

One Thought More on Partiality

Abstract

Given sufficient time and inclination, one could compile a comprehensive list of all the persons to whom one bears associative reasons and duties of partiality. But how might one explain the List? A natural place to start would be with the three theories of partiality that dominate the philosophical literature. The Relationships Theory says all and only those person with whom we share relationships comprised of shared histories which we have reason to value intrinsically make the List; the Individuals Theory explains the List by reference to the unique value and qualities of the particular persons upon it; and the Projects Theory says the explanation of The List derives not from our relationships or our others, but from our personal projects in which they are implicated. However, it turns out that each of these explanations of the List of persons towards whom one bears associative reasons and duties is problematically inadequate. In this paper, I suggest a different explanation derived from Philip Pettit's account of robustly demanding goods. On this account, it is not our relationships, our others, or our projects we should look to for explanations of The List, but rather the robustly demanding relationship good of special concern.

Keywords Associative duties · Partiality · Special relationships · Philip Pettit

Introduction

Given sufficient time and inclination, I could compile a comprehensive list of all the persons in the world with whom I share interpersonal relationships of the kind capable of generating associative reasons and duties of partiality. But how might we explain the List? What, for example, could explain why my best friend Tommy appears on my List, but your friend – call her Jane (a stranger to me) – does not? Suppose I am standing on a pier and Tommy and this Jane are drowning and I can only save one. In that situation, I would save Tommy. And if asked to justify why, a common-sense response predictably presents: because Tommy’s my friend! Indeed, famously, Bernard Williams once suggested that to seek to provide any further justification in a case like this would amount to having ‘one thought too many’ (1981: 18). Undaunted by Williams’s admonishment, however, many have in fact sought to provide ‘one thought more’ by way of fleshing out the implicature of the common sense response. Those persuaded by the Individuals Theory of partiality suggest the explanation is really “*Tommy is my friend*”, whereby it is something about Tommy and the special value and qualities he possesses that explains why I bear associative reasons and duties towards him. For proponents of the Relationships Theory, the explanation is rather that “*Tommy is my friend*”, where what explains the fact that I have associative reasons and duties towards Tommy is something about the valuable relationship we share. On the Projects Theory, the explanation is more like “*Tommy is my friend*”, hence I bear the associative reasons and duties towards him that I do because Tommy and the friendship we share are essentially implicated in my personal projects (Keller, 2013: 74).

Unsurprisingly, then, each of the three dominant theories of partiality can explain why I would be justified in saving Tommy, and not Jane. And perhaps they are all even capable of providing some explanation of why Tommy makes my List in the first place. But none, it seems – or so I will argue – yields an entirely adequate explanation of why Jane *does not* make my List. Or, at least, each struggles to offer an explanation of why she doesn’t make the List of persons to whom I bear associative reasons and duties that avoids what Simon Keller terms the problem of ‘primitivism’ (2013: 114). To tease out that problem, consider that the world comprises billions of individuals, billions of relationships, and billions of projects, only a miniscule number of which ground (if they do) agent-relative associative reasons and duties of partiality for me. That is, reasons to do thing for, to and with persons that I would not otherwise have were they, our relationship, or the projects in which they are essentially implicated not in some sense mine. But, then, what about your equally valuable others, relationships and projects that

aren't mine? What could explain why some of those don't warrant benefitting from my partial concern and treatment? If the answer the various theories offer ultimately reduces to 'because they're not mine', that would seem unsatisfying, for surely a reasonable expectation of any plausible philosophical theory of partiality is precisely that it moves us beyond these kinds of primitive explanations.

In this paper, I propose we can meet this challenge of providing a non-primitive explanation of the List by developing an alternative theory of partiality (or the beginnings thereof, at least) derived from Philip Pettit's (2015) account of robustly demanding goods. On this account, it is not our relationships, our others, or our projects we should look to for explanations of The List (although all are inevitably implicated), but rather the good of robust special concern we typically enjoy in our personal relationships. Over the first three sections, I tease out some of the problems that variously afflict the Individuals Theory, the Relationships Theory and the Project Theory respectively. Having shown them each to be problematically inadequate as explanations of the List of persons towards whom I bear associative reasons and duties of partiality, I go on in section four to develop the Robust Concern Theory of partiality. In section five, then, I canvas two foreseeable objections to this account.

