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Permissible Partiality, Projects, and Plural Agency*

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We are far from impartial in the conduct of our daily lives. We devote significant care and attention to certain favoured others, while doing next to nothing to meet the possibly far more urgent needs of others not so favoured. I spend a considerable amount of time, for instance, working with my students: going over their papers, helping them to polish their writing, urging them to make their formulations more definite and more precise, suggesting counter-arguments they should consider, and so on. It is my impression that these students benefit considerably from this kind of detailed attention. But I'm sure there are many other students out there who need and would benefit from this kind of professorial attention even more; and I'm not helping them. In similar vein, consider the time and energy each of us has spent helping friends get over romantic disappointments. Given that the broken-hearted are often fairly long-winded in airing their grievances and emotions, each of us has probably spent quite a bit of time consoling friends under such circumstances. And we do so unquestioningly, without taking much note of all the other people we know less well who would also benefit from being able to talk through their hurt feelings but who may lack a readily available sounding board. (Not to mention all the people suffering from woes much worse than romantic rejection whose fates we similarly ignore while we help our friend

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through this crisis.) These are only a couple of specific examples, but these forms of devoted, asymmetric attention to our students and our friends are characteristic, it seems to me, of our deeply partial lives.

But is it morally permissible for us to favour certain others in this way? And, if so, when and why? These are the large questions on which I want to begin to make some headway in this chapter, if only in programmatic fashion. I want to focus especially on the issue of the *source* of any moral permission we enjoy to be partial to certain others. That is, if we are indeed permitted to be partial, why or in virtue of what are we so permitted? Moral philosophers who insist that an acceptable morality must leave us free to exercise partiality are pretty numerous; but even the most ardent defenders of the moral permissibility of partiality have not, I think, given this latter question the explicit attention it deserves.

In this chapter, therefore, I shall examine and assess several different possible strategies for securing the moral permissibility of partial behaviour. How, I shall ask, can partiality best be shown to be morally permissible? Along what lines can it most convincingly be argued that we are morally permitted to be partial to certain others? The suggestion I shall make is that we may best be able to secure a space for permissible partiality by deploying the notion of a person's *projects*, rather than by claiming a brute or primitive permission to be partial as an allegedly basic element of morality. One could thus say with some justice that on the view I wish to put on the table, we do not actually find within morality a permission for partiality as such. Rather, we find a permission for something else, which may correspond more or less closely to what we have in mind when we say that morality must leave room for partiality.

1. Permissible Partiality

It is worth underlining that my concern here will be *permissible* partiality, because to contemplate whether and why partiality is morally permissible is to consider only one role that partiality might play within morality. It could be very plausibly claimed, for instance, that morality actually contains *obligations* to be partial to certain people. We might, that is, be downright morally *required* to show greater consideration for the interests of certain people than we do for 'just anyone'. For example, it seems very plausible that those of us who are parents are morally required, and not just permitted, to be partial in various ways toward our children. But whether and why this is so—that is, the question of the source of *special obligations*, as they are called—is not my concern in the present chapter. To the extent that these issues can be treated

separately, I want to focus here on strategies for grounding a *permission* to be partial, rather than on putative partial *obligations*.

It may seem, for two reasons, that it is not easy to keep these two issues separate. First, the specific kinds of partiality whose moral permissibility we would be most keen to establish are probably those connected to close attachments, such as to our friends, spouses, and children. But those are also the very relationships that most plausibly give rise to special obligations. So it may seem that wherever the issue of permissibility is important to us, we find associated requirements in its wake. Second, it is of course true as a general matter that one way to show that something is morally permitted is to show that it is morally required. 'Required' *entails* 'permitted', so if we are asking what is the best strategy for establishing that partiality is permissible, it may seem that the obvious answer is that we need only show that, or when, such partiality is actually required.

Despite these two considerations, I think the two questions of requirement and permission can fruitfully be considered separately. In principle, partiality could figure in morality in both, in just the latter, or in neither of these ways; and—importantly for my inquiry here—the arguments in support of its appearing in the former role would presumably be rather different from those that would substantiate the latter status. For, in general, there must be arguments for something's being morally permissible that do not pass through its being morally required. This must be so for the simple reason that the range of what is morally permissible is wider than the scope of what is morally required. Even if everything morally required is morally permitted, the converse is not true; and this shows that there must be independent ways of establishing something to be morally permitted even when we cannot claim that it is downright obligatory. There can be good reasons for holding certain conduct to be morally protected—protected, that is, by a moral permission—that are independent of whatever reasons there may be to *demand* such conduct of moral agents.

