether. Whatever the attractions of these ideals, they do not provide grounds for criticizing the particular categories of value we are discussing. They aspire to something more radical: a rejection of all valuing, indeed a rejection of the self as normally understood. I won't engage with these ideals here, since debates about morality and partiality normally take it for granted that we are dealing with human beings as creatures with values who have distinct identities as persons. So long as we proceed on that

assumption, I see little basis for any credible argument to the effect that people should cease to value their projects and relationships.

If the arguments I have been sketching are correct, this means that partiality is a deeply entrenched feature of human valuing. To value one's projects and relationships is to see them as sources of reasons for action in a way that other people's projects and relationships are not. Personal projects and relationships by their nature define forms of reasonable partiality, partiality not merely in our preferences or affections but in the reasons that flow from some of our most basic values. To be sure, I have so far argued only that valuing one's projects and relationships involves *seeing them as* sources of reasons. I have not argued that these 'reasons of partiality' really exist. Yet if there is no general ground for insisting that we are mistaken in valuing our projects and relationships, then neither is there any ground for denying the validity of project-dependent and relationship-dependent reasons as a class. By virtue of what we value, we see ourselves as having reasons of these types. We may on occasion value things that shouldn't be valued, and so we may on occasion see ourselves as having reasons that we do not have. But to say that we are fallible is not to say that we are systematically misguided. Absent any reason for repudiating our valuation of projects and relationships as a class, there is no basis for denying that we have project-dependent and relationship-dependent reasons at all. Contrapositively, scepticism about such reasons is tantamount to the rejection of fundamental categories of human valuation.

4. Membership-dependent Reasons

In addition to valuing their personal projects and interpersonal relationships, people value their membership in groups and associations of various kinds. They value group membership even when the groups in question are large enough that there is no prospect of knowing individually, let alone having a personal relationship with, each of the other members. It is possible, of course, to value one's membership in a group in a purely instrumental way, as a means of achieving one's long-term goals or obtaining the discrete benefits that group membership makes available. For example, an ambitious white-collar worker may apply for membership in an exclusive club in the hope that it will enhance his career. Or, again, one may value one's membership in the American Association of Retired People solely because AARP members receive a discount on the purchase of prescription drugs. Here it is perfectly imaginable that one might receive such a discount without belonging to the

AARP, and if one could, then, by hypothesis, one would see no loss in surrendering one's membership and obtaining the discount in other ways.

Often, however, people value their membership in groups non-instrumentally. They find membership rewarding in its own right. Even in such cases, there may seem to be a sense in which they can be said to value membership for the sake of the benefits it provides. Perhaps, for example, one values one's membership in a particular community because of the bonds of trust and solidarity that members share. However, this is merely a way of characterizing the respects in which membership in the group is a good. It is not a specification of a good that is independent of membership and to which membership is a means. In other words, the 'benefits' mentioned are not separable even in principle from one's membership; one could not, even in principle, receive them without belonging to this community. One might, of course, come to develop bonds of trust in some other community, but the bonds that unite members of *this* community have a distinctive character and are not fungible. If one ceased to be a member of the community, one would experience a sense of loss even if one were assured that one would be welcomed into some other community. Since one cannot make sense of the idea that one might obtain the 'benefits' of belonging to this particular community without actually belonging to this particular community, it would be wrong to say that one values one's membership only as a means of obtaining those benefits. In valuing the benefits one is valuing one's membership.

It is not surprising that people should value group membership. Human beings are social creatures, and we express our social natures through participation in a rich variety of formal and informal groups, associations, and organizations. This is one of the basic ways in which we find fulfilment. So it is not at all surprising that we should value our membership in groups. This form of valuation is firmly rooted in our nature as social creatures. What is involved in valuing non-instrumentally one's membership in a group or association? As with projects and relationships, valuing one's membership in a group or association is in part a matter of seeing it as reason-giving, as a source of what I shall call *membership-dependent reasons*. In general, membership-dependent reasons are reasons to do one's share, as defined by the norms and ideals of the group itself, to help sustain it and contribute to its purposes. Most groups and associations have formal or informal ways of communicating what is expected of individual members. To value one's membership in a group or association is, in part, to see these expectations as presenting one with reasons for action in a way that the expectations of other worthy groups do not. One need not believe that the group to which one belongs is the most valuable group of its kind, still less that it is the most valuable group of any kind,

in order for its expectations to be perceived as presenting one with reasons for action in a way that other groups' expectations do not. Nor need one believe that fulfilling the group's expectations will have better overall results, in the consequentialist sense, than engaging in other valuable activities would. The capacity of my membership in a group to provide me with reasons for action is not dependent on a conviction that the group is worthier than other groups or that fulfilling its expectations is the most valuable thing I could do. Of course, my membership-dependent reasons may in various contexts be overridden or outweighed or silenced by reasons of other kinds. And if an otherwise worthy group articulates expectations in a given case that strike me as foolhardy or unjust, then I may not see myself as having any reason to fulfil those expectations. But if I never see myself as having any more reason to respond to the group's expectations than I do to engage in other valuable activities, then it no longer makes sense to suppose that I value my membership in the group non-instrumentally.

If these arguments are correct, then, like personal projects and relationships, group membership defines a form of reasonable partiality, partiality in the reasons that flow from deeply entrenched categories of human valuation. If there is no ground for insisting that we are mistaken in valuing group membership in general, then neither is there any ground for denying the validity of membership-dependent reasons as a class. By virtue of what we value, we see ourselves as having reasons of these types. To be sure, some groups are evil or corrupt, and if we value our membership in such a group we may see ourselves as having reasons that we do not really have. As with projects and relationships, however, to say that we are fallible is not to say that we are systematically misguided. Absent any reason for repudiating our valuation of group membership in general, there is no basis for denying that we have membership-dependent reasons at all. Contrapositively, scepticism about such reasons is tantamount to rejecting a fundamental category of human valuation.

5. The Asymmetry between Projects and Relationships

Despite the strong parallels between project-dependent reasons and relationship dependent reasons, there is, as I've noted elsewhere,⁸ an important asymmetry between them. Oversimplifying slightly, we may characterize the asymmetry

⁸ In 'Projects, Relationships, and Reasons'.

as follows. We normally suppose that many of our relationship-dependent reasons are reasons on which we are required or obligated to act. It is not merely that we have reasons to attend to the needs of, say, our children or elderly parents, but that we have obligations to do so. By contrast, even when we have strong project-dependent reasons, we do not normally suppose that we are obligated or required to act on them. I may have strong reasons to complete my novel, but if I fail to do so I shall not have violated any obligation or deontic requirement. And this remains the case even though these reasons may strike me with the force of practical necessity; prospectively I may say that I ‘have to’ finish my novel or that I simply ‘must’ do so. This means that there are really two puzzles to be addressed. One puzzle is how to account for the asymmetry between project-dependent and relationship-dependent reasons. But in order to address that puzzle, we need to characterize more clearly the content of the asymmetry. If reasons of both kinds may strike us with the force of practical necessity—as reasons on which we ‘must’ act—then how can it also be true that we are ‘required’ or ‘obligated’ to act on reasons of one kind but not the other?