1 The Individuals Theory

According to the Individuals Theory, it is something about persons and the unique value and qualities they possess in their own right – the value to which one responds when one acts well in special relationships – that renders partiality towards them normatively appropriate (Keller, 2013; Lord, 2016; Velleman, 1999). Thus, the associative reasons and duties of partiality I have towards Tommy – i.e. reasons and duties to do things for, to and with him that I do not have towards all persons – are grounded by facts about the unique special value he possesses as an individual in his own right and indeed would possess irrespective of being my best friend. But straight away the Individuals Theory looks poorly equipped to be able to explain the List of persons towards whom I bear associative reasons and duties of partiality. For without referencing something extrinsic to the persons with whom you share special relationships as the grounds of your reasons and duties of partiality towards them, and assuming there are other persons in the world who are equally as valuable, good, and virtuous as they are, it is difficult to see how the Individuals Theory can explain why your partiality should be fixed on those persons with whom you share relationships rather than those you do not. Thus, assuming your

friend Jane is just as funny, honest, faithful, loyal, sharp and kind as my friend Tommy, it hard to see why she doesn't make my List whilst Tommy does.

Perhaps proponents of the Individuals Theory might respond that an individual's self-standing value is more than merely the sum of their qualities, however conceived. That it is rather in the unique constellation of Tommy's qualities, and all the manifold little details, perfections and imperfections he comprises, or his sheer Kantian personhood perhaps as J. David Velleman might say (1999: 363-364), that his true value resides. As I become more alive to Tommy's rational Kantian nature – more attuned to his special value, I let down my protective walls and allow myself to become emotionally vulnerable to him; I come, that, is to love him, and the more I do – the more vividly I come to really see his special value – the more it becomes a source of special reasons for me. Jane to be sure warrants the required minimum of Kantian respect of me too, as do all persons, but in coming to love Tommy, my valuation of him comes to require of me the optional maximum response to his Kantian rational nature, which in turn explains why I have associative reasons and duties towards Tommy and not equally valuable Jane (Velleman, 1999: 365-366). Harry Frankfurt similarly sees love as a response to the unique special value of one's beloved defined as utterly irreducible to her qualities and characteristics:

The focus of a person's love is not those general and hence repeatable characteristics that make his beloved *describable*. Rather, it is the specific particularity that makes his beloved *nameable* – something that is more mysterious than describability, and that is in any case manifestly impossible to define (Frankfurt, 1999: 170).

Taking a subtly different approach, Keller says that in order to understand how reasons of partiality are generated by the special value of persons, we must pay particular attention to the fact 'that a person...has a point of view...a particular, distinct perspective on the world' (2013: 142) in which their value as a person is tied up. He goes on: 'Because a person has a point of view, it makes sense to think of yourself as seeing things from another person's point of view, and...to perform an act for a person, or on behalf of a person, or for the sake of a person...The closer the attention you pay to a person's value, the closer you come to seeing the world as if from her point of view' (Keller, 2013: 143).

However, it will not do to say Tommy makes my List whilst Jane does not 'because he's Tommy!' where what is implied is his Kantian rational nature, his nameability, or his unique perspective on the world, for Jane may just as well say 'but what about me? I'm Jane! I bear

all those properties too!’ Moreover, what if I were intimately acquainted Jane’s special value and qualities? Suppose Jane is the famous English primatologist Dame Jane Goodall, and me her biggest fan, long-time admirer, and erstwhile biographer. Perhaps in my admiration for her work I have made it my mission to try and see the world as she does; to make her travails my travails; perhaps I even come to love her in some sense. And, yet, she does not make my List of persons towards whom I bear associative reasons and duties of partiality.

To be clear, this is not to deny that I have reasons for special concern for Dame Jane, or even to deny that I may have non-associative reasons of partiality towards her. There is no incongruity with saying that I have grounds for special concern for Dame Jane as we can distinguish reasons *for* special concern from reasons *of* partiality. The former references the reasons that explain your special concern or disposition to be partial towards someone; the latter the reasons you have to actually perform certain acts explained by your special concern. As such, if I have a special concern for Dame Jane, it is one thing to suppose there must be some reason for it (e.g. because I greatly admire the work she has done with chimpanzees). However, the question of whether I have reasons *of* partiality – reasons to act in certain ways or do things for, to, or with Dame Jane – and what they might be, is quite another. Moreover, there is a perfectly intelligible sense in which I do have reasons of partiality towards Dame Jane. If she and a stranger were drowning I might well see myself as having reason to save Dame Jane over the stranger. But though a reason of partiality, this reason is not ‘special’ in the requisite sense to qualify as an associative reason of partiality, for here ‘special’ does not straightforwardly imply greater in the way it does in ‘special concern’. Rather associative reasons of partiality are special in the requisite sense iff they are special to me or agent-relative. What matters for agent-relative reasons, is not so much that the *object* is mine, but that the *reason* is mine specifically; that is, the reason takes as its essential point of reference the reason-bearing agent and not the reason-recipient object (Raustøl, 2010:17-18; see also Pettit, 1987: 75). If this were not so, we would call them ‘object-relative’ reasons; but we do not. Thus, since my reason to save Dame Jane is not ‘special’ in the requisite agent-relative sense, but rather a role-relative reason insofar as it would be as much a reason for anyone her who admires her in equal measure, that, in part, explains her absence from my List.

