Love, Partiality, and History*

1 A Theory of Partiality: Ethics and Moral Psychology

Why spend money on your child when others are in need? Why visit your friend in the hospital when that time could be spent helping the indigent? Suppose Patricia is standing on a pier with her husband, Bernard, and a stranger drowning on opposite sides. Patricia can save only one of them, and she saves her husband (adapted from Williams 1981). In the years that come, Bernard and Patricia remain at the center of each other's lives; while not selfish, much of their time, money and effort is spent on one another. They often do this without sparing a thought for those strangers they might have otherwise benefited. Spending the money, visiting the friend, Patricia's saving Bernard, building a life with another at its center—these are instances of partiality. A theory of partiality must offer an account of both the moral psychology and justification of partiality; but I'll argue these two desiderata pull in seemingly irreconcilable directions. This dilemma can be resolved by appealing to the significance, rational and psychological, of history. Virtuous partiality involves the adoption of a principle of decision-making *over time*; we are permitted and sometimes required to be partial in large part because of our history of decision-making.

At a first pass, partiality is an agent's bias in favor of some select few. For an agent to be partial is to have the interests and preferences of the few in some way *count for more* in the her deliberation—one way or another, it is the interests of the few on which she acts and in response to which she forms attitudes of care and attention. Any talk of partiality

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makes salient some kind of conflict between partiality, on the one hand, and impartiality, on the other. It is a conflict with which philosophers are familiar, and on which there is more to be said—although these issues will loom large in the background, we will not consider them directly. I'll take for granted that at least some partiality is virtuous (or "rational" or "the thing to do"—whatever you like) even in the face of the urgent needs of strangers. This paper offers a theory of partiality itself.

What does such a theory need to explain? Two things: the moral psychology and the normative structure of partiality. That is, what is it to be moved to act in the way that is distinctive of (virtuous) partial behavior? And what makes it the case that an agent may or must act in a partial manner ("act partially" for short). When Patricia saves Bernard, *why* does she save him? And what makes her action permissible, and moreover, required?

Our theory must answer to these explanatory demands—the normative and the motivational—and it must do so in a coherent and unified way. The trouble, illustrated by extant theories of partiality, is that these two desiderata pull us in opposite directions. On the one hand, relationships seem like an essential part of the normative story. Bernard and the stranger on opposite sides of the pier are (in some sense) equal; it is not as though Bernard's life is inherently more important. The reason Patricia should save him *instead of* the stranger surely has everything to do with the fact that Patricia loves Bernard, that he is her spouse, etc.... It is these *relational* facts that make a normative difference. On the other hand, acting on the basis of relational facts (e.g., "because he's my husband" or "because I love him") is one thought too many. There is a kind of unmediated loving action wherein an agent acts only on the basis of facts having to do with the beloved and not on the basis of anything relational, and such action is virtuous. Assuming some connection between a virtuous agent's motivating reasons and normative reasons we have a dilemma: Patricia's relationship to Bernard seems necessary to justify Patricia's action, even though when she acts virtuously, Patricia is not motivated by any relational fact. There is a tension between the normative and motivational desiderata, with the former requiring the relationship must play a role in the *ethics* of the situation and the latter suggesting it does not play an essential role in the agent's *psychology*.

Extant views tend to be partisans of one desideratum at the expense of the other. So-called "relationships views"[1] claim that relationships (or some relational fact like "I love

[1] I take the term from Keller's excellent 2013. Our taxonomies differ; I do not explicitly discuss so-called

him") are the reasons that ground partial permissions and obligations: Patricia should save Bernard because he's her husband and she loves him. But appealing to relationships yields false implications in moral psychology, namely, that beliefs about relationships play an essential role in (virtuous) partiality. In response, "individuals views" try to do the normative and ethical work without an essential appeal to the significance of relationships (e.g., that he's her husband or that she loves him). Instead, they claim that non-relational facts (e.g., that Bernard is drowning) justify partial action on their own. But in so doing, individuals views get the moral psychology right and the ethics wrong, unable as they are to draw adequate distinctions between strangers and those to whom an agent bears special relationships. We have special permissions and obligations to be partial, and individuals views cannot adequately account for either.

Faced with this antinomy, I'll defend a novel view. I'll argue that the debate has rested on a mistake: an assumption that the rationality of partiality is a wholly synchronic matter. When an agent acts partially, most assume that it must be something about her psychology *at that time* in virtue of which her partiality is rational. But partiality is not a phenomenon that can be understood without recognizing the centrality of agents' histories of being partial. Permissible cases of partiality involve seeing and treating someone as especially important *over time*; it involves adopting a principle of practical reasoning that gives them special weight in one's reasoning. I'll argue that we are under an essentially diachronic, defeasible requirement of rationality to be constant with respect to such practical principles. A view whose central thesis is a requirement to be constant across time is able to square the circle, preserving what is right about the moral psychology of individuals views while nevertheless having the richness to draw necessary moral distinctions between strangers and the special relationships that generate special permissions and obligations of partiality.

I'll begin by considering relationship and individuals views in turn, developing them and the objections they face in greater detail both for the sake of setting up my own proposal and to map the landscape of this rich debate. I'll then defend my appeal to history and defense of a rational requirement of constancy.

"Projects Views" on which the justification for partiality stems from our projects (as in, e.g., Williams 1981; Stroud 2010). So far as the dialectic over motivation is concerned, I think the crucial question is whether (and how) something *relational* features as an essential part of the story. See 19.