The key to solving both puzzles lies in the observation that many relationship-dependent reasons are reasons that one lacks the authority to disregard, not merely in the sense that the reasons may be compelling or rationally decisive, but in the sense that there are specific people who are entitled to complain if one neglects those reasons. If I fail to act on compelling relationship-dependent reasons to attend to my son’s needs, then, other things equal, I have wronged him and he has a legitimate complaint against me. But if I fail to act on compelling project-dependent reasons to finish my novel, I have wronged no one and no one is in a privileged position to complain.⁹ This gives content to the claim that, despite the fact that both relationship-dependent reasons and project-dependent reasons may strike us with the force of practical necessity, we are ‘required’ or ‘obligated’ to act on the former but not on the latter.

But why is someone entitled to complain in the one case but not in the other? Why is it the case that, if I neglect compelling relationship-dependent reasons to attend to my son’s needs, then I shall have wronged him, whereas, if I neglect compelling project-dependent reasons to finish my novel, then I shall not have wronged anyone? It would, of course, be circular to reply

⁹ Compare the view that Milan Kundera attributes to Stravinsky: ‘[W]hat an author creates doesn’t belong to his papa, his mama, his nation, or to mankind; it belongs to no one but himself; he can publish it when he wants and if he wants; he can change it, revise it, lengthen it, shorten it, throw it in the toilet and flush it down without the slightest obligation to explain himself to anybody at all’ (M. Kundera, ‘What is a Novelist?’ *The New Yorker* (9 October 2006), pp. 40–5, at p. 44).

that, in the first case, I lack the authority to disregard the reasons in question, whereas in the second case I retain that authority. Nor will it do to say that, in the first case, my failure will affect my son adversely, while in the second case my failure will have adverse effects on nobody but myself. One's failure to act on one's project-dependent reasons may well have adverse effects on other people. My failure to complete my novel may disappoint admirers of my fiction. My failure to complete the design for a new product may deprive others of its benefits. My failure to open the small business I had dreamed about may deprive the local economy of a badly needed boost. My failure to complete my medical studies may mean that someone does not receive medical care that is as good as the care I would have provided.

A more promising answer would proceed along the following lines.¹⁰ To value our relationships is to see them as sources of reasons. In so far as we are correct to value our relationships—insofar as our relationships are *valuable*—they are indeed sources of reasons. So if we ask why the needs, interests, and desires of people with whom we have valuable relationships give us reasons for action, the answer lies in the fact that we have those relationships with them. A valuable relationship transforms the needs and desires of the participants into reasons for each to act on behalf of the other in suitable contexts. At the same time, it gives each of them reasons to form certain normative expectations of the other, and to complain if these expectations are not met.¹¹ In particular, it gives each of them reason to expect that the other will act on his or her behalf in suitable contexts. These two sets of reasons—reasons for action on the one hand and reasons to form normative expectations on the other—are two sides of the same coin. They are constitutively linked and jointly generated by the relationship between the participants. In so far as we have a valuable relationship, I have reasons to respond to your needs, desires, and interests, and in so far as those reasons are compelling or decisive, you have complementary reasons to expect that I shall do so. And vice versa. This is neither a coincidence nor a mystery. It is simply the normative upshot of valuable human relationships. The fact that two human beings have a valuable bond or tie is a source of interlocking reasons and expectations for each of them. That is the kind of normative significance that valuable relationships

¹⁰ The discussion in this paragraph derives from but also revises and supersedes my earlier discussion of this issue in 'Projects, Relationships, and Reasons', pp. 266–8. In making these revisions, I largely follow the account given by R. Jay Wallace in 'The Deontic Structure of Morality', unpublished draft, 3 December 2005.

¹¹ The idea of holding agents to a set of normative expectations is central to the account of responsibility developed by R. Jay Wallace in *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). Here I focus on the distinctive expectations of the participants in interpersonal relationships.

have for their participants. I might have compelling pragmatic or prudential reasons to respond to your needs or desires without your being entitled to form an expectation that I shall do so or to hold me to account if I do not. But if the source of my reason to respond to your needs and desires lies in the value of our relationship, and if that reason is compelling, then my reason for action is complemented by your entitlement to expect that I shall respond. The very same consideration that gives me reason to act on your behalf gives you reason to complain if I do not. In this sense, I lack the authority unilaterally to disregard my reason to act on your behalf; I cannot waive your entitlement to complain.

This argument needs refinement and qualification, but something along these lines seems to me basically correct. And even without having the refinements and qualifications in hand, it is clear that no comparable argument applies to the case of project-dependent reasons. In so far as they arise outside the context of interpersonal relations, my project-dependent reasons are not accompanied by complementary entitlements on the part of other people to form expectations of me. Interpersonal relationships are collaborative enterprises by definition, and the normative considerations they generate for each party are constitutively linked to the normative considerations they generate for the other. In giving me a decisive reason to act on your behalf, they give you a claim that I should do so. By contrast, nobody but I need be a party to my project. And so my project can give me reasons to act without giving anyone the normative standing to complain if I fail to do so. In this sense, my purely project-dependent reasons might be described as 'normatively individualistic'. I have unilateral authority to disregard such reasons, however strong they may be, and this gives content to the idea that, even though I may be foolish or unreasonable not to act on them, nevertheless I am not 'required' or 'obligated' to do so. In practice, of course, project-dependent reasons often overlap with relationship-dependent reasons, both because the participants in personal relationships sometimes develop joint projects and because personal projects sometimes involve relationships with other people. In cases of either of these types, it may be impossible to distinguish one's project-dependent reasons from one's relationship-dependent reasons, and when this happens it is the normative character of the relationship-dependent reasons that is dominant. That is, one's reasons lose the normative characteristics of purely project-dependent reasons, and one may be required or obligated to act on them. Still, purely project-dependent reasons do exist, and they differ in their deontic character from relationship-dependent reasons.