How, then, might the Individuals Theory explain why Dame Jane does not make my List of persons towards whom I bear associative reasons and duties of partiality? Perhaps the best it can say is that the vivid awareness of the special value of someone you share a socially salient

special relationship with *is just different* from the awareness (no matter how fastidiously cultivated) you have of the special value of someone with whom you share no salient relationship. That is, my intimate familiarity with Tommy's special value, Kantian rational nature, or perspective on the world will, by any stretch of the imagination be qualitatively deeper than my familiarity with Jane Goodall, no matter how obsessed with her I am. If so, then the endpoint of the Individuals Theory looks to be that when you form relationships with people and become intimately familiar with their particular special value, their value *just does* become reason-creating for you in a way other persons' unique value is not.

2 The Relationships Theory

Proponents of the Relationships Theory are swift to criticise this capitulation to primitivism and to show how their view can avoid it. For them the key to explaining the List lies in recognising that it is the special relationships themselves that ground associative reasons and duties of partiality, not individuals (Kolodny, 2010; Lazar, 2016; Scheffler, 2001). However, there is a perfectly good sense in which I can be said to stand in a special relationship with Dame Jane, me being her ardent admirer. If so, then this poses a puzzle for the Relationships Theory: why do certain of my special relationships (e.g. my relationship with Tommy), but not others (e.g. my relationship with Dame Jane) make the List of relationships that generate associative reasons and duties of partiality for me? As previously suggested, part of the explanation might have to do with the fact that the reasons I might have towards Dame are not properly agent-relative 'associative' reasons. But one cannot render reasons of partiality agent-relative by stipulation for to do so would be question-begging. Part of the puzzle, after all, is to explain why all and only the relationships on my List generate associative reasons and duties agent-relative to me.

Suppose the two people drowning in the pier case were Tommy and Dame Jane. In this case, I would feel obligated to save Tommy. And the Relationships Theory offers what looks like a viable three-move explanation of why this would be. The first is to say I value my relationship to Tommy intrinsically whereas my relationship to Dame Jane (such as it is) is merely extrinsically valuable, and so the fact I value them differently explains why the former yields associative reasons and duties whilst the latter does not. As Samuel Scheffler argues, to value one's own friendships, familial relationships, romantic relationships, etc. non-instrumentally, just is, amongst other things, to see oneself as having associative reasons and duties towards

friends, family members, lovers, etc. (2001: 100).¹ But suppose I do intrinsically value my relationship to Dame Jane Goodall (it is not inconceivable that I could). And if I do, does the fact I do make it so that I have associative reasons and duties of partiality towards her? In response, proponents of the Relationships Theory will reply (enter the second move): no, for it is not appropriate for me to value my relationship to Dame Jane Goodall intrinsically because it does not in fact possess properties that could warrant such a response (Lazar, 2016).

However, if it is only those relationships that one has reason to value intrinsically that ground associative reasons and duties, this only really postpones the challenge, for now what we would want to know is: what exactly is it about all and only those relationships of mine that make the List that explains why I have reason to value them intrinsically? An obvious response might be to point out that my friendship with Tommy is a socially salient interpersonal relationship, whereas the relationship of fandom I stand in to Dame Jane is not like that at all. However, the property of being an interpersonal relationship cannot be the whole story, for that could not explain why my relationships to my bank manager, my dentist, my landlord, etc. – all of which are interpersonal relationships – do not make the List. What might, however, be the fact that none of these interpersonal relationships are comprised of the kind of deeply personal shared history that our relationships to our nearest and dearest typically are.