2 Method: Taking Love Seriously

To investigate partiality, we will look towards love. I'll assume that an agent who acts (virtuously) out of love is motivated by that which in fact justifies (or requires) her action. This connection between the moral psychology and ethics of loving action has served as methodological common ground in discussions of partiality, and virtually all parties to the debate considered in this paper have accepted it.[2] Why? Keller puts it in terms of special relationships but his point is stronger if we read "special" as "loving":

> The times when we act well towards those with whom we share [loving] relationships—when we respond immediately to the needs of our parents, make a sacrifice for the sake of a friend, or do something that brings joy to our children—are some of the times when we seem to see most clearly what matters, when we seem to be in closest contact with the really important things in life. It would be both implausible and depressing to suggest that when we act well within [loving] relationships we systematically misperceive our reasons. It is difficult to see what sort of philosophical argument could convince you that when you act out of your special concern for your friends, your partner, or your family, the things that really provide you with reasons are different from the things that seem to provide you with reasons. (2013, p. 27)

Sometimes it is hard to know whether we are doing the right thing for the right reason, but caring for those we love is not one of those times. If ever we are getting things right, it's then. The facts that a virtuous, loving agent takes to justify her actions really are sufficient to do so; the facts that strike a virtuous, loving agent as inappropriate considerations on which to base her action really are so. So if we can show that a consideration seems necessary, unnecessary, appropriate or inappropriate to an agent acting out of love and doing so virtuously, we've learned something about the ethics of partiality.

[2] The connection was given canonical voice in Williams 1981 and Stocker 1976. The contemporary authors to whom this paper objects all rely on or at least endorse a connection between an agent's treating or seeing a relationship as a source of reasons (or as reason) and its actually being a source of reasons (or a reason). Scheffler 1997, 2010; Kolodny 2003, 2010a,b; Jeske 2008; Keller 2013; Pettit 1997; Setiya 2014; Velleman 1999.

3 Relationships Views

Relationships views get the ethics of partiality right, explaining just when we are permitted or required to be partial: when we stand in (certain) special relationships.[3] It is to our friends, our partners, our children, our loved ones, our colleagues, etc…, that we should be partial, and that is so, they say, because of the relationships (friendship, family, love, etc.) we bear to them.

Let's return to our original case in which Patricia can save her husband or a stranger. Relationships views will claim that it is because Patricia's relationship to her husband is so valuable (or provides such strong reasons) that she is required to save him over the stranger, and would even be permitted to save her over the lives of a small handful of strangers. It is because the relationship is not valuable enough that Patricia would be forbidden from saving Bernard at the expense of many thousands of lives. And it is something about the difference between (say) being a *partner* with and being a *co-citizen* with that explains why the former justifies and requires far more partiality than the latter.

With respect to the moral psychology, relationships views must claim that a thought about the relevant relationship ought to feature in an agent's practical deliberation as part of her basis for acting partially, i.e., some relational fact (that I love him, that he's my husband) features as the content of a motivating attitude. The attitude might be a simple belief (that he's my husband, etc.), or involve explicit valuation of the relationship as a source of reasons or as good in and of itself. The point is that on a relationships view, the relationship itself figures as a *basis* for the virtuous agent's partial behavior.

When it comes to the *ethics* of partiality, something about a relationship-based approach to partiality—and love in particular—almost *has* to be right. We seem to be justified or required in acting partially just when we bear a special relationship to the beneficiary of our actions, so it is natural to think that the relationship itself plays a normative role. When faced with a choice to save a loved one or a stranger we are required to save our loved one, and the fact that we share this loving relationship seems to be the obvious fact that tips the balance of normative reasons decisively in favor of the beloved.

[3] See Kolodny 2003, 2010a,b; Scheffler 1997, 2010; Jeske 2008, 2024.

3.1 Relationships views disallow directly motivated action

Despite these strong ethical presumptions in favor of a relationship-based view of partiality, they suffer in their account of moral psychology. Thoughts about the relationship do not seem necessary when acting out of love. As Parfit observed about Williams's discussion of his case (in which the husband does the saving), "It's odd that Williams gives, as the thought that the person's wife might hope she was having, that he is saving her because she is his wife. She might have hoped that he [would save] her because she was Mary, or Jane, or whatever. That she is his wife seems one thought too many" (Parfit as quoted in Murphy 2000, p. 140, n36). Frankfurt puts the point even more strongly, "I cannot help wondering why the man should have even the one thought that it's his wife. Are we supposed to imagine that at first he didn't recognize her? Or [that] he didn't remember that they were married, and had to remind himself of that? It seems to me that the strictly correct number of thoughts for this man is zero" (2004). Frankfurt's claim that a husband of good character should be literally thoughtless while saving his wife is overstated and a bit confused—the point about the number of thoughts is not a worry about what occurently passes through an agent's mind. It is about an agent's basis for acting. And he and Parfit are on to something important: it is not just Williams's intended targets (Utilitarianism and Kantianism[4]) that are subject to worries about motivation and partiality. When Patricia jumps into the sea to save Bernard, it seems that she need only be motivated by a singular thought about *Bernard*. Bernard could hope that in her love, Patricia is moved to save her solely by thoughts about *him*, and without thinking about about how *she* relates to him or about the relationship itself.