The normative characteristics of membership-dependent reasons do not correspond precisely to those of either relationship-dependent or project-dependent reasons. On the one hand, membership in a group implicates one directly in relations of co-membership with others, and membership-dependent reasons lack the normatively individualistic character of purely project-dependent reasons. One may be required or obligated to act on them. On the other hand, the relations that are constitutive of group membership may be highly attenuated. One need not have a face-to-face relationship or even a personal acquaintance with each of the other members of a group to which one belongs, and in larger groups one may know personally only a very small proportion of them. This means that the normative significance of membership-dependent reasons has a more diffuse character than is typical of relationship-dependent reasons. Although one's failure to act on one's membership-dependent reasons does give others grounds for complaint, it may not always be clear who exactly has the standing to complain. Perhaps all the members of the group do, or perhaps only those group members who are most affected by one's failure to act, if they can be identified, or perhaps only the officials or designated representatives of the group, if it has any. It may be even less clear who can reasonably be said to have been wronged by one's failure to act: is it the entire membership of the group, or the group itself, considered as something over and above its membership, or some subset of group members? Or does it not make sense to speak of wronging in such cases? One reason for doubt is that, in large groups at least, the failure of any one individual to satisfy the group's expectations may have no perceptible effect on the other members, who may not even be aware of it. So it may seem overblown to use the language of wronging.

In any event, the answers to questions about who is wronged and who has standing to complain when an individual fails to act on his membership-dependent reasons may vary depending on the nature, size, and organizational structure of the group of which he is a member. What does seem clear is that the relatively simple pattern of reciprocal normativity that characterizes two-person relationships may not apply straightforwardly in these cases.

6. A Relational View of Morality?

I have argued that our project-dependent, relationship-dependent, and membership-dependent reasons all define important forms of reasonable partiality. This list may not be exhaustive. At the very least, though, the three

types of reason I have identified cover much of the territory of reasonable partiality. So it is noteworthy that various philosophers have seen personal relationships as crucial to understanding the normative force of morality itself. On the face of it, many moral reasons are ‘relationship-independent’. That is, they are reasons to treat other people in certain ways whether or not we have any personal relationship with them. Yet a number of philosophers have suggested, in effect, that these reasons are best understood as constituting a species of relationship-dependent or membership-dependent reason, and the idea that morality has an essentially relational structure has been presented as an alternative to the consequentialist emphasis on the impersonal aggregation of value. In an early essay,¹² for example, Thomas Nagel characterized the difference between utilitarianism and absolutist deontology in the following terms:

Absolutism is associated with a view of oneself as a small being interacting with others in a large world. The justifications it requires are primarily interpersonal. Utilitarianism is associated with a view of oneself as a benevolent bureaucrat distributing such benefits as one can control to countless other beings, with whom one may have various relations or none. The justifications it requires are primarily administrative.¹³

Nagel suggests in the same essay that the key to understanding the basis of deontological restrictions may lie in ‘the possibility that to treat someone else horribly puts you in a special relation to him which may have to be defended in terms of other features of your relation to him’.¹⁴

More recently, Jay Wallace has argued that the ‘deontic structure’ of morality—the fact that moral reasons present themselves to us in deliberation as requirements or obligations—can be understood by reference to the same kind of reciprocal normativity that characterizes personal relationships, such as friendship, and the reasons arising from them.¹⁵ Just as we lack the authority unilaterally to disregard our relationship-dependent reasons because they arise from valuable relationships that also ground corresponding expectations and

¹² ‘War and Massacre’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (2) (Winter 1972), pp. 123–44; reprinted in *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, ed. Samuel Scheffler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 51–73.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Wallace, ‘The Deontic Structure of Morality.’ I am here oversimplifying Wallace’s position. He also cites two other factors that may contribute to our understanding of moral reasons as having the status of requirements. These factors are the inescapability of such reasons—the fact that they apply to all people—and their weightiness or importance. However, the central argument of his paper is that the deontic structure of morality cannot be fully explained by these other factors alone. There is, he says, a ‘distinct source of deontic structure’ (p. 2), and he appeals to the notion of reciprocal or relational normativity to account for this additional dimension of the normativity of morality. I shall ignore this complication in the remainder of my discussion, since I don’t believe that it affects the points I want to make.

complaints on the part of the people with whom we have those relationships, so too there are ‘valuable relationships [that lie] at the heart of morality’, and these relationships, in providing us with reasons for action, also generate legitimate expectations and grounds for privileged complaint on the part of other people. Like relationship-dependent reasons, Wallace argues, moral reasons have the character of requirements because they arise within structures of relational or reciprocal or ‘bipolar’ normativity.¹⁶

These ideas suggest a radical extension of the line of argument that I have been developing. My aim has been to argue that project-dependent, relationship-dependent, and membership-dependent reasons all represent forms of reasonable partiality, which morality should be thought of as incorporating. But the remarks of Nagel and Wallace may be taken to suggest, more radically, that moral reasons are always relationship-dependent. This suggestion has the potential to transform debates about morality and partiality. Whereas the presupposition of those debates is that there is at least a *prima facie* tension between morality and partiality, the suggestion here is that even those moral reasons that appear superficially to be relationship-independent nevertheless have their source in relations among people, so that moral reasons and reasons of partiality arise ultimately in just the same way.

I find the idea of interpreting morality in fundamentally relational terms attractive, yet I believe that a satisfactory relational interpretation continues to elude us. Several versions of a relational interpretation have been suggested in recent philosophical work. These versions differ from one another in significant ways, but in each case there are puzzles or obscurities that bar the way to unqualified acceptance. In the remainder of this section, I shall discuss three of these versions, and in each case I shall try to identify some of the issues that need to be addressed if a compelling position is to emerge.

One way of modelling moral reasons on relationship-dependent reasons is suggested by Nagel’s frankly speculative proposal that ‘to treat someone else horribly puts you in a special relation to him which may have to be defended in terms of other features of your relation to him’.¹⁷ However, Nagel offers this as a suggestion about how deontological restrictions in particular might be justified or explained. He does not purport to be offering a relational account of morality as a whole. And since the ‘special relation’ he invokes is supposed to be called into being by mistreatment—by the violation of a deontological

¹⁶ The notion of bipolar normativity derives from Michael Thompson, ‘What is it to Wrong Somebody? A Puzzle about Justice’, in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, pp. 333–84.

¹⁷ Nagel, ‘War and Massacre’, p. 66. The next several paragraphs expand on points I made in footnote 25 of ‘Projects, Relationships, and Reasons’, pp. 267–8.

restriction—it is not clear how readily this proposal could be generalized to explain moral reasons as a class. The suggestion that ‘to treat someone horribly puts you in a special relation to him’ implies that the relation arises from the fact of mistreatment. It is the mistreatment that ‘establishes’¹⁸ the relation. But this means that, if a person respects deontological restrictions, then there is no relation of the relevant kind between him and those who would otherwise have been his victims. Since it is unclear how the deontological reason the agent respects could have its source in a relation that doesn’t exist, this raises a question about whether Nagel’s appeal to the relation between agent and victim can fully explain how such reasons arise. It is even less clear how that appeal might be extended to provide a relational account of moral reasons in general.