So my focus here will be the search for *independent* arguments—which in principle ought to exist—for partiality's being morally permitted (as opposed to morally required). Is partiality the content of—or protected by, as we might say—a moral permission?[1] If so, why is this: what arguments ground such a

[1] The issue, more precisely, is whether it is protected by a 'pure' moral permission. I say 'pure' because (as just discussed) the permission in question is supposed to be independent of, and not simply derivative from, our moral *obligations*; we are looking for a permission to do x that does not stand or fall on whether we are morally *required* to do x. When speaking of permissions and of what is permissible in this chapter, I shall generally always have in mind 'pure' permissions or 'pure' permissibility in this sense.

permission? As I mentioned earlier, I shall suggest that the most convincing such arguments draw on the significance of an agent's *projects*. Before we get to that point, however, we should clarify some aspects of the present inquiry. First: *what is partiality?* If we are going to be trying to determine why and whether partiality is morally permissible, it will be useful to be clear on what partiality is. What is the thing into whose moral status we are inquiring? This is actually less obvious than it seems. Let us say rather vaguely—but, I hope, uncontroversially—that according to common philosophical parlance, partiality is *special concern for the interests of certain people*. By 'special' I mean specifically 'greater': the idea is that S shows greater deference to the interests of those to whom she is partial than to the interests of those to whom she is not partial.[2] We can imagine, for example, that S would confer benefits on those to whom she is partial that she would not confer on others, or that she would choose to direct benefits to them in preference to others. (While this is vague, our subsequent discussion will not, I think, turn on any of the ways in which it could be refined.)

Second: *protection* from *what?* If we're going to be speaking of a permission for partiality, or partiality's being morally protected, what 'threat' to partial practices do we have in mind? What I am interested in is whether and why partiality gets protection from *what would otherwise be moral demands*. That is, I want to look closely at the basis for insisting that the moral requirements to which we are subject must 'leave room' for partial attachments. Why would such insistence even be needed? Why would there even be a worry about moral demands leaving no room for partial practices? The easiest 'threat' to envisage here is a thoroughgoing act-consequentialist morality that demands that each of us maximize agent-neutral value in all our actions. Such a view clearly threatens partial practices: not by forbidding them *de jure*, as it were, but by presenting us with untempered demands to improve the universe, which will probably occupy all our time *de facto*.

Indeed, one might feel a need to protect partial attachments in the face of *any* highly demanding set of alleged moral requirements, whether or not they were based on a global requirement to maximize agent-neutral value or a substantive general principle of impartiality. For example, Garrett Cullity argues that even the seemingly modest demands of beneficence to which we in the affluent

[2] Christine Tappolet has pointed out to me that strictly speaking partiality ought to include giving *less* consideration to certain people's interests (say, because one dislikes them). Certainly it is true that someone who behaves in this way is not being fully impartial. But because most philosophers who have argued that morality must leave room for partiality did not have this kind of case in mind, I limit myself to examining how one might justify especially *favourable* treatment of certain others.

world are plausibly subject will have the effect, if iterated, of driving out partial attachments and connections.[3] So whether or not they take a distinctively consequentialist form, moral claims stemming from considerations of impartial beneficence seem to have the potential—if unfettered—to swallow up the rest of our lives; and this is sufficient to make us feel a need to ensure that our partial practices receive protection from those moral claims, in the form of appropriate moral permissions.

That, then, brings us to the third question to clarify: *protection* by *what?* In response to the threat of partial practices being effectively driven out of our lives by other moral requirements, we would like to be able to substantiate the objection that certain moralities are too demanding. To do this we need to find—and deploy—some arguments or concepts or phenomena that can ground moral permissions. We want factors that we can legitimately cite to block what would otherwise be moral requirements, but that do not themselves necessarily stem from or constitute further moral requirements. (Otherwise we would justify partiality only by showing it to be obligatory—not what we had in mind.) Luckily, there is already out there an argument of just this character: a general argumentative strategy that has already been taken (by some, at least) to constitute a compelling or at least a legitimate rationale for tempering the demands of morality and motivating moral permissions. I'm referring to the appeal to *the personal point of view* that was made influential—in that formulation—by Samuel Scheffler in his *Rejection of Consequentialism*, but that is also strongly present (even if not expressed in those words) in the works of other important critics of purely impartial morality such as Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel.[4] What happens if we hitch the present inquiry to that star? Given the power of that appeal, it seems to me that it will only strengthen the moral case for permissible partiality if we can find a place for it under the umbrella of 'the personal point of view' and the 'agent-centred prerogative' that Scheffler proposed to protect it. So I propose to piggy-back on something like these concepts in an effort to ground the permissibility of partiality.

As I shall try to show, this strategy leaves plenty of interesting work to do, even once we make the significant—although vague—assumption that 'the personal point of view' is indeed a powerful or at least a legitimate weapon to

[3] Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

[4] Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982). See also Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Thomas Nagel's discussion of 'reasons of autonomy' in his *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. IX (see also ch. X); and his *Equality and Partiality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

use against the demands of impartial beneficence. The appeal to 'the personal point of view' suggests that there must be something *agent-relative* that can be set against and limit the potentially voracious demands of impartial beneficence that act-utilitarianism and act-consequentialism embrace as the fundamental moral requirements. But what, exactly, is that something? What, exactly, is 'the personal point of view'? What, exactly—*which* agent-relative elements—do 'agent-centred prerogatives' protect?