Pettit writes:

> It is doubtful whether I could claim to be properly a lover, if it was my recognition of the fact of loving her… which explained my action: if all that needed to be said in explaining how I behaved was that I saw I loved her or saw that I bore a relation to her which, as it happens, means that I loved her…. To act out of love, as we might put it, is to be moved by love and not by the recognition of love. (1997, pp. 155-56)

He puts the point too strongly. There is nothing "doubtful" about the agents' love in these cases; indeed, real, loving relationships are filled with actions in which a thought of

[4]For responses in these traditions, see for instance Jackson (1991); Baron (1991); Herman (1983). For a consequentialist account that takes the need for partiality as a point of departure, see Maguire (2016).

the relationship prompts us to do more for those we love. A couple facing difficulties in their partnership might find that they are motivated to work through them so as to "save the marriage." No worry about having "one thought too many" seems to apply to agents who thoughtfully value and tend to their relationships in these ways. Moreover, many of the difficult things we do for our loved ones involve being motivated by the thought that these relationships *require* us so to act. Nor do such actions fail to express love. But it's telling that phenomenologically, they often *feel* like a special case: it is one thing to visit your friend in the hospital *because he's lonely*, another thing to do so *because you value the friendship* (or see it as a source of reasons).

That contrast suggests there's a further kind of acting out of love—the kind of action through which (I submit) we most purely express our love and by which we most clearly feel loved—what Pettit takes to be love *simpliciter*—wherein the beloved's needs, interests and preferences *alone* suffice as motivating reasons for the agent. It is a kind of love that is expressed when an agent is wholly directed at and moved by her beloved, rather than by the fact of her love or relationship. When Parfit writes that the wife in Williams's case "might have hoped that he [would save] her because she was Mary, or Jane, or whatever," he is giving voice to something like that thought. It is a hope that you might have: that as soon as a loved one recognized your need it would be sufficient to motivate them to act, without requiring recourse to a thought about the relationship they bear to you—that *you are enough* with any further condition. Put another way, if Patricia saves her husband without being moved by their relationship, she is not *missing a thought*, the absence of which renders the action in some way deficient. Relationships views falsely claim that one who so acts without any thought of the relationship is acting on *insufficient reason*.

The objection can be put more or less stridently—we can think (as I do) with Parfit that such directly loving action is not just permissible but preferable, and complain that relationships views disallow this form of virtuous, loving action. Or more modestly, we can claim that it is *at least not irrational* to so act; directly loving action is not action performed in some error. And while there is more to be said on the matter,[5] either version of this "one thought too many" objection poses a serious problem with the way in which relationships views incorporate relationships into the moral psychology.

Note in closing that the problem is *not* that acting because of the relationship is acting

[5]See Kolodny (2003); Keller (2013); Setiya (2014).

"too reflectively," as though the problem were that such love is not sufficiently spontaneous.[6] Neither is the worry about counting the number of occurrent motivating attitudes at the moment of deliberation. The issue is about *why* an agent acts—what her *basis* for acting is. The best version of a one-thought-too-many argument turns on the possibility of direct, unmediated loving action in which an agent's relationship does not feature as a condition, basis, or reason for her action. Such action is virtuous—at least permissible and perhaps preferable—and relationships views make it out to be a mistake.

We must find some other means of incorporating what *is* right about relationships views, *viz.*, that the rationality of partiality turns somehow on the significance of special relationships, without taking relationships themselves to be a necessary basis of partial action.

4 Individuals Views

Defenders of "individuals views" offer theories of partiality that do without an essential appeal to relationships.[7] They claim that to act out of love does not necessarily involve being moved by thoughts about one's relationship to the beloved. Loving agents can be moved solely by thoughts about the beloved himself. Accordingly, they try to make sense of the idea that non-relational facts, e.g., that Bernard was in need, suffice to justify and (virtuously) motivate partial action, e.g., Patricia's saving him over the stranger.

4.1 Getting the Moral Psychology Right

Does that mean relational facts are entirely absent from the picture? Even considering the motivations of Patricia, that would be implausible. After all, if we asked Patricia why she saved Bernard and not the stranger, she might naturally respond, "he's my husband" or "I love him." Likewise, if Patricia explained her action by citing Bernard's need, it would be natural to challenge her with "but the stranger had the same need!" The obvious rejoinder on Patricia's behalf is that Bernard is her husband.

Does the fact that we *explain* action with such appeals to the relationship tell against

[6] As it is construed by Jeske 2008, p. 130-31.

[7] See Velleman 1999; Setiya 2014; Pettit 1997. Keller classifies his own view as an individuals view (2013), but see below.

individuals views' motivational claims? No. There is a difference between a reason why someone acts and the reason why something is a reason why. Consider an analogy. We might explain a courageous or generous person's action by citing her virtue of character: why did she save that child? Because she's courageous. Why did she give so freely? Because she's generous. But this isn't to say that she was acting on the basis of her courage or generosity. Her virtue is not the reason why she acted; instead, citing the virtue is a way of saying why the facts that moved her (e.g., that child was in danger or in need) did move her (McDowell, 1998; Foot, 2001). It is a *principle*, not a premise, of the agent's practical reasoning.[8]

An individuals theorist can claim that the relational element appears in Patricia's moral psychology in just the same way a virtue does. To love Bernard is like being generous. A generous person is not moved by the fact that she or some action of hers would be generous; she is moved by the needs of others. So, too, to act of genuine love for Bernard is not to be moved by the fact that oneself or one's action would be loving; it is to be moved by his needs. Citing the relationship in explanation of Patricia's action cites the practical principle, which explains why the reason at play (Bernard's need) so moved the agent: because an agent with a practical principle of loving Bernard will be *especially* moved by individualistic facts regarding him.[9] By contrast, to act *on the basis* of one's love or relationship is like acting because doing so would be generous: it is continence, not virtue, displaying "a commitment to love rather than a lover's commitment," or a commitment to a relationship rather than the commitment of the relationship (Pettit, 1997, p. 156).