There is a deeper point here. I have argued that personal relationships can be sources of reasons for action because they are among the most basic objects of human valuation, and because valuing is always connected to the perception of reasons. But the relevant notion of a ‘relationship’ requires clarification. As Niko Kolodny has observed, there is a thin, logical sense in which, whenever two people satisfy some two-place predicate, they can be said to stand in an interpersonal relation.¹⁹ But the valuable reason-giving relationships that I have been discussing are relationships in a more robust sense. They are ongoing bonds between individuals who have a shared history that usually includes patterns of engagement and forms of mutual familiarity, attachment, and regard developed over time.²⁰ In such cases, we can usually say not merely that the participants *stand in some relation to* one another, but that they *have a relationship with* one another. My argument has been that relationships of this kind are among the most basic and deeply entrenched categories of human valuation and the most important sources of human fulfilment and that, as such, they have the capacity to give us reasons for action if anything does. In this sense, I have attempted to explain the source of relationship-dependent reasons.

The pertinent question to ask about relational views of morality is whether they can provide a comparable explanation of the source of moral reasons, by showing how those reasons arise from valuable human relationships of some kind. The ‘special relation’ between agent and victim that Nagel speaks of is not, however, a valuable relationship. Indeed, it is not a human relationship in

¹⁸ Nagel, ‘War and Massacre’, p. 67n.

¹⁹ Niko Kolodny, ‘Love as Valuing a Relationship’, *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003), pp. 135–89, at p. 147.

²⁰ See Kolodny, ‘Love as Valuing a Relationship’, p. 148. Kolodny particularly emphasizes the importance of a shared history.

the sense just described at all. Rather than being a temporally extended pattern of mutual engagement, the relation between agent and victim supervenes on a discrete interaction between two individuals who may have no independent relationship of any kind.²¹ In speaking of a special relation between those two individuals, Nagel means to emphasize that what is wrong about the violation of a deontological restriction has to do with features of the interaction *between them*. It does not have to do with the wider effects or overall consequences of such a violation. In *The View from Nowhere*, he suggests that the wrongmaking feature is the fact that the agent's actions are guided by or aim at the victim's harm or injury or evil.²² But to say this is clearly not to ground moral reasons in an ongoing human relationship, let alone in a valuable one. So it does not by itself take us very far down the road towards a satisfactory relational view of morality.

Perhaps the most straightforward way of trying to develop such a view is to argue that, in addition to their other personal relationships and social affiliations, all people share the bond of their common humanity. In Locke's words, all of '*mankind are one community*, make up one society, distinct from all other creatures'.²³ Or, in Christine Korsgaard's more Kantian formulation, each person is not only 'a member of many smaller and more local communities', but also 'a member of the party of humanity, a Citizen of the Kingdom of Ends'.²⁴ This argument proposes that, just as it is possible to value non-instrumentally one's relationships with particular individuals and one's membership in various social groups and associations, so too it is possible to value one's membership in the wider human community. And just as valuing one's relationships or one's membership in groups and associations involves seeing those bonds as reason-giving, so too valuing one's membership in the wider human community involves seeing it as reason-giving. Moral reasons, this proposal concludes, are simply membership-dependent reasons that arise from the value of belonging to the human community.

²¹ Thus I find misleading Christine Korsgaard's comment that 'the relationship of agents and victims, like that of love or friendship, is a *personal* relationship' ('The Reasons We Can Share', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10 (1993), pp. 24–51, at p. 48). Niko Kolodny makes similar points in his 'Partiality and the Contours of the Moral' (unpublished).

²² Nagel writes that a deontological restriction 'expresses the direct appeal to the point of view of the agent from the point of view of the person on whom he is acting. It operates through that relation. The victim feels outrage when he is deliberately harmed even for the greater good of others, not simply because of the quantity of the harm but because of the assault on his value of having my actions guided by his evil. What I do is immediately directed against his good: it doesn't just in fact harm him' (*The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), at p. 184).

²³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Section 128 (emphasis in the original).

²⁴ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 127.

One initial worry about this proposal, which I shall mention only to set aside, is that it may provide a relatively weak motivational foundation for morality. Most people do have projects and relationships that they value, and few of them doubt that those projects and relationships give them reasons for action. But scepticism about morality is more widespread, and moral sceptics may be happy to deny that they value something called ‘membership in the human community’. So if moral reasons do arise from the value of this kind of membership, this may do little to persuade the sceptic. Of course, a central aspiration of Kantian moral philosophy is to establish that one must value one’s own humanity as a condition of valuing one’s other relationships and affiliations, or indeed of valuing anything at all. I shall not engage with this dimension of the Kantian project here, since I want to concentrate on the prior question of whether a viable relational interpretation of morality is available in the first place.

More immediately pressing puzzles emerge if we ask the following question. If valuing one’s membership in the human community involves seeing it as reason-giving, what is the content of those reasons? If they are construed on the model of relationship-dependent reasons, then perhaps they are reasons to respond to the needs and interests of human beings, reasons that one does not have to respond to the needs and interests of non-humans. I have two reservations about this proposal. First, as Locke’s emphasis on our being ‘distinct from all other creatures’ suggests, it treats the distinction between human and non-human creatures as the linchpin of morality, as if the primary moral imperative were to give the interests of human beings priority over those of the beasts or of aliens from outer space. Second, it says nothing about the kind of response to the needs and interests of human beings that is called for, and in particular it says nothing to rule out the utilitarian idea that one should respond to those needs and interests by maximizing their aggregate satisfaction. To that extent, it does nothing by itself to flesh out the idea of a relational conception of morality as an alternative to impersonal, aggregative forms of consequentialism.

If the reasons involved in valuing one’s membership in the human community are instead construed on the model of other membership-dependent reasons, then perhaps they are reasons to do one’s fair share, as defined by the norms and ideals of the human community itself, to help sustain the community and contribute to its purposes. The problem, of course, is that in asking about the content of our moral reasons, the norms of the human community are precisely what we are trying to characterize. There is, by hypothesis, no independent characterization of those norms to which non-circular appeal can be made. So, on this interpretation, the proposal is vacuous.