This incorporation of the property of shared histories, then, is the third move proponents of the Relationships Theory might make in explaining the List. Arguably the most sophisticated variant of this claim is that which Niko Kolodny develops by appeal to what he calls ‘a neglected form of normative explanation, “resonance”’ (2010: 177-185). To bring out the essence of this concept, I quote at length here a nicely illustrative example Kolodny uses to rebuff the reductionist claim that friendship is merely gratitude many times over:

Imagine a lone traveller of a bygone age, making his way west. Along the way, he helps and is helped by the people dwelling in the places he passes through, creating and incurring various debts. Contrast him with a different traveller who helps and is helped in the same ways, but by one and the same companion throughout. The companioned traveller has reason for responses that are not simply the sum of the responses for which the companionless traveller has reason, but just re-focused, as it were, on a single person. The companionless traveller has accumulated a series of debts that he might repay and then move on. But things are not like that for the companioned traveller. He has reason for a concern for his friend’s interests that

¹ Whereas Scheffler talks of non-instrumental valuing, I speak of intrinsically valuing so as to avoid confusion, since aside from non-instrumentally valuing X as an end (i.e. intrinsically), it is also perfectly coherent to non-instrumentally value X extrinsically (Arrell, 2014: 169-170).

is open-ended: that keeps no ledger and that asks only that like concern be reciprocated. And he has reason not to move on, but instead to sustain his friendship going forward. Their history together roots an expansive loyalty, in a way in which no string of encounters with a changing cast could. Such is the distinctive kind of importance that only a shared history with another person can have (Kolodny, 2010: 183).

Generalising from this, Kolodny proposes that shared histories of encounter (such as that between the companioned travellers) give one reason to respond to them in a way that ‘resonates with’ or ‘is similar to the way that one has reason to respond to the discrete encounters of which it is composed, but that reflects the distinctive importance of a history shared with another person’ (Kolodny, 2010: 183). Thus, Kolodny’s resonance argument would yield the following explanation of the Tommy/Dame Jane case: the friendship Tommy and I share belongs on my List because I have reason to respond to our history of encounter in a way that is similar to the way I have reason to respond to the discrete encounters of which it is composed, but that reflects the distinctive importance of the particular history Tommy and I share. Since Dame Jane and I share no personal history of encounter, that is what explains why that relationship it is not on my List of relationships that ground associative reasons and duties of partiality. For in the absence of any such history, there is, as it were, nothing for partiality to ‘resonate’ with.

If Kolodny’s resonance argument goes through, it answers the challenge of explaining what it is about all and only those relationships of that make my List that gives me reason to value them intrinsically. It is in virtue of the shared history of encounter that Tommy and I share that I have reason to value our friendship distinctively, to respond to it in the distinctive fashion I do, and to perform the associative reasons and duties it generates as a result. The problem, however, is that this only postpones the challenge again, for clearly other people have intrinsically valuable friendships composed of deeply personal shared histories of encounter too. Think back to the original pier case in which Tommy and your friend Jane (a stranger to me) are both drowning. And suppose you (also a stranger to me) are Jane’s friend and are standing on the same pier as me (although we are each unaware of the presence of the other) and you too can only save one person. Assuming your friendship with Jane is as valuable to you as mine and Tommy’s is to me, and that as such each friendship generates associative reasons, what we now have are two equally stringent associative reasons of partiality in the vicinity: (i) an associative reason to save Tommy; and (ii) an associative reason to save Jane. If we think I ought to save Tommy and you ought to save Jane, the question then becomes:

why does (i) – the associative reason to save Tommy – cleave to me; whilst (ii) – the associative reason to save Jane – cleaves to you?

In response, proponents of the Relationships Theory might simply bite the bullet and concede that the best we can say is that we *just do* value our own intrinsically valuable relationships differently to those of others, but note that any repudiation of this would involve rejecting fundamental categories of human valuation in a way that no plausible moral framework can countenance (Scheffler, 2010: 106). Nevertheless, the point remains: if the best proponents of the Relationships Theory can say is one's own intrinsically valuable shared histories of encounter *just do* generate associative reasons for you in a way the intrinsically valuable shared histories of encounter of others do not, then their account of partiality is ultimately no less unsatisfying than that of the Individuals Theory (Keller, 2013: 138). It might be of some help for meeting the challenge Kolodny tackles: that of explaining why certain of my own relationships (e.g. my relationship with Tommy) make the List of relationships that generate associative reasons and duties for me, whilst others (e.g. my relationship with Dame Jane) do not. But it is of no help with the real puzzle of partiality: that of explaining why certain relationships (e.g. my friendship with Tommy) make the List of relationships that generate associative reasons and duties for me, whilst others (e.g. your friendship with Jane) do not. And if that is right, then it seems this philosophical excursus on the back of the Relationship Theory has simply brought us (albeit via a different route to the Individuals Theory) to just another primitive common-sense justification of my partiality towards Tommy: because it's my friendship!