The relational fact that Patricia loves Bernard appears alongside the virtues—not as a premise but as a principle of Patricia's practical reasoning. To be someone who reasons in that way is part of what constitutes being in a loving relationship with Bernard. To cite the relationship or a relational fact (e.g., she loves him) is to appeal to that principle of Patricia's practical reasoning, and that is consistent with the possibility of direct, unmediated loving action.

[8] What, exactly, is a principle of practical reasoning? Minimally, a disposition to be moved by certain facts (Setiya, 2010). One might instead require that the disposition be essentially rational (Wedgwood, 2006; Arpaly and Schroeder, 2015); that the agent adopt a maxim via self-legislation (Korsgaard, 2009); that the agent decide to treat something as a reason (Bratman, 1999), or that she decide on some relevant *end* (Bratman, 1987).

[9] Cf. Stocker 1981.

4.2 Getting the Ethics Wrong

Motivationally, individuals views are on good footing. But normatively, they are in trouble. Partiality involves *special* permissions and obligations to a select few. A theory of partiality must explain the difference for Patricia between strangers and Bernard. She is permitted to do more for him than for strangers; and moreover she is obligated to do for him that which she need not do for strangers. Individuals views cannot explain either.

If only non-relational facts make a normative difference, then whatever an agent is permitted to do for a loved one, she is permitted to for a similarly situated stranger to whom she bears no special relationship. After all, the individuals theorist insists the relationship is normatively irrelevant. But that's implausible. We are permitted to be partial towards our loved ones over the many where we are not permitted to be partial to one stranger over the many. To hold otherwise, as the individuals theorist seems forced to do, is to accept that to a shocking degree, the numbers don't count in ethics. Whatever degree of partiality is permissible to manifest for a loved one is such that a stranger could have done it as well. So if it's permissible for Patricia to save Bernard over two (three? five?!) strangers, it is permissible for anyone to do so. If it is permissible to pay summer camp tuition for one's child instead of saving a life, it is permissible to give to charities which do summer-camp's worth of good instead of saving lives. This is a wild, but familiar, position. It is Taurek's view that *the numbers don't count* (1977); and Setiya explicitly endorses this upshot of his individualism as a feature and not a bug.

But *even if* innumerate ethics is tenable,[10] individuals views face a further problem just within a theory of partiality: they cannot explain partial obligation. Perhaps in light of the challenge posed by anti-partialist arguments like those of Singer and Unger, discussions of partiality typically aim to show why it is that we are permitted to favor our loved ones and other special relations (Singer, 1972; Unger, 1996). One could be forgiven for thinking that the defender of partiality need only establish that we have a prerogative to favor a special few at the expense of what is impartially best. But if we reflect on our ordinary practices of love, it is clear that many of the norms of partiality are obliging. If Patricia's pier were flanked by two strangers, she would be permitted to save either; but it isn't. Given that one of the drowning people is Bernard, she is not merely permit-

[10] Cf. Parfit (1978).

ted to save him, she must. If she acts in a direct, unmediated, loving way, i.e., without having anything relational as its basis, her motivation should still reflect the fact that saving Bernard is required; saving his opposite should appear off the table. By contrast a stranger could jump in either direction; neither option is uniquely eligible for choice. In the absence of an appeal to relational facts, there is no way to explain Patricia's special obligations or that asymmetry; any non-relational fact that could oblige Patricia would oblige a stranger.

It's no surprise, then, that many theorists who *look* like they have individuals views in the end do not. Velleman holds that while that reasons to love are entirely non-relational, reasons for loving *action* make essential appeal to the relationships (1999).[11] Keller, who develops a one-thought-too-many objection to relationships views, argues that relational facts make a normative difference not as reasons but as enablers or intensifiers—relational facts make the non-relational facts (e.g., Bernard's need) *more weighty*. But to say that Patricia acts for the *reason* that Bernard needs help *intensified* by the fact of their love or marriage is still to disallow directly motivated, loving action. The worry isn't that the agent have one *reason*-thought too many, but one *motivating* thought too many; a reasons-enabler distinction doesn't answer that worry. So Keller and Velleman wind up, in the end, treating the ethics (and so moral pyschology) of partiality as relationship-based.

Indeed, to explain both special permissions and special obligations, we *need* to appeal to relationships. But it seems impossible to do so without running headlong into the motivational problems of the straightforward appeal employed by relationships theorists. The relationship must make a normative difference while not showing up in the content of a motivating attitude. But how, consistent with the virtue theoretic constraint on loving action (§2) could we do so?

5 Love('s being a virtue) is all you need?

To restate the challenge developed in the last section, how can we vindicate Patricia's principle of favoring Bernard in a way that doesn't overgeneralize and vindicate any form of practical bias towards another? Let's return to the analogy between Patricia's love for

[11] In divorcing reasons for love from reasons for loving action, Velleman's view suffers from disjunctive schizophrenia (Kolodny, 2003; Setiya, 2014).