On closer examination it turns out not to be obvious what the answers to these questions are, and I don't think philosophers have been as clear on these points as we should have been. For in fact there are several *different* things one might mean by saying that morality must leave room for 'the personal point of view': the content of the rather protean concept of 'the personal point of view' is not immediately clear or obvious. So in what follows we shall look carefully at a few different ways of spelling out what it is that ought to be protected from impartial demands: *what* it is whose special significance to the agent ought to find expression in an agent-centred prerogative that puts a brake on those demands. I shall operate primarily at the conceptual level: what *concept* serves us best in this connection? That is, what concept makes this appeal most compelling as a basis for insisting on moral permissions? But I shall also be concerned with the implications for partiality in particular of these various possible disambiguations of the appeal to 'the personal point of view'. Which of these various construals, if any, is apt to ground a permission for partiality?

To recapitulate, then: we are looking for a compelling way of grounding moral permissions to engage in partial behaviour. To that end, we shall consider several distinct ways of disambiguating the appeal to 'the personal point of view', because that general strategy is already accepted—by some, at least—as a plausible basis for insisting that moral theory show special deference to certain agent-relative elements. With regard to each candidate disambiguation, our twin questions will be how compelling a case it yields for tempering the demands of morality, and to what degree the 'protection' that it affords would extend to partiality. Does partiality as such—or, more modestly, some particular form of partiality—fall within the 'protected area' that blocks the rapacious reach of would-be demands of impartial beneficence, on one or more of the following ways of delineating that area?

In short, according to the present strategy there is indeed magic in the adjective 'my';[5] the question before us now is 'my *what*?' *For what X* do

[5] The reference is to William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning political justice*, 3rd edn (1798), vol. 1. p. 127.

we feel that the moral demands on me must be deferential to *my* X? What concept do we want to use to cash out the relevant X? Let us consider some candidates.

Option 1: My Interests

Perhaps the most straightforward way of spelling out what allegedly requires special deference is *the interests* (or well-being) *of the agent to whom moral demands are addressed*. And the obvious way of accomplishing this is for my interests to receive extra weight when we are considering what I morally ought to do. The appropriate form for an 'agent-centred prerogative' to take would therefore be the introduction of something like a 'multiplier' that operates on *my* interests in comparison with the interests of others when we are trying to determine what I am morally required to do. In fact Scheffler's original formulation of the 'agent-centred prerogative' took precisely this form: 'a plausible agent-centred prerogative', Scheffler wrote, 'would allow each agent to assign a certain proportionately greater weight to his own interests than to the interests of other people'.[6] Associated with this appeal to *my* interests as requiring moral protection is a particular way of making out the objection that certain moralities are too demanding. On the present construal, what is, at bottom, wrong with a morality that is too demanding is that it comes at too high a cost to my well-being, or leaves me not well enough off.[7] It is not clear why this should be thought to be a fatal objection to a morality, however. It might constitute a fatal objection *if* we assumed morality were a contract for mutual advantage. In that case, if I am left worse off due to the adoption of a particular morality, that would indeed mean that morality was failing in its purpose. But that seems a very contentious assumption to make about what morality is.

We should also note, in any case, that this approach does not seem to generate *any* permission for partiality as such. On this approach, the only consideration that acts as a brake on possibly encroaching moral demands is *my* self-interest; only *my* interests get special regard. We could therefore speak of 'partiality to oneself', but surely this does not exhaust the kinds of partial attachments and practices that we were hoping to protect from competing moral claims. So whether or not this is a compelling way to

[6] Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, p. 20.

[7] Simplifying greatly, this is the tenor of Liam Murphy's rather sceptical analysis of 'the problem of over-demandingness' in his *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chs 1–3, esp. pp. 16–21. Murphy distinguishes 'losses' and 'absolute-level' versions of the objection.

temper the demands of morality, it is not one especially favourable to partiality as such.

Option 2: My Interests and the Interests of those Who Stand in Certain Designated Relations to Me

In light of the observation we have just made, the present suggestion is a very natural broadening of the previous option. On this proposal, the moral requirements that apply to you must be tempered by or show deference to not just *your* interests, but the interests of other people who are related to you in certain designated ways. An 'agent-centred prerogative' that had the same structure as in Option 1 but spread the extra weight around more broadly might be structurally analogous to the concentric circles of Broad's 'self-referential altruism', although in the present case these concentric circles would be better described as 'self-referential permissions'.[8] Such a system would, I think, constitute a granting of moral protection to partiality as such—or at least to partiality toward those related to us in the designated ways.