3 The Projects Theory

Can the Projects Theory do better by way of yielding a non-primitive explanation of the List? Perhaps it can. Firstly, the Projects Theory can explain why neither your friend Jane nor the relationship you and Jane share feature on my List, for neither of them are implicated in my personal projects the way Tommy and the friendship we share is. And to attach special significance to your own projects straightforwardly is, amongst other things, to see them as reason-creating for you. Thus, to deny that agents' projects generate such agent-relative reasons would seem to require a repudiation of our understanding of persons as agents, and arguably no plausible moral framework could make such a demand (Stroud, 2010: 142-143). But doesn't this merely mirror the response just proffered on behalf of the Relationships Theory? Side by side the respective claims are: (i) to attach special significance to one's own

relationships is simply part of what it is to be human; and (ii) to attach special significance to one's own projects is simply part of what it is to be an agent. We need not deny either, but plausibly (i) still stands in need of normative justification in a way that (ii) does not. If a person did not attach special significance to their own relationships we would likely think that inappropriate, and that implies there must be deeper normative reasons at work. By contrast, if an agent did not attach special significance to their own projects it is less obvious what grounds there would be for moral censure. Indeed, it is not clear in what sense they would even remain an agent. As John Cottingham puts it: 'the principle of according a special extra weight to one's own concerns just because they are one's own... is one which seems an essential prerequisite for thinking of oneself as a human agent, as an individual, as a person with a distinctive identity' (1986: 364). Thus, it is not merely that my projects *just do* matter to me in a way your projects don't, but rather that were I to cease to attach special significance to my projects, there is a sense I which I would cease to be an agent at all. By contrast, if I were to disavow attaching special significance to my special relationships, I would not of course cease to be human for all that. Secondly, the Projects Theory might also be able to make a similar move to the shared personal histories move the Relationships Theory makes that would enable it to explain why Dame Jane is not on my List. For proponents of that view may plausibly hold that historically non-reciprocal projects like these are incapable of making the List. That is, since my personal projects in which Dame Jane is implicated are normatively individualistic – consisting solely of reasons on my part whilst furnishing Dame Jane with no special reasons towards me, nor special claims against me – that is why she doesn't make my List.

However, the cost to proponents of the Projects Theory of leveraging the normatively individualistic proviso to explain Dame Jane's absence from my List is steep indeed. For even though many *projects* are not historically non-reciprocal, the types of *reasons* even those projects ground are inherently 'normatively individualistic' (Scheffler, 2010: 111). And this being so renders the Projects Theory singularly ill-equipped to explain why some associative reasons are *duties* of partiality. On the Relationships Theory, our relationships ground two corresponding sets of reasons: the reasons of partiality I have towards you; and the reasons you have to form normative expectations that I will respond to your interests in an appropriately partial fashion. And your reasons prevent me (morally-speaking) from disregarding mine. However, no such parallel exists regarding reasons grounded by projects. As Scheffler writes: '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’ (2010: 111). For example, suppose one of my personal projects is to complete a full marathon. Whilst my project plausibly generates special reasons for me to hold myself to a training regime, we do not think my failure to do so generates normative grounds for complaint on the part of anyone else. These kinds of project-grounded reasons simply lack the reciprocal normativity characteristic of relationship-grounded reasons, since I retain the unilateral authority to disregard the former in a way I cannot the latter. Thus, whatever project-grounded reasons I may have, if I can, by an act of my subjective will and without moral censure, unilaterally divest myself of the projects that ground them (thereby unilaterally divesting myself of the reasons themselves), then by definition they cannot be duties.

There are at least two responses a defender of the Projects Theory might look to in repelling this claim. The first is that if you count being a good son, daughter, mother, father, friend, lover, etc. amongst your projects; and being a good son, daughter, mother, father, friend, or lover means sometimes being required to provide for them the good of your partiality; then it may seem that in such cases your project are a source of duties. The problem with this response, however, lies with the thought that it is possible to lack, or by some ill-motivated feat or another, divest oneself of one’s project to be a good son, father, lover, or friend. It may be heinously cruel, stupid, and selfish to do so, but to the extent it can be successfully achieved, nothing remains to which proponents of the Projects Theory can appeal in order to establish project-grounded associative duties. In the 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, for example, one of the protagonists Clementine has her ex-boyfriend Joel erased from her memory (or, for our purposes, her projects). In the wake of the procedure, she has absolutely no idea who he is, and is completely unaware that they once had a romantic relationship. But assuming she is aware the procedure exists, although utterly unaware that she has had it, we could I think, if we somehow found a way to prove to her that she and Joel were once a couple, convince her that she owes him *something* in virtue of the loving relationship they once shared, even if she has no memory of it anymore. What we could not say in our attempts to entreat her to help lift him out of his depression, is that she owes it to him because of the pivotal role he or the relationship they once shared plays in her personal projects or sense of self. After all, once she has him erased from her projects, nothing remains that could be appealed to at all. Of course, project-erasure on this scale is somewhat fantastical, but the same point holds for more plausible cases. I might decide that really, what I am all about – what defines me – is helping those living in severe poverty, and that I should give myself over to this project 100% heart

and soul, and if this means effectively deserting my children to go and live in those places where my help is most needed, well so be it. Yet, however successful I may be in divesting myself of the project of a good father, most of us would not think that by doing so I can thereby also successfully divest myself of my parental duties, but the fact that I cannot is something that the Projects Theory lacks the normative capacity to explain.