Bernard and virtues like generosity. If we can argue that Patricia's principle of practical reasoning favoring Bernhard is virtuous, we'll have a theory of partiality that doesn't run afoul of a one-thought-too-many worry.

Patricia's practical principle of responding to Bernard-involving facts is constitutive of her *love* for him. So perhaps the simplest possibility is to think that *love for another* is a virtue as such. Where bare partiality towards another person is irrational, that same practical disposition is, when part of a whole loving character involving patterns of attention, affection, etc., is a virtue. Why? Here we might have just hit rock bottom: because loving another manifests a human excellence or realizes a distinctive value (Pettit, 1997).

The best version of this view leans heavily on the analogy with virtues. If generosity is a virtue, then taking others' interests as weighty reasons is rational, i.e., others' interests are reasons to act (McDowell, 1998; Foot, 2001). Likewise, if Patricia's loving Bernard is virtuous, then her taking non-relational facts to do with Bernard as *especially weighty* is rational, i.e., Bernard's interests do give Patricia *especially weighty* reasons to act.

This view has two elements: first, it takes love's normative status (as rational or virtuous) as a starting point; and second, it sees love not as a *basis* for an agent's action but as a practical principle which treats reasons related to the beloved as especially weighty. In doing so, it makes significant progress over a view like Setiya's exactly because it makes use of a *relational* element in its ethical story—Patricia's loving Bernard gets to feature in the moral psychology and ethical account qua practical principle: it is because the principle by which Patricia relates to Bernard is part of her love for him that it is rational. That allows this view to go some way towards squaring the circle: without having any relational basis for action (Patricia still acts solely on the basis of Bernard's needs), it nevertheless hinges its account of the moral psychology and ethics on something relational—the character trait (and constitutive, partiality-involving practical principle) of Patricia's love for Bernard.

One might worry such a view is explanatorily disappointing. We've justified partiality by appealing to the (secure) ethical status of love as virtuous; but whatever worries one had about partiality might just as well be raised for love itself—why can we be partial in our *love*? I myself find this worry hard to take seriously; if anything seems like a safe starting point in ethics, the virtue of loving another does.

But this kind of picture is still wanting. While avoiding Setiya's Taurekianism, it still

misses out on the fine-grained ethical distinctions that can be drawn by relationships views. It builds something relational into the picture—love. But it would be surprising if the only thing that made a difference to justify partiality were *love*; our *history* with others seems to make a difference as well. Suppose I fall in love with Bernard at first sight; or if first sight seems to quick, imagine we become exceptionally fast friends. After a few short days, I love him. Am I justified in manifesting the same degree of partiality as Patricia, who has loved him for years, whose *relationship* is more significant? No, but such a view—in still avoiding any use of *relationships*—cannot draw any such distinctions.[12] Moreover, it isn't clear how to extend such a view to non-loving relations to whom we can be partial; how might we vindicate partiality to neighbors, co-citizens, or colleagues whom we don't love?[13]

What we need, then, is a way to somehow build not just Patricia's occurrent love for Bernard but her *history* of so relating, i.e., something like her relationship with him, into the picture not as a basis for her decision-making but at the level of a practical principle. Her loving *relationship* has to occupy a place in the theory akin to courage or generosity.

6 Relationships and a History of Reasoning

To do so, we must reject an assumption all parties to the debate have taken for granted: that the rationality of partiality is an essentially synchronic matter, i.e., that the only things that could make a difference to what it is rational to do at some moment are facts about an agent's psychology *at that moment*.[14] We must look to the (ir)rationality of an agent's attitudes *over time*.

To love another is not to jump off a pier to save them once; life serves up piers of various sorts daily, and we must constantly choose whether to favor our loved ones or others. To love involves choosing our loved ones repeatedly, seeing and treating another

[12]Cf. The worries leveled against views which vindicate *any* practical bias towards another by Stroud (2010).

[13]One option is to be quite expansive in our understanding of what love involves, seeing even my mild concern for my neighbors or colleagues in other departments as mild forms of *love* even if that sounds odd. Another option might take love for a particular other as something we can *approximate* even in non-loving relations (White, 2025).

[14]Relationships theorists, of course, think history matters; but they claim it is inasmuch as an agent is motivated by a *current* thought about a historical relationship that partiality is rational.

as significant *over time*. The key to understanding partiality is to appreciate the diachronic requirements we stand in, among them, a defeasible requirement to be constant in our love over time.

Consider a case of irrational *im*partiality. Imagine that after years of loving Bernard, Patricia is faced with a choice between Bernard's life and a stranger's and she gives Bernard's no extra weight, instead just flipping a coin and saving the stranger's life. After years of reasoning in a manner especially attentive to Bernard, she suddenly stops. Something has gone wrong; what? We don't want to appeal to Patricia's failure to countenance her relationship with Bernard as a reason—that will just land us in familiarly troubled water. What is wrong seems to be her sudden, seemingly crazy shift in the way in which she approached the situation. Those who know her would wonder *why* she would just stop caring especially about Bernard. That is, a natural reaction to this story is to demand a *reason* for her shift in the way she reasoned. Perhaps there could be good reasons for the change; but if not, Patricia's behavior seems irrational.

Nor does that sense of something going wrong attend only to a case in which she saves the stranger's life. Suppose she flips the coin and saves Bernard. Or she gives his life more weight than that of a stranger but *just barely*—far less than she did in the years prior. Absent some reason, that, too, seems irrational. So what seems off about Patricia is not just her choice of whom to save but the way she reasoned about the situation, i.e., her principle of practical reasoning.