This raises the question, however, of what these 'designated ways' might be, and how we would determine what they should be. Recall that these relations pick out, for present purposes, people whose interests we are *permitted*—not obliged—to favour, even at the expense of other morally worthy aims. How are we to characterize which relations these are? To take just one example, how are we to determine whether fellow citizenship is such a relation? One might say it is simply a brute fact that certain relations generate these permissions. It seems odd, however, to posit that what one might term 'eternal moral verities'[9] govern whose interests *may*—not *must*—be accorded special weight in your moral decisions.[10] It would be odd, for instance, for you automatically to have a permission to favour (say) your sister over others objectively more needy, even if you don't care about her at all. Under the circumstances it seems pointless—as well as detrimental to the needy—to grant you such a prerogative. A further issue: a scheme like this will probably want to assign decreasing *degrees* of extra weight to others' interests depending on the precise

[8] C. D. Broad, 'Self and Others', in David Cheney (ed.), *Broad's Critical Essays in Moral Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971).

[9] Cf. Christine Korsgaard's use of the phrase 'eternal normative verity' at p. 315 of 'Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy', in her *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[10] I don't think the parallel point about obligations sounds as odd as the present claim about permissions, which is why I emphasize the difference between them.

relation in which those others stand to you (so that the interests of your fellow citizens get less of a top-up than those of your spouse, for instance). But what exactly is the metric of 'distance' that would be required to map this discounting? This is far from obvious.

These worries about the present proposal might push us out to a still more broadly based permission, extending to the next option.

Option 3: My Entire Evaluative, Desiderative, and Motivational Outlook

On this proposal, anything that is part of what Bernard Williams called your '*S*'—anything you care about, prefer, or value—would receive moral deference, and would thus be capable of blocking or putting the brakes on would-be impartial moral demands.[11] In determining what you are morally required to do, morality would have to recognize the special significance to you of all these elements of your *S*.

This proposal has some important virtues, both in terms of its substantive implications and in terms of its possible theoretical grounding.[12] This proposal nicely responds to some of the worries we had about Options 1 and 2. Unlike Option 2, this proposal has a built-in way of demarcating the *scope* of the partiality that is covered by the permission. On this approach, the scope of the permission for partiality would be determined by the scope of what—or whom—you care about. So this proposal would not be subject to the worry we raised above about 'eternal moral verities'. On this view, there wouldn't be any such 'eternal moral verities', as the 'preferred others' for a given person would be picked out by what she cares about—not by some *a priori* demarcation of relations into those that do and those that do not confer extra weight on the relatee's interests. The present proposal could also plausibly propose a metric for *degrees* of permissible partiality: the degree to which someone cares about something (the intensity of her caring, preferring, or valuing) could serve as a metric for fixing the degree of extra weight those factors get in determining what she may do.

Note also that the elements singled out for moral protection by Options 1 and 2 will very probably also receive special deference on this proposal; whereas certain limitations built into Options 1 and 2 will be jettisoned. Option 3 will very probably extend moral protection to your interests and to those of others who are related to you in certain ways, simply because

[11] Bernard Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[12] I discuss only the former here in the main text; see n. 19 for the latter.

you probably *care* distinctively about the advancement of interests falling into these two classes. But the present proposal does not insist that *only* those two categories of interests can receive special moral deference. One of the virtues of the present approach, compared for example with Option 1, is its moving away from a concern for *myself*. Preferences and desires—which of course count as part of my evaluative/desiderative/motivational profile—can be *for* anything: any state of affairs, whether it involves me or not, can be the proper object of a preference or desire on my part, and thereby something whose importance to me morality ought to respect.

This last feature of the present proposal—its flexibility—is attractive, yet also dangerous. Precisely because it is so potentially capacious, the present proposal risks extending moral protection to things that are not clearly proper subjects of such protection. We can see this by deploying a kind of 'remoteness' objection that has been effectively used in other contexts: in political philosophy, for instance, and in debates over theories of well-being.[13] Suppose, for instance, that Jerry's strongest preference is that the Red Sox win the pennant. I don't have in mind a case in which Jerry *is* a Red Sock, or a family member of a Red Sock. Rather, Jerry is just a rabid Red Sox fan, of which there are many in New England. Now Jerry doesn't take himself to be in a position to *do* anything to help them win the pennant—he's a fan, not a collaborator. But as a wish, hope, or preference, this one—that the Red Sox win the pennant—scores very high for intensity. According to the present proposal, then, Jerry ought to be morally permitted to give the interests of the Red Sox *a lot* of weight, as compared for instance to the interests of people with far more urgent needs than the Red Sox whom he could help instead. Does this seem correct? Ought Jerry to have an *agent-centred prerogative* to ignore those people and confer a benefit on the Red Sox, if he's doling out benefits?