A second response might look to *joint* projects, and point out that, as a matter of fact, those kinds of projects often do generate duties. If in training for the marathon, you and I commit to training for it together, then perhaps we do have duties to show up for scheduled training sessions. Or maybe I have committed to co-authoring a book with you, and am thus obligated to see it through in a way I might not be if I were the sole author of the book. However, it seems that for the most part, when joint projects like these generate obligations, it is usually because some kind of contractual agreement or promissory commitment has been made. This is most obviously so when you and I are relative strangers. If we are not strangers – say we are old friends who have decided to run the marathon together or co-author the book – then I may also have distinct duties that perhaps pertain to our joint projects, but that are nonetheless duties of friendship for all that. Still, in neither case does it seem to be the joint project itself that is the source of duties, but rather the explicit agreement or our valued friendship. One potential workaround here might be to reference our friendship itself as the joint project, not the joint projects we engage in as friends, but this move brings out a different problem, for whilst this might be plausible as regards friendship, other types of special relationships which we take to be archetypally characterised by duties of partiality do not look like ‘joint projects’ at all. As Sarah Stroud points out, it looks rather like intellectual overreach to say we jointly pursue projects with our new-born infants or perhaps severely mentally-handicapped relatives, especially since the fact they are arguably not moral agents at all means there is no sense in which they could be seen to form part of a plural agent with you (2010: 148). Yet, we feel strongly that we have duties to care for our new-borns and mentally-handicapped relatives, and to the extent that the Projects Theory cannot assist us in making sense of where those duties (or associative duties generally) come from, it remains significantly inadequate as a theory of partiality.

If this is right, then I think we should reject the Projects Theory. For even if it might fare relatively well in terms of explaining the List, assuming it is reasonable to expect a theory of partiality to be able to account for associative duties, the Projects Theory is ultimately a non-

starter. If so, then we are left with the Individuals Theory and the Relationships Theory, which, as we have seen, both ultimately reduce to unsatisfying primitive explanations of why all and only those persons or relationship respectively make the List of persons towards whom one bears associative reasons and duties of partiality. So maybe we should just concede that we have reached the limits of explanation with respect to the List. Is the best we can say simply that we *just do* value our own relationships and/or our own friends, family members, and lovers differently to those of others; and that having associative reasons and duties of partiality towards them *just is* part and parcel of what it is to value them so? I think not. At least, I think we can do better by way of identifying: *what* it is about your own special relationships that explains why they and they alone make your List; *why* your own relationships ground associative reasons and duties of partiality that are specific to you; and *how* some of those reasons come to take the form of duties of partiality.

4 The Robust Concern Theory

Half a century ago this year, the Beatles penned a song called ‘With a Little Help from my Friends’ in which they pondered the question: “What would you do if I sang out of tune/Would you stand up and walk out on me?” In his 2015 book to which this issue is dedicated, Philip Pettit artfully deconstructs various iconic cultural artefacts such as this in order to reveal the structural make-up of certain goods like friendship that has largely gone unnoticed in the philosophical literature. And the fact that it has is in some ways quite surprising, for I think most of us intuitively grasp the sense in which the counterfactuality of the Beatles’ query is a pivotal feature of friendship. If my losing my singing ability is sufficient to cause your friendship towards me to lapse, then on most accounts we are inclined to think it never deserved the name friendship to begin with. More generally, if you are my friend, it will not be sufficient that you are there for me (are partial towards me) merely as things stand. For me to count you a true friend, it must be that you would also be there for me even were I/you/circumstances somewhat altered. If you are, we may say I enjoy the “rich” relationship good of your special concern.

To say the relationship good of special concern is “rich” is to invoke the adjective as Philip Pettit employs it: as shorthand for ‘robustly demanding’ (2015). To illustrate what it is for a good to be robustly demanding, consider Pettit’s account of the “rich” good of honesty: ‘I enjoy [the “rich” good of] your honesty insofar as I enjoy [the corresponding “thin” good of] your truth-telling, not just in the actual world where it is more or less convenient for you to tell the

truth, but also in various possible worlds where it becomes inconvenient' (2012: 9). Crucially, the thin good is the only one of the two goods in question you can provide me with directly; as such, you cannot confer on me the rich good of your honesty independent of providing me with the thin good of your truth-telling. But if you provide me with the thin good of your truth-telling directly not just in this, the actual world, but across a range of possible worlds (i.e. robustly), then that makes it the case that I enjoy the "rich" good of your honesty (as a constitutive consequence of your robust truth-telling).