Of course, had Patricia *lacked* any history with Bernard, had she not for years been reasoning in a way that singled him out as among the special few to whom she was partial, Patricia's coin flip would be unobjectionable. So it is not the principle, *per se*, that is objectionable. It is the change—from having a principle that is partial to Bernard to no longer relating to him that way. Imagine Patricia had a short history with Bernard—they just met a few weeks ago. Her behavior is *less* in need of justification than if she had spent years with him. All that is to say that it is *history* that makes a rational difference. Relationship theorists claimed the relationship is what motivates and justifies partiality; but it is rather the moral psychological embodiment of the relationship—the agent's principle of relating to the beloved as special—that makes a difference. It is not a present belief about a historically extended entity, i.e., the relationship; rather, the difference maker is the agent's history of so relating, where that relating often consists in reasoning on the

basis of non-relational facts.

The core of the proposal is this: principles of practical reasoning that are constitutive of loving partiality enjoy a kind of rational inertia. Those that we have rationally adopted require some *reason* to abandon. And the greater the history of so reasoning, the greater the required reason. To just give up a practical principle is to manifest the vice of inconstancy; it is to violate a *diachronic* requirement to be constant in our manner of reasoning. Our past exerts a rational influence over our present. Of course, the past is not binding. We face some rational pressure to be constant, but that pressure can be overridden. It could be that loving Bernard becomes too difficult and that Patricia should give up her love for him. But that would only be rational because the requirement to be constant was overridden by the difficulties of maintaining her love.[15]

Recall that relationships views get the ethics of partiality exactly right; once we find a way for relationships to make an ethical difference in our theory, we solve the problems about permissibility and obligation that individuals views could not. We have effectively gotten relationships into the picture without locating them as a reason or modifier or anything else that would see them featured as the content of a motivating attitude. A principle of practical reasoning of treating one's friend, partner, child, etc…, as special—of weighing the reasons having to do with them more—is not an attitude about a relationship. It is constitutive of being *in* a relationship; it is the part of the agent's psychology that partially grounds her being a friend, partner or parent. That is, the fact that Bernard and Patricia are loving spouses consists in part in their having a history of so *relating* to one another as spouses—noticing and reasoning on the basis of non-relational facts involving the other in the manner a loving spouse would. To hold, then, that a history of so relating makes a rational difference comes very close to holding that relationships make a difference—not as premises but via practical principles.

So what is wrong in the case of Patricia's irrational impartiality isn't a failure to accord due weight to a relationship; it is a failure to accord due weight to Bernard's needs (a non-relational fact) in the manner constitutive of her being in a historically extended relationship. In other words, a diachronic requirement to be constant effectively strengthens the weight of the reasons having to do with Bernard. But by showing the weights are modified via a diachronic requirement on practical principles, we've kept the relationship out

[15]On this, see Betzler (2024).

of the loving agent's motivating thoughts.[16]

Relationship theorists are right to think our *history* with another matters; individuals theorists are right to complain that the *way* they make history matter requires one thought too many. Our proposal is that principles of practical reasoning—of reasoning *as* a friend, lover, etc.—have a rational inertia. To be in a relationship is in part to have a *history* of so relating; and so in holding that our history of so relating normatively matters, the proposal allows relationships to play the role relationships theorists wanted while maintaining the moral psychology of individuals theorists.[17]

The picture that emerges is a conservative one. While a defeasible requirement of constancy does not bind us to our past, it does hold that with time comes a rational pressure to stick to the approaches to decision-making that we've already adopted. If practical principles make up our practical identity—if they are part of what makes us who we are[18]—then this view holds that we are under a diachronic requirement to stay true to ourselves (cf. Cohen 2011). Having gone down a path, it is (all else equal) irrational to deviate; taking some other path through life is no longer as open an option as it once was.

But crucially, we must understand that on this picture, Patricia's *reason* for saving Bernard is not to be true to herself! In just the same way that the courageous agent does *not* act in order to be courageous, the virtuously constant agent won't act in order to be true to herself. She'll act on the reasons having to do with her beloved, e.g., that he is in need.[19]

[16] In that respect, I am in agreement with Keller that relationships' normative upshot is as modifiers; but unlike Keller, I don't see modifiers as simply another premise, of a special kind, in an agent's deliberation. Keller himself thinks my proposal is not tenable, see n.19.

[17] Another desiderata which relationships views easily achieve is the difference between the forms of partiality made appropriate by different relationships. What it is to manifest partiality appropriately as a parent, teacher, romantic partner, and casual friend are all different. On the picture defended here, the constitutive norms of these various relationships will, in the virtuous case, not appear as premises of reasoning but as practical principles whose history has rational significance.

[18] cf. Korsgaard 1996.

[19] In correspondence, Keller helpfully objects that on my view, action out of love will be too self-centered, likening my view to what he criticized as "projects views" of partiality like Williams's own. On such views, Keller objects that Patricia should save her husband "with thoughts of being true to [her]self or of retaining [her] own identity" (2013, 42). But the worry does not apply, at least to my view and possibly to some of his original targets as well. Patricia's love for Bernard is not in the content of any motivating attitude; it is not a thought that moves her. It is rather part of her character; it is why the thought that does move her—"Bernard is in need"—is so powerfully motivating. *Just as* the courageous person does not act so as to preserve her identity—to be true to herself—neither does Patricia.