We need not definitively settle whether we are comfortable granting the protection of an 'agent-centred prerogative' to 'remote' preferences like these in order to agree that they make a fairly dubious or problematic case for such a prerogative. In other words, if the argument for the necessity of an 'agent-centred prerogative', or for special moral permissions for elements of the 'personal point of view', must extend to cases like these—because these cases present all the features which that argument describes as relevant to grounding the prerogative—then we have not made the job of defending the necessity

[13] For an influential deployment of such considerations in political philosophy, see R. M. Dworkin's discussion of 'external preferences' in his *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), ch. 9. For an example in the context of debates over the nature of well-being, see for instance Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 494.

of such a prerogative easy for ourselves. We would be better served, it seems, by coming up with a rationale that does not apply to just any element of an agent's S, and, in particular, that avoids committing itself to an alleged right to benefit 'remote' others.

That brings us to Option 4.

Option 4: My Projects

This proposal as to what needs or deserves protection from impartial moral demands claims that status only for a particular subset of the items mentioned in Option 3. For goals, aims, and projects are different from mere preferences. That something is one of your preferences, or something you care about, or that you have a 'pro attitude' towards the obtaining of a certain state of affairs, does not entail that it is one of your aims, goals, or projects.[14] Let's pause for a moment to bring out the *distinctive* type of pro attitude towards *p* that is having *p* as a goal or aim, in contrast to other pro attitudes towards *p* such as wishing, hoping, wanting, or preferring.

You and I may both very much prefer that the Democrats win the election and unseat the Republicans. But our relation to that state of affairs that we both desire is different if I volunteer with my local Democratic Party organization and spend time mobilizing voters and working with others to make decisions about campaign strategy, while you do nothing. That, roughly speaking, is the difference between a mere preference or desire and an aim, goal, or project: something's being one of your aims, goals, or projects means not just that you want it to come to pass, but that you intend to bring it about through your own efforts.[15] Your aims, goals, and projects are indeed things you care about, but they are not only things you care about: they are things towards which you are directing your *agency*.[16] Now no doubt one could make subtle distinctions among goals, aims, and projects. In particular, one's projects are not limited to things one is trying to achieve: things for which there is some state of affairs that is the object of one's pursuit. We would want to include in one's projects the *activities* one engages in, even if they are not goal-directed in the narrow sense. For present purposes, however, the important point is the way in which

[14] From among the authors cited in n. 4, Bernard Williams has especially emphasized the significance of an agent's *projects*. See, e.g., his 'A Critique of Utilitarianism' and 'Persons, Character, Morality' (the latter in his *Moral Luck*).

[15] Simon Keller has stressed the difference between desires and goals. See his 'Welfare and the Achievement of Goals', *Philosophical Studies* 121 (2004), pp. 27–41.

[16] What is the currency of this possibly mysterious notion of 'agency'? Roughly, time and energy, rather than mere intensity or strength of preference.

all of these concepts go beyond mere desires and preferences and involve the direction of your agency towards something.

An appeal to *projects* as the target of an 'agent-centred prerogative' has, I think, several notable virtues. First, its substantive content seems more plausible than that of the other options we have considered. An appeal to projects shares the advantages we noted earlier in connection with Option 3. Like Option 3, the present approach avoids the excessive narrowness of Option 1, because the content of your projects extends beyond your own well-being. It also avoids the 'eternal moral verities' difficulty we raised for Option 2. But an appeal to projects seems in the end more plausible than Option 3, because it avoids the latter's problematic breadth. Because the present approach distinguishes projects from mere preferences or wishes, it would not follow from this approach that the Jerry/Red Sox case presents all the features relevant to grounding a special moral permission. An appeal that is limited in this way to projects will in general be less susceptible to such 'remoteness' objections, as anything to which you are devoting your agency is not 'remote' to you in the way an object of mere preference or wish can be.

A second important virtue of this approach is more theoretical in nature. I think it counts strongly in favour of this approach that a plausible theoretical grounding for an agent-centred prerogative focused on projects can be supplied, or at least sketched. I have in mind what Garrett Cullity calls a 'broadly Kantian' argument: his useful label for arguments that seek to bring to light certain presuppositions of the moral demands to which agents are subject, but that themselves support a tempering of those demands.[17] Here is a quick argument of this kind in favour of morality's showing some kind of special deference towards an agent's projects. Moral demands are, by definition, addressed to *agents*: anything that is subject to a moral demand is, necessarily, an agent. Since morality is necessarily addressed to agents, it seems plausible that it must reflect the *nature* of agents. Here is one pertinent fact about agents: they have projects. (This seems a conceptual, or anyway a necessary, truth about agents.) Furthermore, an agent's projects are necessarily of special significance to him: for me to have something as a project *is* for me to be focusing my energies on it in a way I am not doing for other perhaps equally meritorious pursuits.[18] To ask agents not to do this would be to ask them not to be agents. Morality,

[17] Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, ch. 6.