Underlying many of these worries is a more basic doubt about the plausibility of grounding moral reasons in the value of membership in the human community. One way of articulating this doubt is to suggest that this proposal takes too literally what is in fact a metaphorical way of formulating a very different view. The alternative view is that moral reasons are grounded in the value of humanity, or of persons. This view can be expressed metaphorically by speaking of the value of membership in the human community, but the metaphor should not be taken literally. A literal reading makes morality seem too much like a matter of group loyalty—of loyalty to one’s fellow humans—and in so doing it puts the accent in the wrong place.²⁵ It is not really the value of *membership* that gives rise to moral reasons, according to the alternative view, but rather the value of humanity—of persons—and talk of membership in the human community is simply a picturesque way of reminding us that all persons have moral standing. This contrasts with cases of genuinely relationship-dependent and membership-dependent reasons.²⁶ In such cases, one’s reasons do not arise simply from the value of the person with whom one has the relationship or shares the group affiliation. Instead, it is one’s participation in the valuable group or relationship that is the source of one’s reasons, and non-participants do not have the same reasons, even though they may recognize the value of the persons involved. If this is correct, and if the doubts articulated here are well founded, then what looks like a relational conception of morality may turn out in the end not to be one after all.

A third way of grounding moral reasons in valuable human relationships is suggested by Thomas Scanlon in *What We Owe to Each Other*. Scanlon’s contractualism ‘holds that an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement’.²⁷ Scanlon takes it to be an advantage of this view that it provides a compelling explanation of the reason-giving force of moral judgements. The core idea is that the distinctive reason that we have to avoid doing what is wrong is a reason to want our behaviour to be justifiable to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject. Scanlon

²⁵ I take this to be an objection to the view of morality defended by Andrew Oldenquist in ‘Loyalties’, *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), pp. 173–93. But see Bernard Williams, ‘The Human Prejudice’, in his (ed. A. W. Moore) *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), ch. 16.

²⁶ This is related to the contrast drawn by Niko Kolodny, in ‘Partiality and the Contours of the Moral’, between the ‘person-based’ conception of morality and the ‘owed-to’ conception. Significantly, Kolodny argues that a commitment to the person-based conception is what motivates the view that morality excludes partiality.

²⁷ Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 153.

writes: 'When I reflect on the reason that the wrongness of an action seems to supply not to do it, the best description of this reason I can come up with has to do with the relation to others that such acts would put me in: the sense that others could reasonably object to what I do.'²⁸ This suggests that moral reasons are rooted in considerations about our relations to other people.

Scanlon elaborates on this suggestion in the course of explaining how the contractualist account of moral motivation makes available a convincing reply to 'Pritchard's dilemma'. This dilemma asserts that any account of moral motivation will be either trivial (if it says that we have reason to avoid doing what's wrong just because it's wrong) or unacceptably 'external' (if, for example, it says that avoiding wrongdoing will conduce to our own interests). Scanlon develops his reply by first considering the case of friendship. In this case, a similar 'dilemma' might seem to arise, for we can ask why we should be loyal to our friends, and any answer we give may appear either trivial (if it says that loyalty is what friendship requires) or unacceptably external (if it appeals to the benefits of having friends). The solution to the friendship dilemma, Scanlon believes, is to characterize friendship in such a way as to make clear why it is a relationship that is 'desirable and admirable in itself'.²⁹ If we do this, we shall see that there is really no dilemma. Rather than being competing answers to a single question, the two horns of the supposed dilemma capture 'two essential aspects of friendship'.³⁰ On the one hand, part of what friendship involves is seeing loyalty to one's friends as a sufficient reason for performing what may sometimes be burdensome actions. On the other hand, being a friend also involves an appreciation of the way in which the friendship enriches one's life and contributes to one's good.

Analogous points hold, Scanlon maintains, in the case of morality. Here his solution to Pritchard's dilemma is to represent our reasons to avoid wrongdoing as rooted in a certain ideal of interpersonal relations that is intimately connected with morality, but that has enough independence from it to provide a non-trivial account of those reasons. He writes:

There are obvious similarities between the case of friendship as I have described it and that of the morality of right and wrong, and my strategy in responding to the problem of moral motivation is analogous to the response I have just sketched to Pritchard's dilemma in the case of friendship. The contractualist ideal of acting in accord with principles that others (similarly motivated) could not reasonably reject is meant to characterize the relation with others the value and appeal of which underlies our reasons to do what morality requires. This relation, much less personal than friendship,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

might be called a relation of mutual recognition. Standing in this relation to others is appealing in itself—worth seeking for its own sake. A moral person will refrain from lying to others, cheating, harming, or exploiting them, ‘because these things are wrong.’ But for such a person these requirements are not just formal imperatives; they are aspects of the positive value of a way of living with others.³¹

Scanlon’s position, then, is that a relation of mutual recognition, which is in some ways analogous to friendship but is less personal, ‘underlies’ our reasons to conform with moral requirements. If this is correct, then it seems that moral reasons may be thought of as relationship-dependent reasons arising from the valuable relation of mutual recognition. Furthermore, as Wallace suggests, the ‘deontic character’ of moral reasons may then be understood on the model of other relationship-dependent reasons, such as those arising from friendship. The suggestion, in other words, is that, in the moral case as in the case of friendship, our relationship-dependent reasons belong to structures of reciprocal normativity, which means the same considerations that generate reasons for an agent to conform to moral requirements also generate reasons for others to complain if he does not. In the moral case, the people who may complain are those to whom the action could not have been justified on grounds they would have been unreasonable to reject. As Wallace puts the point:

What makes an action of mine morally wrong is the fact that it cannot be justified to someone affected by it on terms that person would be unreasonable to reject. In a situation in which I do something morally wrong, the person adversely affected will have been wronged by me, and have privileged basis for moral complaint, resentment, and so on, precisely insofar as I have acted with indifference to the value of relating to them on a basis of mutual recognition and regard. The very principles that specify what I have moral reason to do, on this relational conception, equally serve to specify normative expectations and entitlements on the part of others. Those principles are thus implicated in a bipolar normative nexus very like the one that defines the reciprocal reasons and expectations constitutive of a relationship of friendship.³²

This explains why, in the moral case as in the case of friendship, one’s relationship-dependent reasons have the character of requirements; as elements

³¹ Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 153.

³² Wallace, ‘The Deontic Structure of Morality’, p. 35. As Frances Kamm has emphasized in discussion, one obvious question is whether a view of this kind can account for imperfect duties, which are not owed to any particular individual. Another obvious question is whether it can account for the norms governing our treatment of non-human animals. However, Scanlon says clearly that his view is meant only to account for the portion of morality that concerns ‘what we owe to each other’, and that questions about the treatment of non-human animals may fall outside the scope of that part of morality. See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 177–88.

belonging to a 'bipolar normative nexus', they are reasons that one lacks the authority unilaterally to disregard.

