RELATIONSHIPS AND THE LIMITS OF REASONABLE PARTIALITY

by

NOLAN S. RITCEY

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Abstract

The problems associated with an overly impartial moral psychology are well discussed in the literature on utilitarianism, consequentialism, and rational decision moral theory. Criticisms of these approaches to morality center on how they invite us to think in terms which alienate us from those things which matter to us most, our friends and family, our special projects, and our personal integrity. To the extent that these criticisms are successful, they recommend viewing morality and moral reasoning in the context of personal concerns. This inquiry is an investigation into how to understand the reasons of partiality as genuine reasons, and to determine, broadly, how to understand reasonable partiality.

The account presented here has descriptive and normative elements. It is descriptive of the grounds of special responsibilities and the restrictions on what relationships are capable to support special responsibilities. It is normative insofar as it answers questions regarding what relationships should support special responsibilities and what significance they should have in comparison to other important considerations. The primary focus is on how relationships do, and should, modify a moral agent’s practical outlook. The practical relevance of relationships is modeled on a theory of joint action, which sets out how joint actions modify an individual’s practical outlook by making certain considerations necessarily salient.

The resulting position is primarily deflationary with regard to the conflict between morality, on the one hand, and partiality on the other. The joint action presentation reveals that relationships do not need to conflict with morality, but can, and should, incorporate moral principles into the central aims and action sequences which are their mainstays. Reasonable partiality is simply the form of reasoning that adequately
recognizes the joint enterprises that compose a person’s relationship. Accordingly, controversial acts of reasonable partiality, such as transfers of wealth, are categorized as substantive positions within a theory of what counts as adequate recognition, not necessary to all partiality.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Impartial reasoning appears to be a central component of our moral experience, and of our moral reasoning. We want others to treat us in ways that are supported by what matters to humans generally and it is important to us that unique interests of certain individuals are given consideration only to the extent that they reflect those things which are important to all of us. We feel that we’ve been treated morally when we feel respected as persons, and we feel we’ve been treated fairly when we believe our interests have been given an appropriate weight in the balance of moral decision making. Reasoning is moral when it supports important human values and needs by considering what it should be reasonable for others to accept. Reasoning is impartial when it gives equal consideration to the unique interests of all concerned.

On first look, it may seem that in order for our actions to respect certain persons, and to treat them fairly in the context of a group of persons with sometimes competing claims, all moral reasoning must be impartial. However, in some instances it matters to us that others not reason in this way. We feel disrespected, or wronged, when our friends, family, colleagues, and countrymen fail to give our interests special weight or when they treat us in ways that only reflect the minimum standard owed to all persons. This tension within our moral experience, between wanting partial treatment from some, and in some circumstances, and wanting impartial treatment generally, raises questions about the supposition that morality and moral reasoning is essentially impartial.

The problems associated with an overly impartial moral psychology are well discussed in the literature on utilitarianism, consequentialism, and rational decision based first-order moral theory. The criticisms of these approaches to morality focused on how they invite us to think in terms which alienate us from those things
which matter to us most, our friends and family, our special projects, and our personal integrity. To the extent that these criticisms are successful, they recommend viewing morality and moral reasoning in the context of personal concerns. A literature is just now emerging on how to understand the opposing side, how to understand our special responsibilities, to place special relationships within morality, and to determine if that is where they belong. This current inquiry is an investigation into how to understand the reasons of partiality as genuine reasons, and to determine, broadly, how to understand reasonable partiality.

There are presently two main conceptual frameworks on offer in the literature to give shape to the concept of special responsibilities which rely on two different ideas about how partiality interacts with morality. Reductionists think that there is nothing special about special responsibilities. Rather, special responsibilities are simply particularized general responsibilities, their ultimate source, and normative authority, are found in general moral principles. On this conception, our relationships are seen as incidental datum for the application of more general principles.

Non-reductionists don’t think that the normative authority of special responsibilities comes from outside morality, but they do think that insofar as relationships give us reasons, they are not merely minor premises in an argument that begins with general moral principles. Instead, particular relationships, and types of relationships, support normative reasons which are in addition to, and sometimes modify, more general moral reasons. The demands of relationships are accordingly not reducible to ordinary moral demands, they come from extant and, as I shall argue, potential relationships, between persons and between persons and groups.
1.1 Strategy

The investigation of special responsibilities I present here employs the non-reductionist strategy to explain both the source special responsibilities, and also the form they should take. The account has descriptive and normative elements. It is descriptive of the grounds of special responsibilities and restrictions on what relationships are capable of supporting special responsibilities, and it is normative insofar as it answers questions regarding what relationships should support special responsibilities, and what significance they should have in comparison to other important considerations.

In order to explain the source and limits of reasonable partiality, I focus on how relationships do modify and should modify our practical outlook insofar as they frame our practical thinking in terms of the joint enterprises. Like ordinary joint enterprises, such as two people moving a heavy object, relationships modify which actions and attitudes are appropriate in light of overall aims of the enterprise. I borrow from the literature on joint action to explain how joint actions modify what individual actions and attitudes are reasonable. Then I put these ideas against the background of other things of central importance, our individuality, and our responsibilities to strangers.

The account I defend is primarily deflationary with regard to the conflict between morality on the one hand, and partiality on the other. What the joint action presentation helps to reveal is that relationships do not exist outside of morality, but instead incorporate moral principles into the central aims and action sequences that make up the main features of relationships. I argue that this avoids worries about unreasonable favoritism, and unreasonable partiality. While relationships that are organized to support unreasonable demands from their members may seem to require these attitudes and actions essentially, I maintain that these forms of partiality are
not essential to form a cooperative relationship. Those relationships that fail to respect some moral principles in their application of the demands of cooperation must be reformed and can survive reformation.

As for the demandingness of relationships, what they can rightly require of individuals, my account places the demands of a relationship in terms of how they require that individual practical reasoning be modified, and in some ways subject to, reasoning from the perspective of a relationship. I do not take this to imply that a person must make substantial changes to his or her individual aims and intentions to serve a relationship. Rather, I understand the requirements of relationships fundamentally in terms of the expressive intent of individual actions, and of certain kinds of practical reasoning.

I conclude that unreasonable forms of partiality, which are commonly thought to be part and parcel with certain kinds of relationships, are attributable to substantive mistakes about the expressive importance or meaning of certain actions with respect to one’s place within a relationship, and with the place of that relationship within a larger community.

1.2 Outline

I begin this dissertation with a discussion of the difference between reductionist and non-reductionist analysis of partiality and special responsibilities. In the second chapter, I argue against several variants of reductionism. Broadly speaking, I maintain that reductionist approaches fail to characterize our relationships in ways that adequately reflect their importance in our lives.
In the third chapter, I take a first pass at non-reductionism in the form of a value-based non-reductionist theory from Samuel Scheffler. Scheffler thinks that valuing our relationships give us sufficient reason to see them as the source of special responsibilities. If there are good reasons to value a relationship, then there are good reasons to see oneself as having special responsibilities.

This sufficiency condition becomes muddled, however, when we try to uncover exactly what it means to say that a relationship is valuable, or that a person has reason to value their relationship. Unlike other things of value, the properties upon which value supervenes are not wholly objective. We can say that there are objectively good properties that a relationship might have, but it’s hard to say that someone in that relationship has reason to respond to those properties in one way, rather than another. They might just not care.

Having dispensed with the value approach, I then turn to consider the question in terms of a different set of assumptions. Niko Kolodny assumes the existence of partiality principles, and then tries to determine what a relationship might have in order that it supports reasonable partiality. The answer he gives turns on the practical importance of relationships across time, and how it preserves and amplifies the importance of certain reasons. Relationships are capable of supporting partiality because of resonance: the present rationale for an action in the context of a relationship resonates with past events in that relationship.

Kolodny’s proposal is non-reductionist, inasmuch as he relies on the history of a relationship to provide the justifying reasons for present actions with respect to that relationship. In the third chapter I argue that this strategy has two problems. First, it’s hard to see what the relationship itself adds to the justificatory structure. If
there was reason in the past to act in a certain way, and those reasons are preserved in the future via resonance between the two events, then it remains unclear what the relationship itself is meant to justify: impersonal reasons seem to do all of the work. Second, while it seems reasonable to say that a history justifies future actions, rationality within relationships is not exclusively backward looking. Anticipated future events and relationship features often stand as justification for present actions. Furthermore, when one considers past events, one interprets those events in terms of what has happened, what is happening, and also in terms of what one anticipates. In this way, past events are interpretive, and their initial rationale does not provide the kind of stability that resonance-based non-reductionism requires.

The problems I discuss for Kolodny’s approach are analogs to those which I believe are endemic to value based non-reductionism. However, I do agree with Kolodny that the right way to understand partiality is in terms of the modifications to practical rationality which relationships invite. In chapter four I lay out a different way of thinking about the practical importance of relationships in terms of an analogy with an ordinary conception of cooperation.

In ordinary cooperation, two or more parties consider the interests of the other in terms of a plan, or strategy to which each is assumed to be committed. These overarching reasons cast their individual actions in a certain light as contributing to the joint project. Similarly, our relationships put our individual actions against a background of a joint project (the relationship) which we do together. In the case of important relationships, however, this background can be totalizing. This is to say that most, if not all, of our practical thinking is set against the joint action of a relationship, which constrains our actions when our present decision making is
relevant to, or has some impact on, the relationship. Furthermore, like a more prosaic case of cooperation, relationships allow for the exchange of authority over decision making. This is the joint action view of partiality.

In chapters six and seven I look at how my suggestion addresses the two traditional problems associated with partiality: unfair distribution, and non-voluntary participation in relationships. In chapter six, I attempt to refine my concept of relationship in contrast to group membership, and discuss what I think are the required commitments one must have in virtue of group association. In doing so, I attempt to dissolve the idea that membership in a good institution may require undue partiality between its members.

In chapter seven, I consider the problems associated with the demandingness of relationships. Commonly it seems that relationships may undermine one’s right to individual non-interference - to live one’s life as one sees fit. My proposed view seems recommend that we ignore individual self-direction insofar as it recommends that we see our actions in terms of how they fit into a plan of execution of one and another’s interests with our important relationships. I try to temper these unsatisfactory implications by drawing attention to the flexibility that relationships afford us.
CHAPTER 2

Reductionism
Our moral responsibilities can be divided into two types. General responsibilities involve patterns of behavior that are reasonable for every person to expect just in virtue of his or her standing as a being of moral concern. Special responsibilities involve different patterns of behavior that are owed to a subset of persons in virtue of some further fact, or set of facts, which make special treatment appropriate. This cleavage of responsibility raises several philosophical questions about the status and scope of special responsibilities. In this chapter and the next I try to answer a question about what are the grounding facts of special responsibilities.