[18] Cf. Ibid., pp. 130–31. We could think also, in this connection, of the special structuring role in practical reasoning of plans and intentions, which Michael Bratman has stressed. To intend to do something is for that course of action to have a special role in your practical reasoning compared with equally meritorious options that you did not select. See Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

then, must not make such a demand; it must, rather, recognize the special significance to agents of their own projects, and permit them to accord those projects special weight. Otherwise it implicitly denies their status as agents.[19]

Because of the substantive and theoretical virtues we've noted, I'm inclined to think that an appeal couched in terms of *projects* makes the best case for moral deference to (certain elements of) 'the personal point of view'. So *if* we could fit partiality under this rubric, it seems that this could only help in making the case for a moral permission to be partial to certain others. I want now to turn to that question, and explore to what extent we could get the partial permissions we are looking for from this approach to tempering morality's demands.

2. Projects and Partiality

At first glance a prerogative focusing on the agent's *projects* and *agency* might seem conceptually rather distant from partiality as such. Our initial working gloss on partiality defined it as special concern for the interests of certain others; and by 'special concern for their interests' we meant attaching more weight to their interests than to other people's, for example by directing benefits to them in preference to others. This seems to correspond poorly with any 'protected zone' we could hope to establish on the basis of an appeal to the special significance to an agent of his projects. There won't be any *direct* right to favour the interests of certain people within this picture; we shall have such a right only to the extent that, and for the reason that, such conduct counts as pursuing our projects. So if it were one of my *projects* to advance your welfare, *then* my doing so would receive some degree of deference from morality; otherwise not.[20] This kind of approach, then, does not seem liable to generate a permission for partiality as such.

[19] Samuel Scheffler, in his contribution to this volume (Chapter 5), appears to suggest a similar 'broadly Kantian' style of argument, but one that takes off from 'our nature as valuing creatures' rather than, as here, from our nature as *agents* ('for morality to reject partiality in a general or systematic way would be for it to set itself against our nature as valuing creatures', p. 100). Note that one could also offer an argument with this same 'broadly Kantian' structure on behalf of Option 3, asserting at the pertinent stage of the argument that agents necessarily have their own evaluative/desiderative/motivational profiles and that these necessarily involve their giving special weight to the things they care about. I cannot enter here into a full discussion of the comparative merits of these different versions of the 'broadly Kantian' argument. But because the basis of the argument I proffer in the text seems to me slimmer and narrower than the one that an argument for Option 3 would require, I would think the former argument more secure.

[20] I ignore for simplicity the possibility that my advancing your welfare might be (instrumentally) necessary for the success of some *other* project I am pursuing.

However, I think there is more to be said about the connection between the present approach and the possibility of justifying partial conduct. In this section of the chapter I want to underline some aspects of the project-based approach that seem to bring it conceptually closer to what is on our mind when we stress the need for morality to leave space for partiality. When we do this, I think, we are not so much insisting on a right to preferential treatment in the abstract, but, rather, we are thinking especially of the special concern characteristic of certain *relationships*. We want to be sure, that is, that we are morally free to manifest the special concern we have for our friends, our children, our loved ones, our students. (Let's call these, generically, our 'Rs', for 'relatees'.) But what does that 'special concern' for our Rs actually amount to? I think it is time to look more deeply into that notion: this will bring out a heretofore unnoticed connection to the strategy that highlights projects and agency.

In general—and here we begin to depart from our original working gloss on partiality —I think that 'special concern' is very inadequately characterized as simply favouring your Rs' interests, conferring benefits on them in preference to other people. To return to the case of friendship with which we opened the chapter, the 'special concern' we have for our friends certainly does not primarily take the form of a differential tendency to confer benefits on them. Indeed, that would be a caricature of the 'special concern' that friendship involves.[21] If we looked more deeply into the moral psychology of friendship (as some philosophers have done, including myself on other occasions[22]), we would find as far more salient phenomena such things as emotional openness and responsiveness to our friend, 'being there for' our friend, esteem for our friend's particular qualities, loyalty to our friend, shared activity, and simply enjoying spending time with our friend. None of these is easily reduced to a preference for our friend's interests. This is not to deny that 'we would do things for a friend that we wouldn't do for just anyone'. Admittedly, I am more likely to help a friend move house than I would be to help just anyone move house. But it would be misguided to put forward cases like these as expressing the heart of the 'special concern' that friends have for each other.

To take another example introduced earlier, I think it would be correct to say that I have a 'special concern' for my students and supervisees. As mentioned earlier, I work with them to develop the clarity and vigour of their writing,

[21] Cullity argues at pp. 130–3 of *The Moral Demands of Affluence* that friendship is clearly not 'about' conferring cash gifts on our friends, or, more generally, differentially advancing our friends' interests.