Attractive as this picture is, the force of the analogy between friendship and the relation of mutual recognition seems to me uncertain. Scanlon identifies one source of doubt when he says that the relation of mutual recognition may seem 'implausibly ideal'. He adds:

The motivational basis of friendship makes sense because friends play a real and important role in one's life. But morality, as I am describing it, requires us to be moved by (indeed to give priority to) the thought of our relation to a large number of people, most of whom we will never have any contact with at all. This may seem bizarre.

Scanlon's reply to this objection is that 'if the alternative is to say that people count for nothing if I will never come in contact with them, then surely this is bizarre as well'.³³ This reply seems curiously unresponsive to the objection as stated, since the relevant alternative to Scanlon's position is not that people count for nothing if one will never come into contact with them, but rather that the reason why they count for something does not derive from the value of the relation of mutual recognition.³⁴ More significantly, Scanlon's characterization of the objection to his view seems to run together two different worries. The first worry is that, whereas one's friendships play a 'real' role in one's life, the relation of mutual recognition is 'ideal'. The second worry is that, whereas friends are people one actually knows, the relation of mutual recognition is supposed to be capable of holding among people who do not know and will never meet one another. Scanlon's response focuses on the second of these worries, but if we are attempting to evaluate the analogy between friendship and mutual recognition, both worries need to be addressed.

The way I would formulate the second concern is as follows. In what sense may two people be said to stand in a 'relation' of mutual recognition if they have never met or interacted, will never meet or interact, and do not even know of each other's existence? Clearly, Scanlon does not mean to be using the term 'relation' merely in the thin, logical sense identified earlier. But in what more substantive sense do people in the circumstances described stand in a relation of mutual recognition? Perhaps the idea is that, even though they do not know of each other's existence, each wants his behaviour to be justifiable to everyone, and so, by implication, each wants his behaviour to

³³ Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 168.

³⁴ Scanlon goes on to consider a version of this objection, but the version he considers denies the relevance, not of the relation of mutual recognition *per se*, but rather of the idea of justifiability to others. This deflects attention away from the questions about the relation of recognition that I pursue above.

be justifiable to the other. Now if this is what is meant by saying that the two people stand in a relation of mutual recognition, the pertinent notion of 'relation' would seem to be very different from the one that is operative in the case of valuable personal relationships like friendship. As we have seen, the latter consist in ongoing relationships between individuals who have a shared history that usually includes patterns of engagement and forms of mutual familiarity, attachment, and regard developed over time. Even if we can find a use of the term 'relation' or 'relationship' that goes beyond the thin, logical sense and applies in the case of mutual recognition, it is not clear that there is enough substantively in common between that case and the case of friendship to support an analogy between the reason-giving characteristics of each.

The other worry is this. In the case of friendship, what gives rise to reasons is an actual relationship. In general, relationship-dependent reasons, as I have characterized them, are simply reasons that one has by virtue of participation in a valuable relationship, and this model applies straightforwardly to the case of friendship as Scanlon discusses it. In the moral case, however, Scanlon does not say that we do in fact stand in relations of mutual recognition with others. Nor, *a fortiori*, does he say that we have moral reasons in virtue of our participation in actual relations of mutual recognition with others (a claim that might have the awkward implication that moral norms do not apply to our treatment of those with whom we lack such relations). What he tends to say instead is that what underlies moral reasons is the 'appeal' or 'ideal' of standing in relations of mutual recognition. If I understand him correctly, the idea is that we value a certain way of living with others, which we may or may not have achieved in practice, and in so far as we respond to moral reasons, we seek to realize that way of living together. Now this may be a plausible account of how moral reasons arise. However, the role it assigns to the relation of mutual recognition in generating such reasons is not analogous to the role that a person's friendships play in generating relationship-dependent reasons. In the friendship case, it is the value of an actual relationship in which one is a participant that generates the reasons. In the moral case, as here understood, what seems to generate the reasons is not any actual relationship at all, but rather a certain ideal of how human beings should relate to one another. If this is correct, then moral reasons are not relationship-dependent reasons in the sense that I have specified. And despite what Scanlon suggests, morality does not give one reasons in the same way that one's friendships do.

This is not an objection to Scanlon's contractualism or even to the account he gives of moral motivation, except in so far as that account relies on an analogy between the way friendships generate reasons and the way relations of mutual recognition generate reasons. But it does mean that, as it stands at least,

Scanlon's contractualism does not provide us with a way of construing moral reasons as a species of relationship-dependent reason. Nor, contrary to what Wallace suggests, does it yet enable us to see how a relational conception of morality might be grounded. To be sure, contractualism as Scanlon presents it, with its emphasis on the justifiability of one's actions to others who are affected by them, coheres smoothly with an interpretation of the deontic character of morality that links it to structures of reciprocal or bipolar normativity, in which reasons for action are constitutively connected to grounds for privileged complaint. But in the case of valued personal relationships like friendship, the value of the relationships provides an explanation of how these structures of reciprocal normativity arise. The appeal to relations of mutual recognition does not play a comparably explanatory role, for the relations in question are not actual, ongoing human relationships at all. One thing that may serve to obscure this disanalogy is the fact that a structure of reciprocal normativity can itself be taken to define or constitute a 'relationship' of a certain kind between two people. If I have reason to act on your behalf and you have reason to complain if I do not, then those facts themselves might be said to define a 'normative relationship' between us. Clearly, however, structures of reciprocal normativity cannot be grounded in the very normative relationships that they are said to define, for there is no content to these relationships other than the facts of reciprocal normativity themselves.³⁵ In the case of friendship, the normative relationship supervenes on an ongoing historical relationship between the participants, and it is the value of that ongoing relationship that is explanatory. But nothing comparable is true in the case of the relation of mutual recognition. So, as it stands at least, the appeal to that relation does not explain how structures of reciprocal normativity arise.

To sum up: the function of the relation of mutual recognition in the contractualist arguments I have been discussing is ideal and prospective; rather than being an ongoing relationship that gives rise to moral reasons, it is a relation that is supposed to be realized or made possible by acting on such reasons. If the appeal to this relation is to explain how reciprocal moral reasons arise, we need a clearer understanding of how ideal, prospective relations can generate reasons. The character of the relation of mutual recognition also requires further elucidation. It must be a relation that can plausibly be said to obtain between people whether or not they ever meet or know of each other's existence, and whether or not the actions of either ever affect the other. And

³⁵ This is a point that has been emphasized by Kerstin Haase in her unpublished writing on this topic.

it must be sufficiently independent of the structures of reciprocal normativity themselves that it is capable of providing a non-circular grounding for them.