2.1 Special Responsibilities

Let’s define “relative” as those persons with whom an agent has a unique or special relationship. Under this definition, friends, family, colleagues, students and their teachers, and other affiliates shall be known as relatives. Putatively, agents have special responsibilities to their relatives, and not to their non-relatives. But we cannot assume that special responsibilities are explained by reference to the fact that a person is a relative of an agent. Neither can we assume at this juncture that “relative” is a normative term which follows from a clear conception of “relationship”.

In subsequent chapters I shall argue for the claim that we should understand special responsibilities in terms of relationships, the normative boundaries of which are defined in terms of the importance of shared activities. At present, I want to begin with some common reflections about special responsibilities and investigate an alternative set of explanations of their normative grounds which reduce the importance relationships to other normative concepts. In doing so, I shall employ the term “relative” but I do not take it to be explanatory of the concepts of either “special
responsibility” or “relationship”

Intuitively, special responsibilities differ from general responsibilities in several ways.¹ They make satisfaction of some general responsibilities more demanding. We owe it to everyone to allow them pursue their projects. But for relatives, this obligation takes on a positive character: we should help them to try to achieve their goals, even when it puts constraints on what else we might pursue with our time. This means that what constitutes duties of aid in such cases is more demanding than with cases involving strangers.

Not only does it seem we should offer more help to relatives to achieve their goals, it also seems incumbent upon us that we feel good when these projects go well and bad when these projects go poorly. It is reasonable for one to feel indifferent to the success of a stranger, but one should feel, or at least express, some positive emotion in response to the success of a friend. We may not be, strictly speaking, obligated to feel certain positive emotions toward our friend’s success, but we are nevertheless deficient as friends if we fail to hold or express these attitudes.²

More importantly we are responsible to hold certain standing attitudes toward some people and not others. In contrast to affective attitudes, standing attitudes do not necessarily have to do with emotive responses but with the practical relevance others have for our lives. In considering our actions, we should think of how they will impact others generally, and, to the degree that they will impact others negatively, we

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¹It is prudent to mention here that I do not take the putative difference between duties, obligations, and responsibilities to have bearing on any of the questions I aim to answer in this chapter and the chapters to come. I shall, at times, refer to ‘special obligations’, rather than ‘special responsibilities’, but I do not think that anything hangs on the terminology. The reader would therefore do well to subsume apparently different concepts of duty, responsibility, and obligation into a class of actions and attitudes that are patterns of appropriate responses, all of which I call ‘special responsibilities’.

owe it to those people to consider whether the impact is justified by thinking about alternatives that would impose a lower cost upon them and still meet our aims. When we deliberate, we are not required to think of every individual who will be affected by our actions, but only about generic reasons, what people generally have reason to want. In contrast to this form of deliberation, we are required to attend to the actual interests and aims of some specific others in our practical deliberation. This often goes beyond considering what is justified in terms of the generic reasons; even permissible actions may fail to respect the actual interests and goals of those who are close to us. In considering where one wants to live, for instance, one should consider how this will affect one’s family, whether or not it prevents or makes more difficult future family visits, it puts undue burdens on proximate family members to provide support. Failure to deliberate and acknowledge the different considerations that might count against the move represents an example of a failure to hold the standing attitudes which is owed to one’s relatives.

Finally, special responsibilities differ from general responsibilities insofar as they support forms of partiality. Not only should we aim to work positively to support some persons, to feel good when their lives go well, and to respect their interests in our decision making, we should aim to do these things in a way that prioritizes their interests over the interests of others. This further form of partiality suggests that special responsibilities involve discounting the interests of those who are not within their scope.\(^3\)

These differences between general and special responsibilities suggest a question about their normative foundation, about what makes it true that we have special

\(^3\)I shall take issue with this last claim in chapters to come. I mention it here for sake of completeness.
duties to some and not others. I shall refer to this as the question of what grounds special responsibilities.

2.2 Reductionism

One prominent way of approaching the question of grounds is to insist that special responsibilities do not require a separate normative ground from that of general responsibilities. In the literature, this is known as ‘Reductionism’ about special responsibilities and obligations. The basic claim of reductionism is that the true normative claims that have to do with our relatives follow from a normative structure given by facts that are more fundamental than facts having to do with our relationships. So, whatever makes it true that we have the general responsibilities we do, be it facts about well-being, reasons, the value of human life, etc., is what makes it true that we have the special responsibilities we do.

Reductionists think that we may derive special responsibilities from general responsibilities by taking a fundamental normative concept, like well-being, and applying its principles to a case involving intimate relationships. So, for instance, suppose that we think that one should always aim to promote the greatest amount of well-being. We might think that in the case of our relatives, we are well-placed to understand what will promote their well-being, and so we ought to do so by showing preference for their interests. Let’s call the form of reductionism ‘External Reductionism’ because it explains special responsibilities by appeal to a moral standard external to facts having to do with relationships, and takes the fact of the relationship as a

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minor premise in a deduction from a universal normative claim. On this view, we have the special responsibilities we do just because of an external normative ground.

‘Contractual Reductionism’ takes special responsibilities to follow from discrete events where we lead others to form certain expectations. We are responsible to fulfill the expectations of our intimates because we are responsible, generally speaking, for the fulfillment of expectations which we lead others to form. So, for instance, we are responsible to care for the basic needs of our aging parents just in case, and because, we have led them to believe that we will take care of them. We can do this explicitly, by saying that we will provide for them as they age, or implicitly, by showing them our intentions through our activities, perhaps by moving closer to them as they age. On this view, the norms which ground special responsibilities are simply the same as those involved with promising.

There is another prominent view that is related to External Reductionism, but lacks its explicit moral content. We may call it ‘External Value Reductionism’, but I prefer to think of it as ‘Instrumentalism’ about special responsibilities. Instrumentalism holds that we have special responsibilities because they allow us to participate in institutions that in turn permit us to enjoy more fundamental human goods, such as the food, and shelter. So, for instance, the economic activity that allows us to live the sorts of lives we do requires a kind of familial institution and this requires preferential treatment toward family members. The availability of numerous goods and services that make our lives go well, at least from a materialistic point of view, requires stable economic foundations of family, where there is the distribution of labour required to efficiently educate and rear children. Because the family functions well when special responsibilities are upheld, we have reason to do just that. According to
Instrumentalism, then, special responsibilities have their normative ground in basic human goods, other than the relationships themselves.\(^5\)

For the remainder of this chapter, I shall look at each of these positions in more detail marking their shortcomings and strengths. External Reductionism and Instrumentalism fail to provide a compelling account of the normative basis of our special responsibilities because what they cite as explanations for, and justification of, our special responsibilities are too far removed from how we typically understand our obligations to our relatives. Put another way, while External Reductionism and Instrumentalism generate reasons to treat our intimates in preferential ways, these reasons ignore the relevance of central practices surrounding special relationships, most especially the idea that special responsibilities can only be discharged by the unique individual who bears them.

Contractual Reductionism fails to account for some of our common practices, most notably those having to do with how we cite the reasons for holding special responsibilities. However, its chief shortcoming lies in its inability to explain responsibilities that flow from relationships that emerge gradually through series of shared events, (which events taken on their own are more or less unimportant). Because most of

our intimate relationships are what we may call ‘Emergent Relationships’, we must reject Contractual Reductionism as providing adequate explanation of the grounds for special obligations.

In rejecting Contractual Reductionism, however, I shall be careful to note one key normative concept we should not leave behind: expectation. It may be unrealistic to try understand all of our special responsibilities on an analogy with promises, but it must certainly be true that expectation between parties is important to why it is that we have some of the responsibilities we do.

2.3 Deduction and Facilitation

Reductionist approaches to special responsibilities attempt to explain their grounds as flowing from the grounds of general responsibilities. Put another way, they attempt to derive necessary and sufficient conditions for special responsibilities from what they see as a more basic normative framework. The sense in which special responsibilities are derived might be better understood with reference to two principles of translation that are common in deriving one normative claim from another: deduction, and facilitation. Deduction takes a single normative principle, such as,

(1) One should respect one’s elders.

by universal instantiation and a descriptive fact,

(2) John is my elder.

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and derives a further normative claim

\[(3) \text{ I should respect John.}\]

Facilitation is a little less straightforward. Suppose we think that respecting one’s elders crucially involves *inter alia* not interrupting them when they are speaking. We can use this evaluative belief to facilitate the derivation of a variant of the second normative claim such that \((2^*)\) “I should not interrupt John when he is speaking.” In this way, we can capture thoughts about what is required for meeting some basic tenet without introducing a separate normative ground.

Reductionists think that any normative claim which seems to track a special obligation can in fact be derived from more basic normative principles through the use of deduction and facilitation. And, therefore, they believe that there is no separate normative foundation for special responsibilities, separate from what is already given by some external value or more basic moral principle. There are, as I’ve said, two main variants of Reductionism, and a close relative, Instrumentalism, that are germane to the discussion of special responsibilities. In the three sections to follow, I illustrate the costs associated with their acceptance.

### 2.4 External Reductionism

External Reductionism holds that special obligations can be derived directly from the chief principles of an general moral theory. Perhaps the most common articulation comes in the form of those versions of consequentialism that take the promotion of aggregate well-being as the central goal of moral action. We are likely to be very good at promoting the well-being of our intimates, and so it would seem as if we are required to do just this. This immediately meets with difficulties, however, insofar as
it cannot abide the thought that I might sacrifice some advancement of my goals in
order to serve the lesser needs of my relatives.