Extrapolating from Pettit's framework, I propose that the "thin" goods of our relationships are the actual goods or benefits of partial treatment we provide our others with on discrete occasions as and when suitably prompted; the "rich" good, then, is the good we enjoy through our relationships as a result of providing each other with the thin goods of actual partial treatment robustly (i.e. the good of robust concern). And it is via attention to this robustly demanding relationship good of special concern (or good of robust concern, for short) that I believe we begin to discern the beginnings of a Robust Concern Theory of partiality which not only yields an explanation of the List that escapes primitivism, but also a principled method of delineating associative reasons and duties of partiality.

As we have seen, the Individuals Theory and the Relationships Theory both struggle to offer a non-primitive explanation of why certain individuals/relationships (e.g. Tommy/the friendship we share) make the List of relationships that generate associative reasons and duties of partiality for me, whilst other individuals/relationships (e.g. Jane/the friendship you share) do not. The Individuals Theory in particular struggles to explain why my partiality cleaves to Tommy and not equally valuable Jane. But the Robust Concern Theory can say my partiality cleave to Tommy because I enjoy from him (and he from me) the good of robust concern; and since I do not enjoy the good of Jane's robust concern (nor she mine), that is why my partiality does not cleave to her, even if she is qualitatively-speaking, Tommy's doppelgänger. The Relationships Theory struggles to explain why I have reason to value the shared personal history of encounter of which mine and Tommy's friendship is comprised, but not the equally valuable shared history of encounter of which your friendship with Jane is comprised. But the Robust Concern Theory can explain this too. Since the relationship good of Jane's robust concern for you (or yours for her) is not accessible to me, I do not have reason to value your friendship as I do mine and Tommy's; and since the relationship good of my robust concern for Tommy (or his for me) is not accessible to you, you do not have reason to value our

friendship as you do yours and Jane's. Moreover, the Robust Concern Theory can explain why my friendship with Tommy generates associative reasons and duties agent-relative to me (and thus makes my List), but does not generate associative reasons and duties agent-relative to you (and thus is not on your List). My friendship with Tommy generates associative reasons and duties for me in a way it does not for you because *only* I – by providing Tommy with the thin good of my partiality as and when appropriately prompted (i.e. robustly) – can realise for him the rich good of my – Patrick's – robust concern. And, by the same token, the reason your friendship with Jane does not make my List of relationships capable of generating associative reasons and duties of partiality agent-relative to me, is simply because not I, nor anyone else, via providing Jane with the thin goods of partiality (even were we to confer on her by our actions precisely the same thin good or actual benefit that you do by your partial actions), can realise for her the rich good of your robust concern – only you can.

If the Robust Concern Theory of partiality is plausible, then I think it also generalizable to other types of personal relationships. For no-one else in the world can provide my parents, my children, my wife, my friends, etc. with the rich good of my – Patrick's – robust concern; i.e. the good of my providing them with the thin benefits of my partiality robustly. That is why I, and I alone, have associative reasons of partiality that are uniquely agent-relatively mine towards those persons, for it is only via my acting on those reasons in the fashion of providing them with the thin goods of my partial treatment as and when they need it that they continue to enjoy the rich good of my robust concern. In this sense, I think we might even say that it is this good of robust concern that grounds associative reasons and duties of partiality in close personal relationships. Indeed, the Robust Concern Theory may even yield a principled method of delineating associative reasons and duties. For, occasionally, your failure to do something for/to/with a friend – to be there for them when they really need you to be in this, the actual world – may be such as to significantly deprive them of the rich good of being able to rely on you providing them with the thin benefits of your partiality robustly across other possible worlds (after all, your failure to provide them with thin good of your partiality when they really need it in in this world implies failure to provide it robustly). Herein then lies the promise of distinguishing when association reasons of partiality translate into associative duties of partiality: the suggestion is that the translation of an associative reason into a duty of partiality occurs when provision of the thin good of partiality in a specific instance is not just conducive to, but in fact instrumentally necessary to preserve, the rich good of robust special concern. Or, to put it another way, where your failure to provide someone with whom you share a special

relationship with the specific thin good of partiality a particular situation call for would be of the magnitude to significantly deprive them of the rich good of your robust concern (i.e. the good of being able to rely on you providing them with the thin good of your partiality robustly), your provision of the specific thin good of partiality that particular situation calls for is *prima facie* moral required.