7. Relational Views, Deontic Character, and the Consequentialist Challenge

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider whether a successful account of moral reasons along these lines can be provided. Perhaps there is a way of interpreting the appeal to relations of mutual recognition that would make clear its capacity to generate structures of reciprocal normativity. Still, I take the lesson of the discussion in the previous section to be that, even if such an interpretation is forthcoming, it is unlikely to represent moral reasons in general as relationship-dependent reasons in my sense. And this, after all, is not surprising. Relationship-dependent reasons are reasons of partiality arising from the value of particular, historical relationships between specific individuals. Even if moral norms can be represented as relational in important respects, morality aspires to the regulation of behaviour among strangers as well as among intimates, and it seems implausible that moral reasons of all kinds should have their source in particular, historical relationships.³⁶

However, the idea that morality is relational in the sense that its deontic character is to be understood with reference to structures of reciprocal normativity has much to recommend it. In other words, we can distinguish between a *relational view* of morality—the view that the deontic structure of morality is best understood with reference to notions of reciprocal normativity—and the thesis that moral reasons are in general *relationship-dependent*. Even if we do not accept the relationship-dependency thesis, a relational view of morality remains attractive. For one thing, the fact that the deontic character of relationship-dependent reasons is best understood in terms of reciprocal normativity speaks in favour of a relational view of morality, even if morality itself is not in general relationship-dependent. Of course, my own view is that, despite not being generally relationship-dependent, morality does incorporate many relationship-dependent reasons, and this already implies that

³⁶ In *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), Scanlon develops an analogy between friendship and what he calls ‘the moral relationship’. What he says about this analogy differs in some significant respects from his discussion of the analogy between friendship and ‘the relation of mutual recognition’ in *What We Owe to Each Other*. I do not have space here to give Scanlon’s new discussion the careful consideration it deserves. Suffice it to say that it does not allay my doubts about the plausibility of construing moral reasons as relationship-dependent (or membership-dependent) reasons in my sense.

the deontic character of at least some moral reasons must be understood in terms of reciprocal normativity. But even if one rejects this view, the fact remains that relationship-dependent reasons frequently present themselves to us in deliberation and reflection as requirements or obligations, and that their deontic character is best understood in terms of reciprocal structures of reasons and complaints. If that is right, then there is at least *prima facie* reason to think that the deontic character of other reasons that present themselves as requirements or obligations should be understood in the same way.

This consideration is reinforced by the fact that consequentialism, the most influential and best-developed alternative to a relational view, has a hard time accounting for the deontic character of morality at all. Although many consequentialists argue that promoting optimal outcomes is what we have *most reason* to do, this is not yet to explain the peculiar deontic character of morality—the fact that we see moral norms as defining a set of *requirements* or *obligations*. This is a point that Jay Wallace has made very effectively.³⁷ To my knowledge, consequentialists have done little to explain how morality could have this kind of deontic character, although some of them have, in effect, tried to explain the phenomenon away by construing questions about what it is to have an obligation as questions about the utility of blaming the agent. But this is a significantly revisionist move. It amounts to denying that morality has a distinctively deontic character at all, and substituting a set of very different considerations about the utility of blame. If we are resistant to this kind of revisionism, and believe that the deontic character of morality is something to be explained rather than explained away, then a relational conception of morality will seem much more promising than a consequentialist conception.

On the other hand, even if one has doubts about consequentialist revisionism in general, there is something to be said on behalf of revisionism about the deontic character of morality in particular, especially if deontic character is understood in terms of structures of reciprocal normativity. Beginning with the great utilitarian writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the strengths of the consequentialist tradition—and one of its most striking features—has been its insistence on the need to think about moral questions in a systematic and holistic way, focusing not merely on individual actions in isolation but also on the way in which our actions are structured by social institutions and are related to wider patterns of human conduct. In the utilitarian view, the traditional moral norms that serve to regulate the conduct of individual agents in their dealings with one another may not, despite their commonsense credentials, be adequate to the circumstances of the modern

³⁷ In 'The Deontic Structure of Morality'.

world. Although it is understandable that people should once have thought about questions of right and wrong primarily in the context of the relationships among single individuals or the members of relatively small groups, the fates of people in the modern world are tied together in complex ways through their shared participation in vast social, political, and economic structures. Individual actions must therefore be assessed, and the norms governing them must be rationalized, from a broader perspective, which takes into account the entire web of causal connections in which both the actions and the norms are embedded.

Among philosophers, utilitarianism has been severely criticized for its many counterintuitive implications and for its insensitivity to the complex structures of value that inform our practical deliberations and interpersonal relations. But economists and social policy makers have continued to find utilitarianism's broad institutional perspective congenial, and among them its influence has never waned. In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls wrote:

We sometimes forget that the great utilitarians, Hume and Adam Smith, Bentham and Mill, were social theorists and economists of the first rank; and the moral doctrine they worked out was framed to meet the needs of their wider interests and to fit into a comprehensive scheme. Those who criticized them often did so on a much narrower front. They pointed out the obscurities of the principle of utility and noted the apparent inconsistencies between many of its implications and our moral sentiments. But they failed, I believe, to construct a workable and systematic moral conception to oppose it. The outcome is that we often seem forced to choose between utilitarianism and intuitionism.³⁸

Much has changed since Rawls wrote these words, not least because of the great impact of his own work. But the influence of utilitarianism endures among social and economic policy makers and theorists, and for many of the same reasons. Viewed in this light, the failure of consequentialism to explain the deontic character of morality may be cast by its defenders, not as an embarrassing omission, but rather as a deliberate challenge to more conventional forms of moral thought, a challenge that might be spelled out as follows.

The idea of 'deontic character', understood with reference to structures of reciprocal normativity, is indeed at home in a morality of interpersonal relations. But a morality of interpersonal relations is no longer an adequate morality for our world. In trying to decide how people should act, we cannot think about their actions and the implications of those actions solely or primarily in the

³⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. vii–viii.

context of their personal relationships with their friends, family, and associates. The most important moral questions to ask about individual actions often pertain instead to the social and institutional forms that structure the options available to individuals, and the wider social and global impact of patterns of activity to which each of a very large number of individuals makes only a tiny contribution. This is evident, for example, if we think about global warming and other environmental problems, or if we think about the relation between consumer behaviour in affluent countries and labour practices in developing countries. In this context, it is a mistake to think that what is crucial for moral thought is to preserve the ‘deontic character’ of morality—where this means identifying, for each act of wrongdoing, particular people who have been wronged and have privileged ground for complaint. To do this is to mistake the phenomenology of traditional morality for a fundamental feature of moral thought, and to deprive ourselves of the tools we need to address the moral problems we actually face. Some of those problems are difficult precisely because, although they have clearly been caused by the actions of human beings, no specific individuals have privileged grounds for complaint about the behaviour of any other specific individuals. So as long as we insist that structures of reciprocal normativity are essential to morality, our moral thought will lack the concepts it needs to address these problems. The task we face is not to preserve the notions of obligatoriness and privileged complaint, but rather to persuade people that they have reason to avoid certain kinds of actions even when no particular individuals have special grounds for complaint about those actions.