There is more promise in External Reductionist accounts that employ a similar
facilitation principle, but have as their chief normative principle a concept of imperfect
duty. They take it as given that we have imperfect duties of beneficence (and charity):
we ought to aim to produce happiness in others and aid them as we can.\(^7\) Because we
are quite good at meeting these ends in the case of those with whom we are close, we
are obligated to do so. In his *Am I my parents’ keeper?*, Norman Daniels describes
the view as follows:

In general, the duty of beneficence allows us to pick and choose where,
when and to whom we will do beneficial things. In some circumstances,
however, we may be under special obligations to help particular people
because of their acute need and our unique ability to help. On this view,
children have the view someone might express as follows: “It’s not that I
owe it to Mom for what she’s done, but there’s no one else she can turn
to and it would be wrong to turn my back on her need.”\(^8\)

Special responsibilities, therefore, follow from adherence to a moral standard that
is external to the relationship itself. And this gives us *External Reductionism*: The
grounds of special responsibilities are the (imperfect) duties of beneficence and charity.
Whatever characterization we give to External Reductionism, the view will run into

\(^7\)For more on the difference between perfect and imperfect duties see Jr. Thomas E. Hill, *Dignity
and Practical Reason in Kant’s Moral Theory* (Cornell University Press, 1992), Immanuel Kant,
*Critique of Pure Reason*, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press,
1998).

\(^8\)Daniels, *Am I my Parents’ Keeper? An Essay on Justice Between the Old and the Young*, p. 32.
See also Allen E. Buchanan, *Ethics, Efficiency, and the Market* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1985),
difficulties. One such difficulty is illustrated by Daniels in the section that follows the section quoted above. In brief, an emphasis on imperfect duties runs the risk of distorting the concept of imperfect duties: it makes imperfect duties look altogether too much like perfect duties. This can happen in two ways. First, these duties seem to be enforced in ways that bear too striking a resemblance to perfect duties. And second, special obligations may become altogether too demanding to be thought of as imperfect duties.

Ordinarily, we think that imperfect duties are well-understood by employing normative concepts that are expressed by words such as “ought” and “should”. One ought to support organizations like Oxfam. One should help others achieve their goals. This is in contrast to more stringent normative concepts, appropriate to perfect duties, those that employ words like “must”. I must not cause another needless harm; I must refrain from lying. But while it seems true that we must do these things, I think we should wonder if we must support organizations like Oxfam. The difficulty with the External Reductionism is one of the strength of the modal used: the characterization of special responsibilities seems to be too stringent. This owes to the ways in which it characterizes the antecedent conditions as specifying one capable agent (by knowledge or some other ability). If I am the only one able to discharge a certain duty to aid, then it seems as if I must do everything I can to meet this demand.

This is not merely a matter of choosing “must” instead of “ought”. In considering donating to Oxfam, it is important that I am not the only possible donor. This allows me to see how it is that I want the duty of charity to figure in my life. I might

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just as well donate to Greenpeace, or Unicef. If, however, I am the only possible
donor, the stringency of obligation increases to the point that the duty seems only to
be possibly satisfied by my donating. External Reductionists seem to make similar
work of special responsibilities and therefore fail to give sense to the idea that these
duties are imperfect duties. And since this is central to their definition of special
obligations, this is a serious shortcoming.

The second difficulty is closely related to the first. Sometimes our special obliga-
tions can become very demanding. Think, for example, of filial duties to one with
Alzheimer’s, or parental duties to a child with severe cognitive disabilities. These
obligations can be so demanding that their bearer has time for little else. Most im-
perfect obligations, on the other hand, are not thought to be so demanding. The
adage “Give ‘till it hurts” has as its stopgap as damage to oneself and one’s life.
Charity and beneficence are not meant to be so burdensome for agents as to consti-
tute serious threats to their well-being.\textsuperscript{11} Not only are we free to determine how it is
we think these duties ought to figure in our lives, we are also free to determine what
degree of engagement we think is appropriate for us.

One of the challenges in understanding special responsibilities lies in making sense
of the ways in which they can be very demanding, without being unreasonably de-
manding, that is, without lessening the sense in which they are really responsibilities.
Unfortunately for the External Reductionist, the concept of imperfect duty will not
take us very far toward this goal.

The final difficulty with External Reductionism has to do with the ways in which
it seems to obscure the reasons why we think that we have responsibilities to our

relatives. It might be that there is some person, call her Alice, who is better suited to attend to the needs of my aging mother because some special knowledge she has about my mother, or because of her unique caregiving abilities. It would be strange, however, to think that this means that Alice, owing to her superior abilities, should inherit my filial responsibilities.\(^{12}\) This seems doubly mistaken. Alice might well be better at discharging my responsibilities, but it would surely be odd to suggest that she therefore inherits those responsibilities. And moreover, it confuses the sense in which my responsibilities to my parent are mine. That is, it makes difficulties for understanding just what are my responsibilities when there are Alices around. Am I then to think that I am ‘off the hook,’ so to speak, that the responsibility has been discharged?

Finding surrogate caregivers is a familiar way of ‘discharging’ one’s duties to so-called ‘burdensome’ family members. But to think that duties can always be discharged in this way is a mistake; transferring one’s special responsibilities is not always the same as fulfilling them. Meeting our special obligations should involve our activity; our responsibilities will not be met by the mere fact that the world is a certain way, where our intimates are (already) well taken care of. As Sidgwick says “we commonly blame a parent who leaves his children entirely to the care of others, even if he makes ample provision for their being nourished and trained”.\(^{13}\) Were it the case that we merely had to meet the aims of, say, a general utilitarian principle, it would be enough that someone else brought about a similar state wherein our relatives’ needs are met. But such does not accord with how we view our responsibilities to our intimate relations: the sense in which these responsibilities are not readily


2.5 Instrumentalism

Basic to Instrumentalism is the idea that our special responsibilities are in some way derivative of a some external value, such as the value of just institutions, or the value of basic social goods, or the value of one's identity, or the value of social and economic stability. The normative strength of these values is thought to transmit to actions that fulfill special responsibilities by way of a facilitation principle, which says that supporting these values requires attention to one’s special responsibilities. Broadly speaking, we can characterize the view as, Instrumentalism: The grounds of special responsibilities are external values, social or personal.

Instrumentalism is similar to External Reductionism inasmuch as it too makes use of an independent value in order to generate the normative ground of special responsibilities. The primary difference is that the independent value needn’t be expressly moral, as it is in the case of External Reductionism, and in most cases, the moral significance of attending to these values is only tangential to the importance of the values themselves. We can divide Instrumentalism into two camps: one which emphasizes external social goods, and the other which emphasizes the value of one’s character, or identity. I’ll briefly discuss the latter, before moving into a somewhat more detailed discussion of the former.

The main idea of the view that special responsibilities derive from the value of our individual characters might be summed by some remarks of Michael Sandel's extended critique of Rawls. He writes

We cannot regard ourselves as independent ... without great cost to those
loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are... Allegiances such as these are more than values I happen to have or aims I ‘espouse at any given time.’ They go beyond the obligations I voluntarily incur and the ‘natural duties’ I owe to human beings as such. They allow that to some I owe more than justice requires or even permits, not by reason of agreements I have made but instead in virtue of those more or less enduring attachments and commitments which taken together partly define the person I am.14

On this view, it is important that we are able to pursue those things that are in some way so valuable to us as to constitute our idea of who we are as persons. And, because special responsibilities facilitate this aim, they are grounded by the value of our having a coherent identity.15 The basic idea is, I think, that we cannot understand the status of reasons that run contrary to our very ability to rationalize our actions in terms of our deepest commitments, and so we can’t understand what it would be to give up on responsibilities that are inter alia part of these commitments.

But whether or not this is a fair account of how we should understand reasons, as being ‘internal’, it will not do as a ground for special responsibilities. The main shortcoming lies in the picture it suggests for how it comes to be that others are entitled to make claims on our actions and attitudes. The issue has little to do with the positive force of one’s cares and commitments being in congruence with these claims. Rather, the problem is just that our ideas of ourselves, our ‘self-conception,’

14Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice, p. 179.
might well run contrary to these claims, and if this is so, others will seem to lack a standing that is necessary to generate responsibilities. But this can’t be right. The simple notion that I think of myself as a being independent from my aging parents, that my views do not reflect theirs, and so on, does not rightly serve to undermine their status as dependents, and my putative responsibilities to them.

### 2.6 Social Goods Instrumentalism

According to what we may call ‘Social Goods Instrumentalism’, special responsibilities derive, in one way, from the goodness of the institutions they support by a facilitation principle which states that they are necessary for those institutions to exist and function well. (In another way, they may be derived directly from the goods they support for the beneficiaries of the relationship, without need of a facilitation principle.) One example of this view comes from Daniels’ text quoted in the last section. He thinks that in the case of parents and children, legitimate expectations are generated from the basic notion that families do a fine job of providing goods for their members. These expectations, in turn, generate responsibilities for their fulfillment. And, so long as the family unit is basically just, these responsibilities ought to be fulfilled.\(^{16}\)

“The point is,” says Daniels, “that some social structure, such as the family, is a necessary condition for generating a set of goods of fundamental social importance.” And here we get the idea that the basic ground is the goods themselves. But then Daniels goes on to say, “Any structure, whether family- or community-based, that could succeed in generating these goods would require similar levels of cooperation

among children and adults. In turn, such cooperation would require the inculcation of such attitudes and virtues as the willingness to provide mutual aid and to demonstrate respect for others involved in these cooperative structures.\(^{17}\) This seems to dilute the point, somewhat, because we are left wondering whether he thinks that special responsibilities are really responsibilities to someone, or whether he thinks that it is simply a good thing that individuals be provided with fundamental social goods, irrespective of who these goods come from. This may not be a problem for Daniels, given that his aims are to formulate principles for understanding how policies might support legitimate filial expectations, but it will lead to difficulties for understanding the complex concept of special responsibility.

Placing a heavy emphasis on ‘goods’ seems to inevitably lead to distortions of special responsibilities. Recall that in the introduction I specified that special responsibilities differ from general responsibilities inasmuch as they appear to include not just actions, but attitudes as well. But we might suppose that some social goods are had in virtue of our intimates’ apparent attitudes. Children feel secure when their parents exhibit attitudes that demonstrate the importance of their children in their lives. But of course, it is conceivable that these goods would be secured by inauthentic analogs of the same attitudes, or by other social arrangements altogether. The problem, therefore, is not that this view fails to ground special responsibilities, but that it does so in the wrong way. It leaves open what will count as genuinely fulfilling these responsibilities, and so fails to do justice to the idea that there are correct ways that one should fulfill one’s responsibilities. Because this is crucial for understanding the difference between general and special responsibilities, I suggest we can set this view aside as a sufficient account of the grounds of special responsibilities. In doing

\(^{17}\)Daniels, *Am I my Parents’ Keeper? An Essay on Justice Between the Old and the Young*, p. 112.
so, however, we should not leave aside the idea that relationships can generate legitimate expectations, for this seems central to idea of responsibility, even though it may seem epiphenomenal to legitimate claims.