7 Details: Special Obligations, Special Permissions, and Ratcheting

Let us consider in detail how a requirement of constancy would explain special obligations, e.g., why Patricia is *required* to save Bernard in a case where it's his life versus one stranger's. Just considering the facts that motivate Patricia at the moment, i.e., the non-relational facts that Bernard is in need and the stranger is need, Patricia would be justified in saving either. Put another way, a qualitative duplicate of Patricia in the moment of decision, an agent who has no history of favoring Bernard in her reasoning would be justified in saving either person. But the requirement of constancy introduces a diachronic element to the picture: given Patricia's history of reasoning in such a way that gives Bernard's needs more weight, she should continue to do so. This likewise explains why, in a given moment, Patricia would be justified in saving Bernard over two strangers (adjust numbers as needed).[20] Because she *has reasoned* in a manner that is partial to Bernard, it would be a practical error for her to stop (absent a good reason).

But granting that a *requirement* of diachronic constancy can explain special *obligations*, how can it explain special permissions? Put another way, even constancy requires that Patricia *continue* favoring Bernard once she's started, how could that partiality have been justified in the first place?

The answer lies in an appeal to a degree of permissivism about practical reasoning. Consider the start of Patricia's relationship with Bernard. She could have allocated her time and attention in any number of ways; and she was justified in singling out Bernard for her attention just as much as she was anyone. That is, treating Bernard (or anyone else) as very slightly special was always already rational, even before a relationship began. Our reasons to allocate our time, attention, and emotional energy to one stranger are on a par with reasons to do so with others.[21] Having adopted a partial practical principle of favoring Bernard, constancy then kicks in: it would be irrational for her *not* to give the reasons involving Bernard more weight than those involving strangers (unless she had good reason to abandon that principle).

[20] If you think that it is wrong for an agent to save a loved one over two strangers, you can consider groups, e.g., Patricia can save either a group of 4 or a group of 5, where Bernard is among the 4.

[21] To say that reasons are on a par as opposed to equal means that neither reason is stronger than the other, and moreover that even if one reason were made slightly stronger, it would not necessarily outweigh the other (Chang, 2017, 2002).

But something further follows. If it would be irrational for Patricia not to give reasons stemming from Bernard slightly more weight than those stemming from strangers, then for Patricia, those reasons now *just are weightier* than they once were. Put another way: because inconstancy is a vice, the reasons she must give more weight on pain of inconstancy really are weightier reasons. Constancy in effect ratchets up the strength of the reasons that Patricia permissibly took as weightier. But with their ratcheted-up strength, they are now on a par with weightier reasons than they once were. And this process can iterate. If Bernard's needs are now on a par with slightly weightier reasons, Patricia can give his reasons as still more weight.

A requirement of constancy thus functions like a ratchet. Having begun to (rationally, virtuously) reason in a manner that is partial to someone, one is permitted be still more partial, and is required (absent some justification) to at least stick to that baseline. And this matches our intuitions about how loving relationships should develop: incrementally (even if those increments happen in quick succession), with backsliding requiring some justification.[22]

Here, I suspect, some will object that some mistake (or heavy-weight assumption) has been made. So let me review the assumptions I have been relying on. First, I have assumed a tight connection between reasons and rationality: for it to be irrational to give some consideration lesser weight means (or at least entails) that that consideration is a weightier reason. One way to defend that is via a more general commitment that reasons just are the bases of good practical reasoning. But we can make do (with a bit of translation) with even less than that. So long as one accepts that it is (im)permissible to do what it is (ir)rational to do (under conditions of relevant true belief), the main conclusion follows: because inconstancy is irrational, partiality is both permitted and required of agents who already have a history of reasoning partially.

Second, I am assuming that the ratcheting mechanism can *iterate*. Of course, one might object that while constancy might explain why giving the *first* bit of extra weight is binding, it could never iterate so much as to explain the extent of our special permissions. But this follows from fairly modest assumptions about the nature of parity. To illustrate how, I'll make some horrifically crude assumptions. I can't emphasize enough that this is just to illustrate the structure of the view; accepting the argument does not require valu-

[22] Cf. Kolodny's account of *starting* a relationship (2003). On *ending* relationships, see Betzler (2024).

ing lives so flat-footedly. But just suppose that the parity of reasons is such that a stranger may permissibly save one stranger over two strangers, and two strangers over three, but not one over three. By contrast, suppose Patricia may permissibly save her husband over even three strangers. At first, when strangers, Patricia permissibly treats Bernard's life as providing her neither more nor less reason to save him than that of any other stranger; then having been partial to him—treating Bernard's life as providing her *extra* reason (say as no less than that provided by the lives of two strangers)—Bernard's life really does have a rough, imprecise weight not less than those of two strangers. Patricia's giving it any less weight is a mistake. But by parity, something of such a weight is going to be imprecisely on a par with the lives of three strangers (or 2.5 strangers or whatever).

(Note that I am not presuming that parity is transitive; I am not claiming that if the weight of reasons p and q are on a par, and q and r are on a par, then p and r are on a par. The claim is instead that if p and q are *initially* on a par, and subsequently, it would be (diachronically) irrational not to give p more weight than q (i.e., if subsequently p is decisively weightier than q), then it will be on a par with things weightier than q.)