To describe this consequentialist challenge is not, of course, to endorse it, still less to concede that consequentialism itself represents an adequate moral outlook—in contemporary conditions or any others. I have argued in various places that, for a number of different reasons, among which its failure adequately to accommodate reasonable partiality is one of the most important, consequentialism does not provide a viable alternative to the traditional morality it criticizes. Still, the consequentialist challenge reinforces the importance of addressing the lacuna we have identified in the relational view of morality. The question is how, on the relational view, to explain the source of moral reasons in a way that preserves the view’s emphasis on reciprocal normativity, while at the same time demonstrating its applicability outside the context of relatively small-scale interpersonal relationships. This means providing a sensible treatment of the structural, institutional, and aggregative phenomena that the consequentialist challenge highlights, and accounting in a plausible way for the norms that govern our treatment of distant strangers. Whatever the failings of the consequentialist position, the structural and institutional

phenomena to which it calls attention are of undeniable importance, and their perceived salience is likely to grow in coming years. These phenomena are not themselves artefacts of consequentialism, and no moral outlook can ultimately be acceptable unless it addresses them in a satisfactory way. Nor can a moral outlook be acceptable if it fails to account for the norms governing our treatment of distant strangers. So it is essential to establish that a relational view of morality can be convincingly applied outside the context of actual interpersonal relationships. As I have argued, although appeals to the relation between agent and victim, to membership in the human community, and to relations of mutual recognition are all suggestive, none establishes a convincing parallel with personal relationships like friendship, and none, without further development, provides a clear explanation of the source of moral reasons in general. I continue to believe that the capacity of a relational view to provide a non-sceptical interpretation of the deontic character of morality is a great advantage. But the worry persists that this may be an illusion, deriving from an understandable but mistaken tendency to apply essentially interpersonal concepts outside the domain in which they have a genuine application.

8. Morality and Partiality

Setting relational views to one side, the question of morality and partiality remains. Even if morality is not generally relational, I believe that it incorporates project-dependent, relationship-dependent, and membership-dependent reasons, and in so doing accommodates reasonable partiality. When I say that it incorporates these reasons, what I mean is that reasons of these types bear directly on the rightness or wrongness of actions, in much the same way that the fact that one has promised to act in a certain way bears directly on the rightness or wrongness of acting in that way. In my view, moral norms aim to regulate the conduct of people who are understood from the outset as valuing creatures, creatures with projects, relationships, and group affiliations. Like other forms of regulation, morality simultaneously constrains and legitimates. On the one hand, not only does it limit what may be done in the service of our projects, relationships, and group affiliations; it shapes our understanding of what counts as a worthy project or relationship or association in the first place. It tells us not merely that there are limits to what may be done in the name of a personal project or relationship, but also that a project that is evil or corrupt, or a relationship that is destructive or abusive, lacks the value that makes it a source of reasons to begin with. Yet morality also assumes that,

within these limits and constraints, it is appropriate and often obligatory that people should act on the reasons that arise from their projects, relationships, and group affiliations. It tells us that we may legitimately pursue our projects, that we are obligated to address the needs and interests of our intimates, and that we should do our fair share in the joint enterprises in which we participate.

None of this is argument, of course, and it is in fact quite difficult to argue in a non-question-begging way for this or any other view of the relation between morality and partiality. That is because the issue turns ultimately on some of the most basic and abstract questions about the nature and function of morality, and it is difficult to produce arguments about morality and partiality that do not already presuppose some answers to those questions. My strategy in this chapter has been indirect. By examining project-dependent, relationship-dependent, and membership-dependent reasons, I have sought to emphasize that partiality is a dimension of practical rationality, and so to undercut the tendency to associate morality with detached reason and partiality with non-rational feeling or affection. I have also tried to highlight two features of these reasons that, to my mind, make it implausible to situate them outside the ambit of morality. The first is the fact that they are concomitants of basic categories of human valuation; in other words, the recognition of such reasons is part of what is involved in valuing some of our deepest commitments. The second is that reasons of partiality exhibit precisely the deontic characteristics that we associate with moral norms; we see ourselves, for example, as having obligations to our families, friends, and associates, as being entitled or permitted to develop and pursue personal projects, and so on. Indeed, obligations to family, friends, and associates are often viewed as paradigmatic moral requirements. Taken together, these considerations seem to me to make a strong, albeit indirect, case for incorporating reasons of partiality within morality. At the very least, they shift the burden of proof to those who would exclude such reasons from morality's ambit. Those who wish to do this cannot deny that we are valuing creatures at all. Nor can they deny that morality appeals to our nature as valuing creatures, since morality is itself a realm of value, and the capacity of moral norms and ideals to motivate and engage us depends on the fact that we are valuers. So the position must be that although humans are valuing creatures, and although morality appeals to our nature as valuing creatures, morality nevertheless gives no direct weight to some of the most basic reasons we have in virtue of what we value; instead, whatever morality asks of us, it asks of us on the basis of reasons that have some other source, and whose roots in what we actually value remain to be explained. And this despite the fact that the excluded reasons are often taken as paradigmatic moral considerations

and exhibit precisely the deontic characteristics associated with moral norms. What exactly might the motivation for this ‘exclusivist’ position be?

The point can be sharpened. Morality aspires to regulate our conduct towards all people, strangers and intimates alike. The exclusivist position is that, at the most fundamental level, the moral reasons that apply to intimates are no different from those that apply to strangers. But once we accept that reasons of partiality are genuine reasons that flow from some of our most basic values and do in fact apply to our treatment of our intimates, the insistence that these reasons have no direct moral relevance risks making morality itself seem irrelevant. If morality were to give no weight to these reasons, then instead of looking authoritative, moral judgements might appear simply to be based on an incomplete accounting of the pertinent considerations. And if that were so, then it would be unclear why people should acknowledge the authority of those judgements or even take them into account. Ultimately, then, the basic reason for thinking that morality incorporates reasons of partiality is that no credible system for the regulation of human behaviour can possibly exclude them.³⁹

³⁹ An earlier version of this chapter was presented as the Mala Kamm Memorial Lecture at NYU. Versions were also presented to audiences at Reading, MIT, Cornell, Oslo, Iowa, and the Ethics Centre at the University of Zurich. I am grateful to all of these audiences for helpful discussion. Special thanks to Nick Sturgeon, who served as commentator on the paper at Cornell, and to Niko Kolodny and Jay Wallace, who provided helpful comments on the earliest draft.