Social Goods Instrumentalism takes a somewhat more general form in accounts that focus primarily on the importance of just institutions themselves. Michael Hardimon argues that we have special obligations that derive from the social roles we occupy, what he calls ‘role obligations,’ just in case those roles support just institutions.  

What is key for our purposes is to ask whether or not this approach would be a good account of the kinds of special responsibilities that are our interest here, those that seem, anyway, to have some moral content. This is a question about the normative mode of our concepts of obligation and responsibility. We cannot take this approach simply in looking at whether or not their institutions are just. This is because it is quite conceivable that an institution is just without thinking that there is much sense in the claim that the various actions of their members are imbued with moral content. It may well be true that we have obligations that derive from the fact that we are actors in just institutions, but some of these will involve relationships to others that can deliver us moral content, others will simply be things that professionals ought to do in virtue of their profession. This reinforces the idea that there is a ground of special responsibilities that is separate from one’s practical identity, or institutional identity; it does not commit us to rejecting the idea that these identities play some part in understanding these duties, just that they play a constituent part.

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[18]Hardimon, ‘Role Obligations’.
2.7 Contractual Reductionism

Contractual Reductionism is likely the most well-known approach to explaining away the sense in which special responsibilities are unique, the sense in which they require an account of their normative ground. The Contractual Reductionist takes special responsibilities to follow from discrete events where we lead others to form certain expectations. So, for instance, we are responsible to care for the basic needs of our aging parents where we have led them to believe that we will take care of them. We can do this explicitly, by saying that we will provide for them as they age, or implicitly, by revealing our intentions through our activities, perhaps by moving closer to them as they age. The norms that ground our filial responsibility are simply those that follow from the promises we’ve made to our parents. More succinctly, Contractual Reductionism: The grounds of special responsibilities are just the norms governing promises.\(^{19}\)

As I see it, the normative structure here is direct; contractual reductionists do not require a facilitative principle in order to explain how special responsibilities follow from promises, they derive directly from the events that generate the promise in the first place.

There are difficulties with this view. One such difficulty has to do with the ways in which promissory responsibilities differ from special responsibilities. For instance,

promises are best understood as perfect obligations: they are fulfilled by the specific acts that are their content. And moreover, the responsibilities associated with promising are discharged when one has fulfilled the promise. However, the same cannot be said for special responsibilities. It is often left open as to what counts as fulfilling one’s responsibility to care for one’s parent, child, or spouse. Furthermore, it does not seem right to say that one can discharge these responsibilities in just the way one would discharge promissory obligations. It would be better to say that one’s responsibilities change, that what counts as caring in the case of a dependent child may not be appropriate as that child grows into adulthood.

The Contractual Reductionist may deny that these difficulties present any real problem for her view. She may say that the concept of promising is capacious enough to include duties that are fulfilled by more or less unspecified actions, capacious enough to capture what we would normally understand as commitments. Whether or not this is so, however, Contractual Reductionism seems to get things wrong about the genesis of these unspecified obligations. It is sometimes fair to say there are relationships that begin with an event, for instance, the exchange of vows in a marriage ceremony. However, we should be wary of accepting that these events do properly capture the genesis of the relationship because they are merely non-arbitrary points that we put to work as starting points; they cannot support all of the significance of the history before and after their place in time. “One of the extraordinary adaptive powers of our species is its ability to transmute a stray encounter into a first chapter.”

Moreover, we may complain, with Sam Scheffler, that our ordinary practices of citing relationships, and not events, to explain our special responsibilities is evidence

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that events in a history, however significant, are not solely responsible for generating our responsibilities. Scheffler has argued that Contractual Reductionism will fail to do justice to our ordinary practices of giving reasons to explain why we have the responsibilities we do. He draws attention to the fact that we do not often cite events in the relationship to explain our responsibilities, but rather cite the relationship itself. So, in explaining why we owe it to our aging parent to ensure her care we may make reference to some event where we led her to believe that we would do so, but more often we will simply say, “Because she’s my mom.” This leads Scheffler to suggest that we might understand the relationships themselves as forming normative foundations of special responsibilities. These considerations point to a serious shortcoming of Contractual Reductionism, which lies, I think, in the fact that this story will not help to understand emergent relationships, such as friendship.

It is difficult to give an exact definition of “emergent relationships”. It’s best simply to think of the way that most friendships are formed. There may be points in a friendship that parties identify as being the start of one’s friendships, but this is rare, and anyway is contestable between parties. More often, one recognizes one’s friendship with another after the friendship has been formed. One may find oneself defending one’s friend against attacks by mutual acquaintances, for instance, without a prior recognition that a friendship exists. To say that one is responsible for this defence because of some past event involving an implicit (or explicit) avowal of that responsibility adds nothing to the explanation of why one felt responsible.

We might be tempted to say that the relationship wasn’t extant until after the defence, however, I would suggest that we understand these sorts of examples as

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cases where existing relationships are strengthened, and sometimes transformed. It is important, however, that strengthening a relationship like friendship can happen without the participation or knowledge of both parties. This helps to illustrate the ways in which friendships can emerge at different times for each party, and how responsibilities can be generated out of the simple idea that a friendship is emerging. In some cases, looking to find a specific point, promise, or contract, to ground one’s duties can distort the very content of one’s responsibilities.

There is another problem with Contractual Reductionism. In a superb discussion of parental and filial duties, Jane English argues that an endorsement of the Contractual Reductionist read on events in the history of parents and children will generate the wrong sort of explanation of filial duties.

Basic to her point is the idea that the things parents do for children are not well understood as favours. Favours are often done out of an expectation that the favour will be repaid in the future. However, it seems more natural to say that parents act from the love they feel for their children, not from a hope of reciprocation. It would be a mistake, therefore, to think that the grounds of filial responsibilities are well put in terms of events and promises. She writes,

The parental argument. “You ought to do x because we did y for you,” should be replaced by, “We love you and you will be happier if you do x,” or “We believe you love us, and anyone who loved us would do x.” If the parents’ sacrifice had been a favour, the child’s reply, “I never asked you to

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22This runs contrary to what is now seems to be common in casual relationships that couples must declare their relationship as significant enough to make it exclusive. I think there is something unpalatable about the practice and that we would be better without it. Nevertheless, even if we retain this practice it is of no help to the reductionist, for surely what makes it true that one is exclusive to the other is not the agreement of exclusivity but the facts about the relationship that make the declaration appropriate.
do y for me,” would have been relevant; to the revised parental remarks, this reply is clearly irrelevant. The child can either do x or dispute one of the parents’ claims: by showing that a love relationship does not exist, or that love for someone does not motivate doing x, or that he or she will not be happier doing x.23

In brief, because Contractual Reductionism encourages the kind of picture that leaves aside whatever emotions and qualities are unique to the relationship, it ends up misconstruing the reasons one has for meeting their responsibilities to one’s intimates.

It is no doubt important that an account of the grounds of special obligations must do some justice to the idea that intimates have expectations that derive, in some way, from the history of intimacy. But however tempting it may be to attempt to qualify these expectations as being akin to ordinary promises, we should not endorse such a view. We can identify a history with a relationship, but it is misleading to identity the qualities of that relationship with points along the history that generated those qualities. And we mustn’t identify all of our special responsibilities with points in various histories. This is not to say that there won’t be moments in our intimate lives that give rise to specific expectations, but when this is so, it is because these are moments of a relationship.

2.8 Summary

The focus of this chapter was primarily negative. I surveyed a number of different reductionist approaches to understanding special responsibilities, and I attempted to detail their shortcomings. Given their many problems, it seems best to leave behind

the reductionist strategy, and instead pursue a non-reductionist line, one that takes our relationships themselves to provide both the source of authority, and the basic normative content, of our special responsibilities. In doing so, however, we should not set aside all features of reductionism. In particular, we would do well to account for the sense in which special responsibilities must respond to the expectations of parties within relationships. In the next chapter, I develop a view that characterizes relationships in terms of cooperative activity that is shaped by attitudes of trust. En route, I hope to capture the importance of expectations, and begin to allay worries that there is an essential conflict between duties of friendship and family, and the demands of justice.
In the last chapter, I looked at a number of reductionist attempts to account for the grounds of our special obligations and responsibilities. Whereas reductionists argue that we can account for special responsibilities solely in terms of existing moral principles, non-reductionists think that our relational duties are grounded, in some way, by our individual relationships. In this chapter I begin by offering a more precise definition of the difference between reductionism and non-reductionism. I then examine Sam Scheffler’s value-based non-reductionism.

Scheffler position is that our special responsibilities are grounded by value. “If we have good reasons to value our relationships,” he says “then we have good reason to see ourselves as having special responsibilities.”¹ According to this explanation, the value of our historical relationships supports the reasons we have to be partial to our family and friends.

If Scheffler is correct, we can understand special responsibilities as part of a comprehensive normative outlook that is based on the compelling reasons we have to respond to things of value. This theory would then explain the source of special responsibilities, and, if values are commensurate, it will provide reasons for thinking that partiality is reasonable, or justified. However, I shall argue that it is difficult to conceive of the value of a relationship without adverting to the subjective appreciation of its participants. The reasons we have to be partial to our relationships depend strongly on whether we are already partial to our relationships. And this fails to meet an impersonal standard of acceptability.

After detailing this objection, I explore one way in which value-based reductionism is false to our experience of the demands of relationships. I argue that the demands

of our relationship are not simply based on our understanding of the history of the relationship, but our prospective rendering of our relationship.

3.1 Non-Reductionism

Non-reductionism about special responsibilities says that the source of special responsibilities, and their ultimate authority, derives from our relationships. In contrast to reductionists, non-reductionists insist that relationships provide this ground directly, and do not require additional moral or practical principles.

So for instance, a reductionist might explain particular filial duties by reference to a general principle of filial duty combined with some minor premise which introduces the particular relationship. A non-reductionist would introduce filial responsibilities by implication from the minor premise alone. The reason I have to care for my aging mother is that she is my mother. No other information is needed to complete the practical syllogism.²

This difference between reductionism and non-reductionism is formal. Substantive differences depend on the mechanisms they use to pick out relationships that support responsibilities. According to Scheffler, an agent’s special responsibilities are grounded in the fact that she has reason to value her relationship non-instrumentally. Non-instrumental value provides a sufficient condition for the grounds of special responsibility; Scheffler allows that it may not be a necessary condition.