[22] For works on the moral psychology of friendship, see, e.g., Sarah Stroud, 'Epistemic Partiality in Friendship', *Ethics* 116 (2006), pp. 498–524, and Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett, 'Friendship and the Self', *Ethics* 108 (1998), pp. 502–27.

their analytic acuity, their trust in their own philosophical judgement, their standards of meticulousness, and their own distinctive philosophical interests, in a way that I don't work with other equally meritorious people at their stage who do not happen to be studying with me. So it would not be false to say that I am advancing their interests in a way that I am not advancing others' interests. But again it would seem wrong-headed to encapsulate my 'special concern' for these students as a 'special concern' to advance their interests, in the sense of attaching more weight—in some generic way—to their interests than to other people's when making decisions. For example, if I had some money that for some reason I was going to give away, I wouldn't be any more likely to bestow it on my students: I don't think it would even occur to me to make them the special beneficiaries of my *financial* largesse. My 'special concern' for them takes other forms; a generic extra weighting of their interests is too blunt an instrument to capture the sense in which I am 'partial' to *my* students over other people's students.

The partiality that is manifested in certain paradigmatic personal relationships is, then, very imperfectly conceptualized as a matter of attaching extra weight to or favouring certain people's interests in one's decisions. What seems most distinctive about the personal relationships we have discussed, I submit, is not that we have a differential concern for these people's *interests*, but rather that we devote our *agency* (our time, our energy) to these relationships and to the specific activities they consist in. This much better picks out the sense in which I devote special care and attention to my students and friends. But now a tie emerges to the conceptual framework we used in the context of the appeal to the 'personal point of view' when we settled on an interpretation of the latter in terms of *projects* and *agency*. There is after all a conceptual link, then, between the notions that we deployed to ground an agent-centred prerogative, and the type of partiality that is constitutive of close personal relationships. This suggests that the project-based approach we are presently exploring *does* have the potential to generate a permission for me to manifest these forms of special concern, in so far as I have a permission to direct my agency towards my projects and aims.

We can bring out a further relevant dimension of the project-based or agency-based approach by highlighting another inadequacy of thinking of partiality simply in terms of a preference for conferring benefits on certain people over others. Our Rs figure in that approach only as (passive) recipients of our beneficence. But that seems especially inapposite for personal relationships, because one very salient element of those relationships is joint participation, *as agents*, in some shared activity or pursuit. Here we take up the Aristotelian idea that *shared activity* is a constitutive element and characteristic expression of

philia,[23] interpreting that claim broadly to include the joint pursuit of shared goals and aims. Indeed, when you and I are in a personal relationship, I want to suggest that we very often form a 'we' in a sufficiently robust sense that we can speak of *plural* or *collective* or *shared agency*.[24] One can clearly see this in the case of spouses, where many 'we'-statements such as 'we are having people over' or 'we decided to move house' will unquestionably be true and seem genuinely to refer to the actions of a plural agent. But the point also holds of other relationships. My students and I are jointly pursuing their intellectual and philosophical development. My colleagues and I work together to offer a well-balanced array of courses to undergraduates. My daughter and I practise piano together each evening. My fellow campaign workers and I are trying to get the vote out next Tuesday. It seems the partners in a variety of relationships often constitute a 'we'-agent.

I would suggest that these instances of co-agency are typical or even characteristic of personal relationships, and that they are much more salient in the moral psychology of such relationships than a simple favouring of your Rs' interests. As we might put it, rather picturesquely, 'with' is the preposition of choice between 'I' and 'you': it's what I do *with* you, not what I do *to* or *for* you, that we should be focusing on.[25] Let's make the bold conjecture that such co-agency is ethically significant: that my entering into plural agency with you affects the ethical landscape facing me. This might well be germane to the issue of permissible partiality. For if we are granting moral significance to the fact that I invest my agency in collective pursuits with you, this already marks you off as occupying a special moral place in relation to S.S.; this already distinguishes you from the other individuals with whom I do not form plural agents. After all, I've chosen to form a plural agent with you, which plural agent has projects of its own; and I haven't done that with others. Indeed, if we were prepared to identify my participation in joint projects together with you as the heart of the sense in which I am 'partial' to you, the fact of such co-agency could be the main source of permissible partiality.

[23] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bks VIII, IX.

[24] Such 'plural agency' has been extensively explored by Margaret Gilbert and Michael Bratman, among others. See Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989), *Living Together: Rationality, Sociality, and Obligation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), and *Sociality and Responsibility: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), and Michael Bratman, *Faces of Intention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chs 5–8, and *Structures of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 13. The scope and precise analysis of shared or plural agency are controversial, but we need not resolve all the metaphysical issues surrounding collective agents in order to suggest, as I do here, that plural agency is an important dimension to consider in analysing the moral standing and import of personal relationships.

[25] On this picture, for instance, we should focus more on the fact that I practise piano with my daughter every day than on the fact that I pay for her piano lessons.