Nor does this "ratcheting" mechanism eventually permit or even require a partial agent to be partial a loved one to a seemingly vicious degree. For every ratcheting up, it is true both that ratcheting down requires a reason and that some degree of further ratcheting up is rational. But it doesn't follow that the permissible weighting will increase beyond a given point, e.g., justifying (or requiring) saving the beloved over a million (or a hundred or ten—whatever the point of viciousness is). Why? Because weights can increase asymptotically. Whatever our first order theorizing tells us about the limits of partiality, this view can accommodate it.

One more worry should be briefly addressed. If rationality requires constancy, does it follow that we should stick to our guns, even when have begun in error and committed ourselves to bad principles? Do we have reasons to be constant in vicious principles of practical reasoning—e.g., to be cruel, or to be partial to white men, if we've already started reasoning thus? No. Constancy requires only that we have some good reason to give up a practical principle. But we of course have very good reasons to give up any vicious or otherwise irrational principle; that follows from the principle's being irrational. Moreover, the case that got all this going, that of love toward a beloved individual, begins with reasoning in the face of parity. We needed to explain what was wrong with switching

from one option to another where the switched-to option seemed on a par with the abandoned option. But racism was never on a par with anti-racism, nor cruelty with kindness. The requirement defended has always been one to be constant in principles rationally adopted in the face of parity, not to be constant in one's practical principles regardless of their normative status.

8 Constancy as a general requirement?

My argument for constancy as a rational requirement has been two-fold: first, it alone of the views considered has squared the circle, achieving the desiderata related to both the moral psychology and the ethics of partiality. Second, inconstancy seems like a good description of what is wrong when an agent fails to be partial, i.e., is inconstant.

But I suspect that many of the arguments on offer have broader application. Constancy might be a virtue not just within the context of loving relations but more broadly: whenever we are faced with choices which are on a par and choose one, that choice generates rational inertia. Something like this has been defended by Broome, Bratman, Brunero and others who articulate a diachronic rational requirement on the persistence of our intentions (2013; 2018; 2021, respectively). But perhaps that, too, can be seen as species of a more general requirement be constant not only with respect to our intentions but also in our principles of practical reasoning, i.e., the ways in which we form our intentions.

There is a structural parallel between constancy to those we love and constancy in one's commitments to things like career, life projects, and other choices between mutually exclusive activities which are on a par with one another.[23] One might hold that one should stick with philosophy over, say, literature when the reasons to pursue either are on a par the fact *because* one one has so choosen in the past (or on the basis of one's history). But parallel arguments to those above suggest this is a mistake—oddly self-centered or fetishistic. The reasons to stick with philosophy just are the reasons that made it worth pursuing in the first place, e.g., those fleeting moments of understanding. A constant agent would see *those* reasons as especially weighty, requiring her (all on their own) to stick to her studies; those reasons would ratchet up in strength.

[23]For an argument that takes the permissibility of life projects for granted and builds an account of partiality's permissibility out of that, see Stroud (2010). Cf. Cullity (2021).

On this picture, loving partiality would be a virtue exactly because it is a species of a more general virtue of constancy—of integrity in one's agency across time. And that should be no great surprise—we are persisting agents, and the shape of our agency both within and outside the context of loving relationships has an essentially diachronic element. The excellence of our agency should involve coherence across time, within our loving relationships and in general.[24]

9 The Limits of Partiality?

By default, our practical situation is filled with parity. Patricia and Bernard might allocate their limited time, attention and resources to anyone, and the reasons to do so are (all else being equal) on a par. But as they choose to favor one another over others, all else is no longer equal. Their love for one another involves a practical principle to favor the other, and the deeper that principles, and the greater its history, the greater the permissions and obligations of partiality they face. By appealing to history we can capture the central role that relationships play without locating them in the content of any agent's attitudes; it is not the fact of the relationship that makes a difference, but the history of so relating that justifies and requires partiality.

I have said much about the ethics of partiality without seriously tackling the question of how partial we may or ought to be. I've tried to illuminate the general structure within which Patricia can save her husband over the lives of a handful of strangers, but what is she to do if on the other side of the pier are twenty or thirty or one hundred strangers?

While a full account of the extent to which partiality is permissible and required is the topic for another time, this picture of partiality at least points the way towards an answer. We took partiality seriously because it was constitutive of love; part of what it is to love is to see one's beloveds (and their wellbeing and preferences) as having a special status in one's practical deliberation. And love is not a practical mistake; a life without love for particular individuals is one that is profoundly lacking, whatever other goods it might instantiate. And so some partiality is part of what it is to live well. How much partiality? *At least* as much as is constitutive of virtuous, loving practical principles. But

[24]Much more would need to be said to defend this extension of the proposal, e.g., responding to the powerful arguments of Hedden (2015a,b,c).

to say that our loved ones count for more than strangers is not to give us *carte blanche* with respect to them. While seeing one's son as just one person among many whose interests need to be carefully weighed up against those of strangers is inconsistent with loving him, donating significant portions of one's income to charities and being more modest in one's parental spending habits is not. To be especially crude about it, it seems like while spending 70-80% of one's income on strangers might interfere with loving parenting in a profound way, spending 10% or 30% or even 50% might not be. The arguments of this paper provide a rough, upper limit on the impartialist demands strangers make on us, but it is entirely consistent with a thoroughgoingly partialist ethic that one still owes a great deal to strangers. Put another way, it is consistent with love for particular individuals that one also approximate, at least to some extent, a love for humanity in general.[25]

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[25] A view developed in White (2025).

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