In principle, the value-based approach retains any advantage that promising reductionist accounts might wield. Reducing special obligations to general obligations has the potential upshot of providing a coherent set of demand on moral agents. If all

special obligations follow general principles, it is unlikely that there will be intractable conflicts between the demands of relationships and the demands of morality. All demands will be moral demands. Similarly, a value-based non-reductionism can provide a coherent set of normative principles because its demands are just those made by all of those things that are valuable, some of which will be given by the value of persons, some of which will be given by the value of relationships. It’s reasonable to assume that all values are compossible, and so it’s reasonable to assume that general duties and relational duties together form a unified set.

To explain how relationships support special responsibilities without using a separate normative principle, Scheffler introduces two different senses of a relationship: a normative relationship, and a historical relationship. A historical relationship simply refers to the natural history of a relationship, a series of events shared between persons. The normative sense of a relationship refers to its practical importance to its members, the way in which it supplies constraints on what actions and attitudes are reasonable. The relation between these two senses constitutes the meat of Scheffler’s non-reductionism: the normative relationship supervenes on the historical relationship. He writes that “In the case of friendship, the normative relationship supervenes on an ongoing historical relationship between the participants, and it is the value of that ongoing relationship that is explanatory.”

Supervenience provides Scheffler with a way to reason to special responsibilities without a separate normative principle. So long as the historical dimension of a relationship is valuable, the relationship will have a normative importance, and will

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provide its members with reasons on account of that value alone. No further rationalization is needed, as Scheffler says, the value of the historical relationship is explanatory. This account of special responsibilities which specifies grounds in a wholly different way from those surveyed in the last chapter.

The supervenience component can also explain common normative structures of relationships in a way that is broadly objective. Suppose Black and Grey’s friendship involved mutual aid, say, copy editing one another’s work. This gives them reasons to be grateful for one another’s help in the past. Were Grey to discover that Black had failed to attend to many of Grey’s manuscripts, and had merely sent them back with a stamp of approval, he would no longer have reason to feel grateful. There must be some change in the historical dimension of the relationship in order for there to be some change in the normative dimension of the relationship. Grey wouldn’t have grounds to all of a sudden feel resentful without discovering that some element of the history of the relationship makes this attitude appropriate.

The notion of supervenience also provides space for consistency across relationships while at the same time allowing for a degree of variation. Those relationships with histories similar to Grey and Black’s support a similar forms of gratitude. But there could be other relationships that that have a different history and realize the same normative status of Grey and Black’s relationship, but in a different way. Brown and White may watch one another’s children on alternating weekends. The natural history of watching children is not the same as that of editing one another’s work. But the supervening normative relationships may involve similar forms of gratitude. And so, normative relationships are therefore multiply realizable.

One might think that what makes the relationship valuable is the copy editing
events that provide some benefit to Black and Grey. This suggests that the value of a relationship is just instrumental. In this case it has simply to do with the aims each has for well-edited prose. Scheffler says that it is the non-instrumental value of the relationship that is important, and not, so much, the instrumental value. But it is unclear how this is supposed to be understood. We can imagine that there is a non-instrumental component that has to do with the intrinsic importance Black and Grey place on their working together. Yet, if we attempt to generalize from this point, it seems that relationships are valuable just when, and because, their agents value them. This subjectivist reading of value does not fit with Scheffler’s stated views on the subject.\(^4\) This raises genuine questions as to what it means to say that a relationship is valuable.

### 3.2 Values and Reasons

According to Scheffler, to say that something is valuable is just to say that there are reasons to value it, to treat it in ways which are appropriate to the thing that it is, to hope that it is preserved, and to be emotionally vulnerable to it.\(^5\) This is a form of metaphysical quietism about value: value is understood in terms of the practice of valuing; value is not a property things have. Rather, there are other properties a thing has that makes it valuable. This is often referred to as a “Buck-Passing” account. A buck passer thinks that to say something is valuable is to say that it has

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For instance, to say that a piece of music is valuable is to make a claim about other properties it has, for instance, that it is pleasant, or relaxing, and that those features give us reasons to treat the piece in certain ways, and not in others. In this way, value constrains what we might do. To borrow an example from Scanlon, we mustn’t play Beethoven’s late string quartets as elevator music for this would undermine the sense in which this music demands careful, and sustained listening. It’s not that this would be morally impermissible, but that it would ignore what actions and attitudes are appropriate to the late quartets; it would ignore the ways in which we should value this music. By contrast, it’s perfectly acceptable to play instrumental versions of “Hey Jude” in elevators because this is an appropriate way to respond to these renditions. (Whether or not these renditions properly value the Beatles’ “Hey Jude” is another question.) An action is morally impermissible, not just inappropriate, where the value in question is the value of persons, or their rational nature.\footnote{Ibid.}

It’s tempting to ask after what properties a thing must have to in order for it to be valuable, but this mistakes the aims of the buck-passing theory of value. The aim is not to discover the underlying normatively significant properties, but to offer an explanation of the practical importance of persons and things which avoids the Euthyphro-style dilemmas about objective values. According to Scheffler all values depend on humans in the sense that, were humans to cease to exist, values would likewise cease to exist.\footnote{See Scheffler, \textit{Death and the Afterlife}; see also Raz, \textit{Value, Respect and Attachment}.} But humans discover, rather than create, the reasons which values sustain by determining what is an appropriate response to the properties a
thing has. On this account appropriate responses to value are meant to be objective.

The buck-passing theory of value successfully dissolves Euthyphro worries. However, it is an open question how it can handle values, such as relationships, whose practical relevance varies widely from relationship to relationship, and agent to agent and the properties of which are diffuse. This suggests that valuing relationships is at least partly subjective. Before pursuing this line of investigation, it will be helpful to have in mind what Scheffler thinks valuing amounts to in the context of personal relationships.

### 3.3 Valuable Relationships

Scheffler says that,

To value one’s relationships is not to regard them as more valuable than other people’s relationships, but neither is it merely to believe that they are valuable relationships that happen to be one’s own. To value one’s relationships is also to see them as a distinctive source of reasons. It is, in other words, for the needs, desires, and interests of the people with whom one has valued relationships to present themselves as having deliberative significance, in ways that the needs and interests of other people do not.\(^9\)

Valuing relationships, like valuing music, is a matter of treating it as practically important - seeing that it gives us certain reasons, that it makes certain attitudes and actions appropriate. However, valuing relationships is practically deep. Not only does the value of a relationship present us with certain reasons (owing to the sort of thing it is) but it makes others’ agent-relative reasons practically important. And

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more than this, it makes another’s agent-relative wants and desires into reasons for their relative.

A valuable relationship transforms the needs and desires of the participants into reasons for each to act on behalf of the other in suitable contexts. At the same time, it gives each of them reasons to form certain normative expectations of the other, and to complain if these expectations are not met.¹⁰

This suggests a difference between the responses a relationship makes appropriate for insiders and those it makes appropriate for outsiders. Outsiders needn’t treat the practical outlook of insiders as having practical importance in the sense that they must further another’s aims. What outsiders must do is outside the scope of this description, but it is reasonable to assume that, if the relationship is genuinely valuable, that they have reasons not to damage it without justification. So for example, suppose that Black has a deadline approaching. He has reason to proofread the piece he will be submitting. If White has no acquaintance with Black, this has little practical bearing on what White has reason to do, but does have some bearing. White should not interfere with Black’s efforts, or denigrate them. But absent a relationship White needn’t do anything positive for Black. Black’s reasons are his own.¹¹

But this is not so for Grey. Grey and Black are friends, remember, and Black’s reasons are therefore eligible reasons for Grey. Just what this means for Grey’s practical outlook may be difficult to discern from the scant description of their relationship. But we can say that Black’s deadline should interest Grey. Whether or not he is

¹¹Cf. Raz, Value, Respect and Attachment.
required to do more will depend on the normative expectations that are created by
the relationship, Black’s expectations for Grey, and Grey’s expectations of himself.

In the context of the story about their mutual copy editing, one can form an
expectation that Grey will help Black. After all, he has done so in the past. But
this is simply an epistemic sense of expectation. In order for this expectation to be
normative - that is, in order to say that Grey should help Black with the copy - we
need a story that tells how Grey and Black’s normative expectations support this
particular case, and how they are justified. We require a thicker narrative of their
history together to show how Grey and Black develop normative expectations about
their relationship.

For instance, it may be common knowledge that the copy-editing is very important
to Black, that no one else will be of any help, and that, without Grey’s help, Black will
surely submit a substandard draft, with grave consequences. Furthermore, it may be
common knowledge that Black believes that Grey should help him. These particulars
would help answer questions about the case because they give us reasons for thinking
that Grey is required to help on this occasion. But this is a substantive conclusion
about what reasons Grey has in the context of his relationship with Black. And this
doesn’t seem to work if Grey disagrees. What if Grey thinks that given his past help,
Black should be able to do the copy on his own? What if Grey thinks that Black
should not ask? Whose normative expectations are justified by the relationship?

Even supposing that we can give an answer to this last question, based on argu-
ments which weigh the importance of both Grey and Black’s beliefs, and what it is
reasonable for them to believe, there will be a sense in which the conflict may not
be resolved. Grey may help begrudgingly. An objective account of the substance of
what normative expectations are justified may not represent all the salient aspects of the relationship that support a conclusion about what Black and Grey should do. The answer to what the relationship justifies, in this sense, must be negotiated between participants. This leaves Scheffler’s general point intact. Relationships give their participants practical directives, and they make the forming of normative expectations appropriate, even if they do not determine which expectations or directives are actually appropriate. But this undermines the sense in which the relationship is objectively valuable because it leaves, as controversial, what reasons relationships generate, what is an appropriate response to the relationship.

3.4 Endemic Subjectivity

It’s easy to say that one should take on another’s agent relative reasons only if they are involved in a valuable relationship, which is to say, only if they have genuine reason to value the relationship. It would be inappropriate, and wrong, for me to take on your reasons if I simply imagine that we have a friendship. It’s not that it isn’t possible that I might do you some good by taking your interests on as my own. I may do you some good. But I haven’t the authority to do so, and so whatever good comes from my actions is, in some sense, illegitimate. But in order to say that relationships ground special responsibilities, in the sense that they legitimate partiality, more needs to be said about what makes a relationship a genuine ground for the transfer of agent-relative reasons.