But are we prepared to do this? Here are some considerations, on both the 'pro' and the 'con' sides, to think about further. On this approach, what we find by way of 'a permission for partiality' within morality is actually a permission to pursue and engage in projects, notably of the plural kind. From a theoretical point of view, then, this model is pleasingly economical, because it folds *relationships* as grounds for moral permissions under something that was playing that role anyway, namely *projects*.[26] In terms of its substantive content, this model would confer special moral consideration on those with whom we form plural agents. Indeed, this model would yield something like the concentric circles of 'self-referential permissions' that we discussed earlier under Option 2. But this time that structure would come with some added benefits that were absent the first time around. Those include a clear demarcation of who gets a 'circle': our co-agents. Furthermore, by adding a dollop of voluntarism to the picture, we would avoid the 'eternal moral verities' problem. On this view, the selection of people I am permitted to favour is sensitive to my choices, rather than being determined by some 'eternal moral verity'.[27] Finally, this line would appear to give thumbs down to moral permissions in 'remoteness' cases like that of Jerry and the Red Sox, or in cases in which someone habitually wishes to give preference to, say, his own ethnic group. The present approach would refuse to grant any special moral dispensation to those preferences and desires, because there's no plural agency present in these cases. This may in fact be a welcome result.

However, despite these important theoretical and substantive virtues, the proposal is still at least somewhat revisionist: its fit with the partiality we would like to be allowed to exhibit may seem notably imperfect. It seems to me that there are two general types of case where the present approach would have trouble justifying partiality that we might well want to see protected. (I simply

[26] Although the broad strategy of argument of this chapter obviously owes much to the work of Samuel Scheffler, the present approach diverges in this important respect from the direction Scheffler has taken in his recent work. An important theme of his recent work is that there are at least two *distinct* categories of agent-relative reasons that morality must take account of: 'project-dependent reasons' and 'relationship-dependent reasons'. See his 'Projects, Relationships, and Reasons', in R. Jay Wallace *et al.* (eds), *Reason and Value: Themes from the Philosophy of Joseph Raz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 247–69, and his chapter in the present volume (Chapter 5), in which he proposes a further distinct category of such reasons, 'membership-dependent reasons'. While this is not the place to engage more fully with the rich picture Scheffler has developed, were one to wish to consider further the potential merits and demerits of the present approach it would certainly be important to compare it carefully with Scheffler's more nuanced but theoretically less parsimonious model.

[27] I should underline again that the present inquiry concerns only the grounding of (pure) moral *permissions*. It would not, in my view, be equally plausible to hold that there must be a voluntaristic underpinning to all special *obligations*. (On this latter issue see Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chs 3, 4, 6.)

present these for your consideration here, without trying to determine what might be the most effective line of response, or indeed whether there is one.) First, because the partial permissions this approach can secure are triggered by joint agency, those permissions would apply only within the context of that joint agency. Your special moral permissions, in other words, would not extend to your Rs' interests in general: this model does not grant you a permission to favour your co-agents' interests outside the context of your respective joint projects with them. This line of argument, then, allows you to favour the *project*, but not the other person's interests *per se*. (One might even say: the project but not the person.) So if the cellist in my quintet needs a new bow and is too poor to buy one, I might be permitted to direct money that could otherwise go to famine relief to the cause of getting her one, in so far as that makes possible the continuation of a collective project in which I am engaged: playing the Schumann Quintet. But if she needs money for reasons unrelated to the quintet project, then it seems I can send my money to famine relief without any cost to *my* (or *our*) *projects*; so on the present approach I would not have the same moral case for directing it to her instead.

A second potential problem is that some cases of partial attachment that we would have thought it important to protect against voracious moral demands will not easily qualify as cases of plural agency or joint projects at all, and thus will not fall within the scope of the moral protections this approach can secure. This will be the case, notably, for all close attachments to someone who is not an agent, and thus *a fortiori* not part of a plural agent with you.[28] A leading example here might be a new parent's devotion to and love for his newborn, and the fierce concern for her interests that he will feel. This is a prime example of the kind of personal attachment to which we want to be free to devote ourselves, and yet because a newborn is arguably not an agent at all this case does not fit easily under the present rubric. It may sound forced and over-intellectualized to say that the parent and his baby are jointly pursuing some project; but if we don't say that, then it seems the notion of plural agency can offer us no assistance.[29]

[28] A different type of case involves an attachment between two people who *are* both agents, but whose relationship no longer involves much shared agency. Think of an old friend who has for years lived thousands of miles from you, or the relationship between grown children and parents who live in different cities.

[29] Of course, we could fall back here on an *individual* project as grounds for the relevant moral permission. For even if there is no collective project here to protect, there is at least an individual project on the part of the parent, who presumably devotes considerable time and energy (the basic currencies, if you recall, of agency) to the advancement of his child's development and welfare. It is not clear that this gives an intuitively satisfying description of the morally relevant aspects of the case, however.

In considering further a project-based approach to the question of permissible partiality we shall clearly have to think about how much revisionism we are prepared to tolerate for the sake of the theoretical and substantive virtues I have highlighted. I do hope these are sufficient to place such an approach on the menu of options that should be considered as we seek to understand and, if possible, to validate permissible partiality.