5 Objections

There will no doubt be more objections to the Robust Concern Theory than I can cover here, but one immediate one might be this: if the explanation of why I have associative reasons of partiality towards Tommy is because only I can realise for him the rich good of my special concern; and since no-one else can enjoy the rich good of my – Patrick’s – special concern unless I confer it on them; it may look (bizarrely) like I would have special reasons of partiality towards everyone. However, this is not so because enjoyment of the rich good of special concern – the good of enjoying the thin good of partiality not just in this world, but also other possible worlds – implies the enjoyment of the thin good of actual partiality in this world. As such, unless you enjoy the thin good of my partiality in this the actual world on at minimum one occasion, then there is simply nothing to be robustly provided. Differently put, no stranger can claim to have been wronged by me on the basis that, by my never performing any associative reasons of partiality towards them, I have deprived them of the rich good of being able to rely on my robust provision of partiality not just in this world, but also other possible worlds, for they have never in fact enjoyed the thin good of my partiality.

This is really just another way of saying I cannot realise for anyone the rich good of my special concern independently of actually providing them with the thin good of partial treatment robustly. But further consideration of the sense in which that is so might help circumvent a second potential objection. For it might be argued that many of our associative reasons of partiality do not in fact seem to be uniquely identified with the agent in the way I suggest. Suppose Tommy invites me to his farewell drinks before he emigrates. As a friend, it would seem remiss of me to not go (assuming I have no good excuse). What explains my associative reason of partiality towards Tommy in this situation is certainly in part the fact that Tommy is my friend. But, perhaps it might seem that whilst ‘because Tommy’s my friend’ is not a reason for anyone to attend his farewell drinks – i.e. not *fully* agent-neutral; nor is it a reason for me alone – i.e. not *fully* agent-relative, for it would seem as much a reason for any of Tommy’s friends to attend his farewell drinks.

However, this is simply mistaken, for the special reasons each of Tommy's friends have to attend his farewell drinks *are* agent-relative to each of them. And the reason why, is because the rich good of robust concern comes about as a *constitutive consequence* of the thin goods of partiality provided robustly. An example Pettit himself uses brings out quite nicely what it is for a consequence to be constitutive. The act of lying down, we might say, makes it so that one is resting; but although resting is a consequence of lying down, it does not come about in a causal fashion. That is, lying down does not cause one to be resting – rather, lying down constitutes resting. In this sense, resting is a constitutive consequence of lying down (Pettit, 2015: 144). In a similar vein, then, my robustly providing Tommy with the thin benefits of my partiality makes it so that he enjoys the rich good of my special concern, but although the good of my robust concern he enjoys is a consequence of my partial actions, it does not come about in a causal fashion. That is, my robustly providing Tommy with the thin good of my partiality does not cause him to enjoy the rich good of my special concern; rather my providing Tommy with the benefits of my partial treatment robustly constitutes the good of my robust concern he enjoys. And so, we see that my associative reason to attend Tommy's farewell drinks really is uniquely agent-relative to me – Patrick – for were I without explanation to not attend, I would deprive him of a good – the good of *my* robust concern – that, insofar as it is constitutively tethered to my acts of partiality towards Tommy, is simply not realisable by anyone else. No-one else, by attending Tommy's farewell drinks, can make it so that he enjoys the good of my robust concern, any more than my lying down can make it so that you enjoy the good of rest.

6 Conclusion

The question that I have sought to answer in this paper poses what I believe to be *the* puzzle of partiality: Why do some special relationships (e.g. my friendship with Tommy) make the List of relationships that generate associative reasons and duties of partiality for me, whilst others (e.g. your friendship with Jane) do not? Neither the Individuals Theory nor the Relationships Theory can explain why people like Jane don't make my List in a way that doesn't ultimately reduce to saying "they just don't", and I think we might reasonably expect more than that of a philosophical theory of partiality. The Projects Theory might fare better at explaining the List, but to the extent that it cannot account for associative *duties* at all, it is a non-starter. For it is not merely reasonable to expect of a theory of partiality that it accounts for associative duties; it is, I think, reasonably required. If what has been argued here – and all I have argued is that the Robust Concern Theory can account for both associative reasons *and* duties in a manner

that escapes primitivism – then perhaps we have the beginnings of a novel theory of partiality. But perhaps *only* the beginnings of one. The puzzles of partiality are manifold, and much more would need to be said to establish, as it were, the robustness of the Robust Concern Theory with respect to them all.

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