This question has two aspects. On the one hand, we must say what makes some relationships the genuine source of reasons, as opposed to an apparent source of reasons. And this requires an account of the difference of negative and positive relationships.
For, according to the present description there are appropriate responses to every relationship, not just those that are positive, or good. We can think that negative relationships do not provide the same practical importance as positive relationships, but it’s not obvious what, in Scheffler’s view, is supposed to explain this common-sense thought. This worry animates Kolodny’s claim that relationships may be part of practical reason without being part of morality. He writes that

While the relationship theory establishes that partiality is part of practical reason, it does not necessarily show that partiality is part of morality the relationship theory might seem to heighten the widespread sense of uneasiness about including partiality within morality. For if the relationship theory is correct, then our reason for partiality arise from the value of relationships. Yet moral reasons, it is often thought arise distinctively from the value of persons. To be moral, according to a familiar conception is to respect the worth of persons, either as loci of well-being, as utilitarianism claims, or as rational natures or ends in themselves, as broadly Kantian theories would have it. By contrast, if the relationship theory is correct, to be partial is to be beholden to the value of mere things.\textsuperscript{12}

In the next chapter I discuss Kolodny’s alternative non-reductionist approach, which attempts to give an explanation of how the practical demands of relationships are regulated internally by moral principles. At present, I shall assume that the premise that value compossibility makes the coherence of general and special duties likely, even if it doesn’t entail it.

On the other hand, we must account for how a participant’s interest affects the sense in which a relationship is valuable. The responses made appropriate by personal relationships, like those made appropriate by personal projects, seem to depend, at least in part, on the interest of participants. The ordinary thought here is that friendships are valuable just because friends see them as valuable. When friends see their friendship as valuable, then the appropriate thing to do is to treat one another’s individual interests as shared interests in a common goal - that is just what it means to value a friendship. But what if one friend just doesn’t care about the relationship? It seems as if that affects what responses are appropriate, or demanded by the relationship. But if this is true, then the correct interpretation of the value of relationships must include a subjective component.

One possible response Scheffler has to the worry about reasonable partiality is to adjust the aims of his project to highlight the claim that value is a sufficient ground. The thought is that if it’s true that valuable relationships are sufficient to ground special responsibilities, then we needn’t be concerned about negative relationships.

But we should wonder if this response equivocates on two senses of ‘value’ - Scheffler’s value-as-reasons-to-value, and the more common, value-as-good. Scheffler’s characterization seems capacious enough to incorporate almost anything because there are appropriate ways to treat almost anything. So, it would be arbitrary to rule out valuing negative relationships simply because they’re not good. There are appropriate ways to value these relationships as well. The threat here is that value-based non-reductionism devolves into reason-based non-reductionism: if relationships give us reasons, then we have special responsibilities, viz. to respond to these reasons. It’s hard to see how this could illuminate the concept of special responsibilities.
This point comes out more forcefully if we turn to consider the other aspect of the question about what makes a relationship a genuine ground for the transfer of agent-relative reasons. The strength of value-based accounts of morality and moral reasons is that they provide an explanation for the source of true normative claims in terms of stable, and objective, values. For instance, if we think that the distinctive value of persons lies in their rational nature – their ability to respond to reasons – then we need only to figure out how to appropriately account for this unique value. Our agent-relative reasons to treat some individual, in some circumstance, in ways that respects their value as a person, is grounded by the agent-neutral reasons anyone would have were they in a similar situation.

However, when we introduce other important interests some humans have, for instance, their important relationships or life projects, this formal account begins to seem less plausible. This is because there are agent-relative reasons that are irreducible to, or unsupported by, agent-neutral reasons. Our agent-relative reasons to treat some particular relationship, or project, in ways that respect their value seem to depend partially on the reasons everyone has to respect things of practical importance, and partially on whether or not we care about that project or relationship. The fact that Black finds stamp collecting pleasant and relaxing is a reason for him to value this hobby and see it as the source of reasons. If Grey doesn’t care for stamp collecting, then he hasn’t any reason to collect stamps, though he may have reasons to avoid interfering with Black’s collecting stamps. This suggests that appropriate responses to projects and relationships are unlike appropriate responses to the value

\[13\] This is true for all acceptable hobbies, but not for those hobbies which are not independently valuable. Black may find collecting rotting body parts robbed from the local cemetery pleasant and relaxing. But this does not make it the source of reasons. Stamp collecting is generally pleasant and relaxing, even if a little old-fashioned, but body part collecting is generally abominable. And so Grey has reason to interfere with body part collecting because it isn’t independently valuable.
of persons. Our agent-relative reasons to treat some project in a way that respects it’s value is grounded by the agent-neutral reasons anyone would have were they in a similar situation where they cared about the project. But discovering what is appropriate when one cares about a project, or relationship, is just what is at issue when we ask after what responses are reasonable to these things.

There is a difference between personal relationships and personal projects that is worth mentioning here because it lends support to Scheffler’s suggestion. Subjective interest in a personal project is necessary for it to be the source of agent-relative reasons. We might all have agent-neutral reasons to support, or not interfere with good projects. But if some particular agent loses interest in his personal project, then it is reasonable to say that he fails to have the agent-relative reasons to respond to the project in a way that is unique to him.

The demands of personal relationships, their agent-relative reasons, are not so impermanent. Losing interest in stamp collecting may remove it as the source of agent-relative reasons, but losing interest in a friendship doesn’t remove it as a source of reasons, at least not immediately. The reason for this is, I think, obvious: one’s losing interest isn’t enough to render the reasons moot, one’s friend must also lose interest. Even still, it is doubtful that this will be enough. For surely there are other social relations supporting, and supported by, the ailing friendship, all of which are the potential source of reasons, and which make the relationship matter in ways that extend beyond the subjective interest of the parties. Think, for example, of the reasons failed marriages present when relationships with children are involved. Failed marriages remain normatively significant relationships where children depend on stable relations between parents. A clean break isn’t just unrealistic, it’s inappropriate.
In this way, personal relationships draw directly on the value of persons. Treating another’s expectations as normatively significant is part of responding to the value of persons. And so we must treat another’s interest in a relationship as normatively significant, even where we fail to care about the relationship. However, this may amount to merely disabusing the other of false notions about the importance of the relationship.\textsuperscript{14} This suggests that the value of relationships is more stable, but it does not mean that they do not depend, in some way, on whether or not connected agents are interested in seeing them as the source of value. Therefore, it seems fair to say that value-based accounts of the normative significance of relationships and projects are unlike value-based accounts of the value of persons inasmuch as the latter involves a subjective element that muddles the sense in which they are generally valuable. If this is correct, it casts doubts on the explanatory power of value-based accounts of special responsibilities.

3.5 Recognizing reasons

Scheffler says that it is the value of an ongoing historical relationship that supports, or provides grounds for, a \textit{normative} relationship. To advert to the value of a historical relationship is, on Scheffler’s own explanation, just to advert to the reasons that a person has to value the events in the relationship, to see them as the source of reasons. But according to the reflections above, it seems that whether a relationship provide reasons depends, at least partly, on whether or not participants find them

\textsuperscript{14}There is a sense in which this is true for personal projects: we may expect talented scientists to stick with important projects even when they fail to find these projects compelling. Yet, in the case of personal relationships, the important expectations are less abstract than they are in the case of valuable public projects which are also personal projects for some persons.
There is a further sense in which the value of relationships might be thought to be subjective, owing to how events in our shared histories feature in our practical outlook. Perhaps Black and Grey care about the first time they met, and that they celebrate it every year. If this is so, then the appropriate response to this event is a celebration. But if they don’t care, then there is no appropriate response to this anniversary – no reasons. The practical importance of some event in their history is strongly determined what Black and Grey think about it. So the sense in which the relationship provides reasons, depends on what Black and Grey think are appropriate responses to the events of their history – what they think is reasonable. They get to say how the facts of their history should matter to their future actions. The reasons of relationships are just how their members understand their history-relevant reasons. The value of historical relationships, therefore, depends strongly on how, and whether or not, their members find events in that history meaningful. This puts pressure on the idea that there are appropriate responses to events in a given history which are independent of what participants think appropriate.

One way Scheffler might avoid this conclusion is to suggest that there is an alternative account of valuable relationships. On this account, there are generic valuable relationships – parent, child, friend, teacher, and so on – and that these generic relationships are the true source of reasons, just as valuable practices are the true source

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15Scheffler might complain that where no relationship participant cares about a shared history, then there is no relationship, and so there is no reason to worry about its normative significance. However, this is at odds with the idea that there is a historical relationship which is meant to exist independently of its value.

16The fact that these interpretive aspects are negotiated between members will be the subject of the fourth chapter.
of agent-relative reasons. The reasons offered by these generic formulations are relativized to agents by their personalizing the forms. You and I say what our friendship is about, but in the context of a generic form which is understood to have instrumental and intrinsic value. This process takes the value of friendship and brings it into our lives, leaving us with agent-relative reasons to treat our relationship as valuable, to see it as the source of reasons, so long as it embodies the value of the form.\footnote{Thanks is due to Rahul Kumar for making me aware of this line of argumentation.}

This account offers a plausible objective conception of the value of a relationship, but it isn’t clear that it adheres to the spirit of non-reductionism, nor to Scheffler’s formulation. On Scheffler’s account the value of the history of a friendship is itself supposed to be explanatory of the normative significance of the friendship. In the history of their friendship, Black helped Grey edit an article that was subsequently widely read in his field. This event had instrumental value, Grey’s work was widely read, and intrinsic value because Black’s help added to the significance of the achievement and to the significance of their relationship in Grey’s life. On the form of non-reductionism which adverts to the generic value of a relationship, Grey and Black’s history is valuable because it embodied the principles of good friendship. But this seems closer to the account of value where relationships are valuable to their members because they are valuable, and because they happen to belong to their members. It leaves out mention of the work done by the significance of the event in the context of the relationship, and the subsequent meaning in the context of Black’s life.

There is a further deficiency of the generic-relationship-account-of-value worth mentioning. The account assumes that relationships can be understood as being generally valuable, outside of particular histories, on account of what properties they
have. But I think this idea relies on a heavily normative notion of what these relationships should be. This conflates normative relationships with natural historical relationships.

The point is easy to see in the context of familial relationships. It isn’t at all clear that simply being biologically related to a child is valuable.\(^{18}\) That a child owes its existence to my genetic material generates a natural history – I am metaphysically a parent – but that history is not necessarily the source of value. I may fertilize a plant with my excrement, but this doesn’t mean that my relationship to the plant is valuable. Being a parent, in this natural sense, is not a sufficient condition to say that one is in a valuable relationship. One may be metaphysically a parent without being a parent normatively. If this is true for familial relationships, then it should be doubly true for other relationships, like friendships, given that their natural history is relatively flexible. It is unlikely, therefore, that these relationships can even be metaphysically delineated without normative content.

### 3.6 Prospective Relationships

On reflection, Scheffler’s principal claim – that normative relationships supervene on value historical relationships – begins to look trivial. A historical relationship is valuable according to whether, and how, its participants should see its events as the source of reasons. But this is just a description of a normative relationship. And so the supervenience claim is that relationships support reasons only when they are

\(^{18}\)Though see Kolodny, ‘Which Relationships Justify Partiality? General Considerations and Problem Cases’. It may be normatively significant because biological facts serve as information which is the basis of reasons. The fact that one’s offspring has genetic markers for some disease might give one reason to get tested for those markers. However, this is not germane to the normative significance of the relationship as I’ve been exploring it.
the source of reasons. Add to this the idea expressed in the last two sections that these reasons are not sensibly called ‘objective’ and it seems unlikely that value-based non-reductionism can provide an explanation of special responsibilities that provides space to say that they are inherently reasonable.

In this final section, I want to further emphasize the effects of the subjective aspects I’ve discussed to foreshadow the discussion in the next chapter. My discussion of relationships often focused on the events within the relationship and their normative significance in terms of their meaning to participants. An event is meaningful in the sense that its description has normative significance. A certain date, described as an anniversary, has a significance lacking from a date which has no such description. The point was that we should not simply focus on the history of a relationship just in terms of bare descriptions of its events, but on the interpretation of how those events are supposed by the participants to generate reasons. This is the sense in which we value events in a shared history, and the sense in which we value our relationships.

This formulation allows Scheffler’s general claim that our responsibilities depend on the history of the relationship. But notice how often our sense of a relationship’s reasons depend on the future of our relationship. And furthermore, perhaps paradoxically, there is some sense to the idea that the history of a relationship depends on the interpretive value of our present and future relationship. This can be understood in terms of the normative concepts of ‘prescription’ and ‘revision’.

In the context of a personal relationship, shared events are mutually interpreted, lending a, more or less, negotiated and agreed upon meaning to events.\footnote{I say “more or less” because negotiation is rarely explicit, and there will often be persistent, though slight, disagreements about the meaning of individual events.} The meaning of shared events over time forms part of the basis for understanding the significance
of the relationship itself. This, against a backdrop of other features of a life which are significant, is the normative significance of a relationship.

The prescriptive and revisionist elements enter at the level of individual events, but are also important for understanding the meaning of the relationship. In the case of revision, we look backward at events and assign them new meaning according to how our relationships have evolved. In the case of prescription, we anticipate the direction of the relationship, assigning meaning on the basis of a relationship that does not yet exist.

Revision is the easier of the two to understand. In the context of an existing relationship, we can add meaning to events which otherwise may have been impossible had the relationship failed to flourish. I believe that the origins of friendships often are constructed in this way. Two people share an event, which becomes the beginning of the friendship after the friendship has been established. Otherwise, the event lacks the significance necessary to make it important in other contexts, such as being the reason to celebrate on a certain date. This is meant to contrast with Scheffler’s approach in as much as I take a stronger position on importance of interpretation of past events. The value of the relationship, and its normative significance, owe a great deal to what we say now about past events. This contradicts the idea that the value of those events is more independent, and more static, depending on the objective features that provide reasons to value.

This point comes out even more forcefully when we consider prescription. Prescription assigns meaning to an event based on an anticipated history. In established relationships it is important because it matters to members of a relationship where
the relationship is headed, and describing events in particular ways is part of determining this in advance and controlling for uncertainty mitigating one’s exposure or vulnerability. In other cases prescription pre-constructs prospective relationships. Parents considering having, or adopting, a child, can’t really be said to have a history with that child, at least not in the traditional sense of history. Yet prospective parents have reasons to see their prospective relationship as reason-giving, simply in virtue of the fact that they intend to be parents.

Notice the contrast here with Scheffler’s non-reductionism. Where we anticipate a relationship, we can act in ways that will be appropriate to that relationship when it comes into being. In these cases, there is a normative relationship, a set of reasons organized around an aspect of a person’s life, but little sense to the idea that one is responding to a history. Rather, we respond to the value of a possible relationship. We recognize potential value by assuming the authority to so prescribe interpretive significance to future events based on their prospective position in the relationship.

The general idea is that natural relationships do not ground reasons and responsibilities, but rather the other way around. Our individual and joint interpretation of our actions generates the normative sense of the relationship, which assigns the natural history importance. Personal relationships are in this sense normative all the way down.

3.7 Non-Reductionist Grounds

Reductionist accounts of the normative import of relationships seem too far removed from our everyday experience of the moral demands of our relationships because they have only the concepts of external morality, personal duty, and perhaps honor,
as grounding principles. In attaching importance to our relationships as the most significant foundation of special responsibilities, the value-based approach points us in the right direction, because it suggests that there is something in our practical deliberation that invites relationships to play the generative role that morality, duty, or honor seemed inept to play.

The main problem with a value-based theory is that it is too anemic to explain how relationships are the genuine source of reasons. If we accept my contention that there is an irreducible subjective aspect to the concept of ‘valuable relationship’, then the aspirations to provide this explanation seem misplaced. Furthermore, I’ve argued here that even if we add to the value account a supplementary theory about historical and normative relationships, we are still left without an explanation of how relationships generate reasons. And so an explanation of the grounds of special responsibilities remains elusive.

This suggests that a non-reductionist theory should not begin with an abstract question about how relationships provide normative grounds. In the next chapter I pursue a different line of investigation. Rather than focus on what does the grounding for claims about special responsibilities, we ought to focus on what it is about a relationship that makes it normatively significant. In the next chapter I look at an alternative approach that takes shared events as the natural foundation of personal relationships and attempts to explain special responsibility by showing how the reasons that govern a historical event expand to govern over the entire relationship.
CHAPTER 4

Relationships
In the last chapter, I examined Sam Scheffler’s value based theory of special responsibilities. I argued that value-based accounts meet a dilemma. Either they are too objective, and fail to provide non-reductionist grounds for special responsibilities. Or they are too subjective, in which case they fail to provide a compelling and non-circular explanation to how individual relationships support partiality.

In this chapter I consider a non-reductionist approach by Niko Kolodny. Kolodny’s explanation is non-reductionist insofar as he seeks to find the answers to questions about special responsibilities by looking at the normative significance of relationships. But his argument differs widely from Scheffler’s. Scheffler’s interest is in providing coherence, and congruence, between the demands of impartial morality, and personal relationships and projects. Kolodny takes it as given that there are true partiality principles, that there are good reasons to favor our friends and families and that this does not stop us from acting morally. He is mainly concerned to find the underlying rational for why it is that some relationships support true partiality principles whereas other relationships do not. The answer he gives is that partiality is justified just when and because there is resonance between the relationship history, and a present act of partiality. Partiality principles are defended implicitly, on the basis that they describe such acts of reasonable partiality.

I argue here that Kolodny faces a worry similar to the one I raised for Scheffler. I agree that his approach shows how relationships of reasonable partiality support associative principles. However, at bottom he can explain only continued partiality, that is, why we should be partial to those with whom we have shared a relationship of reasonable partiality. The reasons why some relationships form the basis for reasonable partiality are left unexamined. And so the central question about the foundation
of partiality principles, their reasonableness or true normativity, is left unanswered.

4.1 Resonance

Recall from Chapter 2, that reductionists explain the supervenience of normative relationships on historical relationships by way of a deduction from general principles to agent-relative reasons through a minor premise that includes mention of the context of the relationship. For example, a Reductionist can appeal to the following sort of argument:

(1) One has reason to promote well-being where one is best able to do so.
(2) A parent P in parent-child relationships is well placed to promote their child’s well-being.
(C) Therefore, P has an agent-relative reason to promote P’s child’s well-being.

The agent-relativity here follows from the ineliminable reference to P’s child; the conclusion follows by deduction from the agent-neutral reasons contained in the major premise, along with the minor premise.

As we saw in the last chapter, non-reductionists like Scheffler will have difficulty providing an argument to (C) because they cannot appeal to the kind of general principle stated in (1). Rather they must find an explanation that begins with the relationship. For instance,

(1’) One has reason respond to one’s relationships in ways that respect and uphold the value of those relationships.
(2') Promoting a child’s well-being would respect and uphold the value of a parent-child relationship R.

(3') An agent P has relationship R.

(C) Therefore, P has an agent-relative reason to promote P’s child’s well-being.

R is ambiguous. Either R stands for ‘valuable-parent-child-relationship’ or simply ‘parent-child-relationship’. But trouble arises irrespective of what reading we accept. If the former, then (3) needs some independent defense. We cannot simply assume (3) as a description of the circumstances. We need to know what makes it true that P has a valuable relationship. If we take the latter reading, we need a fourth premise to say why R is valuable, which requires the same sort of explanation.

This is not to say that the reductionists are in a better position. I argued in the second chapter that we should be wary of relying to heavily on the importance of claims like (2). But the problem with value-based non-reductionism is more striking because it relies on a conceptual circle: ‘P has R’ is defended on the basis that P has reason to value R, and this is just the existential version of the universal principle stated in (1).

Kolodny’s strategy flips this procedure on its head. He assumes that there are some instances of reasonable partiality of the sort represented in (C). Then he notices that only some relationships are going to be a good fit for R and will therefore support universal formulations of (C). The task then is to find out why some relationships make a good fit, and others do not. He puts the challenge in terms of explaining an exhaustive list of all true partiality principles, to explain why it is that

(1) One has reason for parental partiality toward children
belongs on the list. Whereas principles involving negative relationships, such as

(2) One has reason for prison-gang partiality toward other members in one’s prison-gang
and those involving arbitrary relationships, such as

(3) One has reason for blood-type partiality toward others who share the same blood-type
do not.¹

To meet this challenge, Kolodny introduces the concept of resonance. Partiality in some relationships, like those between friends and family, resonate with the history of partiality in those relationships. Partiality in other relationships, for instance, between criminals, does not resonate with partiality in criminal histories. What resonates with criminal histories is not continued partiality, but, apology, remuneration, shame, and making amends.

Kolodny’s explanation is compelling, but employing resonance in this context is new, and so it will be helpful to look at the connection between resonance and normative principles, and thereafter reintroduce its connection to partiality.

The main idea is that resonance provides an explanation of why principles applicable to one sphere of life transfer over to other spheres of life without need of a separate argument or transfer principle. The example he gives first concerns how the reasons we have to experience natural emotions are represented in normatively laden contexts.

I have reason to feel negative reactive attitudes, such as resentment,

when someone aims to do me harm because these attitudes resonate with the non-reactive attitudes I would feel toward the state where I’ve been harmed.\(^2\)

In the case of actions, my attitudes are directed toward someone, and this is meant to reflect the importance of the active dimension of intention, the dimension of agency, and the dimension of interpersonal address. Resonance bridges the gap between, as we may say, two normative spheres, (two ontic realms), here natural emotions and the reactive emotions, without requiring a deduction or facilitation from more basic principles.\(^3\) The reasons there are to have certain natural emotions in response to a situation of harm are preserved when we discover that the harm resulted from some intentional act. The basic normative relationship, the reason to feel an emotion, is transformed in order to respect the change between a natural harm and an intentional harm.

Similarly we might think of the resonance between moral and legal norms. In moral contexts, we have reason to experience negative moral emotions, such as indignation, toward wrongdoers and wrongdoing. This reason resonates with the reasons we have to want to see the actions of wrongdoers punished in a legal context. It isn’t that legally sanctioned punishment is morally required, or that negative moral emotions are somehow the implication of legal decisions. The legal and moral contexts are in this example meant to be separate. But in spite of this separation there

\(^{2}\)See also Peter Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’, in: Freedom and resentment and Other Essays (Routledge).

\(^{3}\)I use the term ‘ontic realm’ here and elsewhere to signify the underlying ontological difference between contexts that support different normative claims. It is true that legal norms and moral norms supervene on the same descriptive facts. But those facts are contextualized differently according to the domain we choose, and have different implications. And so this is why it is helpful to call the contexts separate realms. It helps to represent the plain idea that descriptive facts mean different things in different contexts.
is a symmetry between their normative facts such that the reasons in one context have counterpart reasons in the other context. Resonance is meant to explain this occurrence. Legal norms would not resonate with moral norms if acts which engendered moral disapprobation resulted in legal rewards. And this, combined with the assumption that morality must be the arbiter of good practical principles suggests that resonance is not normatively neutral, merely a description of the relationship between spheres, but can function prescriptively.

This is Kolodny’s summary:

Resonance: one has reason to respond to X in a way that is similar to the way that one has reason to respond to its counterpart in another dimension of importance, but that reflects the distinctive importance of the dimension to which X belongs.⁴

Notice that Resonance suggests a route to normative principles directly by way of analogical reasoning. If some action or attitude seems appropriate in one case, where I’ve stubbed my toe for example, a similar action or attitude should be appropriate where you kick at my toe, adjusting for important differences in the cases. Here the relationship between two events which sets out the relationship between natural and reactive attitudes is one of general association, not deductive. And therefore, it looks like there is a way to get to claims like (C) without major and minor premises.

This fact makes resonance a powerful idea for talking about partiality. In questioning the normative significance of our relationships we want to know what it means to have an association, or to be associated. We may think that some associations fail, in some way, perhaps in some moral way, as associations. And so targeting which

historical relationships lend themselves to analogical reasoning - from the history of the association to the future of the association - we seem to have an explanation of source of normativity. Those which are amenable to the resonance formulation will pass the test for being a significant historical relationship.

4.2 Shared Histories

Kolodny’s explanation is suggestive of the form a historical personal relation must take in order to be normatively significant, but the form itself, and the ultimate importance of resonance is elusive.

According to Scheffler the normative relationship supervenes on a historical relationship, so there can’t be a change in the normative relationship without a change in the historical relationship. I argued in the last chapter that this is false, unless the historical relationship includes the prescriptive elements of the members’ evaluative stance toward the relationship. If this is true, however, then this makes the claim about supervenience trivial.

Resonance solves this concern by dividing personal relationships into two ontic realms in a way that differs significantly from Scheffler’s theory. The history of a relationship is one ontic realm, and the present context is another. A history of reasonable partiality supports partiality in the present because present acts of partiality resonate with events in that history. Suppose you and I have been friends for many years. Friendship requires, inter alia, discrete encounters of aid and cooperation, and our friendship has involved many of these discrete encounters. On the suggested explanation, I have reason to respond to our history of aid and cooperation in a way that resonates with each encounter, but reflects the importance of that history. This
gives me reason to, for instance, feel gratitude toward you, and our history together, because discrete encounters of aid no doubt involve gratitude.

Kolodny’s general idea is that special responsibilities arise out of the:

*Resonance of histories of encounter*: one has reason to respond to a history of encounter in a way that 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.\(^5\)

Extending the example above, the reasons we had to respond to past instances of aid, say, with gratitude, resonate with the reasons we have to feel grateful for our friendship. Or, to take an example of action, the reasons we had to support one another’s project in the past, resonate with the reasons to support one another generally. The resonance between present events and the historical relationship suggests its normative dimension in terms of preserving the reasonable requirements of the past. These requirements can be anything that fits with how the events are basically associated with one another.

This approach resolves the worry about triviality by taking the prescriptive element out of the rationale for present partiality. The reasons we have to continue our partial relationship derive from the external fact that only some acts in the present will resonate with the history of partiality. My helping you now resonates with our history of aid, whereas leaving you in the lurch does not resonate with the history of aid.

On Scheffler’s value based non-reductionism, the value of the relationship relies on

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the importance we assign to its events. This is what I identified as an endemic subjectivity. On Kolodny’s theory a historical relationship is not essentially interpretive, but is simply a collection of our shared events. We simply have a history of mutual aid. We don’t respond in individual circumstances with the aim of creating such a history or work to create that history. And so we do not set the reasonable response in advance by deciding what will count as reasonable in the future. Therefore, it is not trivial to say that a change in our history will change our present rationale for our actions.

As an initial response to the worries I raised about value-based accounts, this seems like a promising avenue. Kolodny’s position has all of the elements of objectivity that I argued couldn’t be preserved in the value approach. At the same time, it does not seem to commit us to a form of objectivity that ignores the importance of unique histories. External principles may govern individual events, but there are no principles that govern the sequence of those events and so the importance of the relationship as the foundation of normativity, which is the standard of non-reductionism, is preserved.

However, this only takes care of what I called the retrospective element in a relationship which in part entails the triviality I diagnosed in Scheffler. What Kolodny’s suggestion ignores is the ordinary sense in which a history is formed prospectively. Individual events have meanings that carry over to future events by casting them in a unique light. This idea runs contrary to the suggestion that relationships come into being accidentally. It does not suggest that Kolodny’s explanation of continued partiality is trivial, but rather that there is an explanation of the formation of reasonable partiality, that is, partiality in the first instances, which is missing from his account.

To develop this objection it will be helpful to look more carefully at the details
of Kolodny’s explanation of how resonance divides relationships into reasonable and unreasonable instances of partiality. Recall the principle

(1) One has reason for parental partiality toward one’s children.

Kolodny does not explain exactly how it is that resonance puts (1) on the list, but I should think that we can develop an argument. Consider the following:

If there are reasons for parents to love their children, to help them to grow and achieve a stable position in life, then a parent has reason to respond to their parent-child relationship in a way that resonates with discrete encounters of love and support, and reflects the importance of their shared history. Reasons in individual instances of parenting cross over from the dimension of singular action, into the broader dimension of the relationship. Parents must therefore respond to their relationship in the present so as to reflect the importance of the relationship. (What this means will, of course, depend on the features of that history, and on the reasons one has in discrete encounters.)

This argument shows the way in which parental relationships are capable of using resonance to generate reasons directly. It therefore gives some sense to the idea that there is a principle that says that one should be partial, in this way, to one’s children. But there is a lingering worry about the meaning of partiality in this context, that is, with how partiality links up with special responsibility.

When one compares the basic statement of Resonance with Resonance of History of Encounters, one might notice that substantive requirements of resonance depend exactly on what is reasonable in the first case. It therefore seems as if resonance cannot be taken as a principle of action as such because it cannot be employed without some sense of what is objectively reasonable in the singular case. Rather,
resonance simply allows us to see that the rationale for an action or attitude can be brought from one ontic realm into another in a way that does not destroy its normative significance. It does not illustrate how this happens, and so, although it provides more insight into the Non-Reductionist schema, it only stands as a truthmaker for claims about which relationships can justify partiality. Were we to try to take this form of Non-Reductionism beyond this level of philosophical explanation, to attempt, for instance, to answer the question of grounds, we will end up glossing over just those details an account of special responsibilities is meant to explain: the details about how relationships generate special responsibilities. Partiality toward relationships is simply a matter of continuous recognition of a set of objective reasons that guided the formation of that relationship.

Consider, for illustration, what a general argument involving resonance might look like:

(1) We are involved in a host of relationships that have involved discrete instances of special responsibility.
(2) Responding to these relationships in the right way is a matter of responding in a way that resonates with individual instances of responsibility.
(C1) Therefore there is a set of principles that govern over relationships with histories of responsibility that say that we should respond in a way that reflects the importance of a history of responsibility.
(C2) Therefore there are true partiality principles that govern over relationships of just this kind.

This is consistent with what Kolodny says in summation:
The central relationship between parents and children, whether adoptive or biological, is a shared history of a certain kind of encounter: an encounter in which one adult has responsibility, whether he has or has not fulfilled it, for a particular child. Thus, the partiality that parents and children have reason to have for one another in response to this shared history resonates with the responses that they have reason to have in response to the discrete encounters of responsibility of which it is composed.6

This approach seems to fill out Scheffler’s schema, by showing how partiality is justified, or reasonable, for relationships that have a history of partiality. But it will not tell us anything about the justification for partiality in the first dimension of encounter. There is therefore a question about how relationships form this responsibility in the first place.

In conversation with Kolodny, he suggested that the first dimension of responsibility in the parent-child case is likely given by some conventional aspect. If communal child rearing was the norm, this responsibility would be shared, and would likely not create the form of partiality with which we are familiar. But then we should want to know what exactly Kolodny’s account adds to our conventional understanding of special responsibilities. We want to know what it is about the relationship that makes it the source of justified partiality. It won’t do to say that we find ourselves in relationships that involve special responsibilities, and that these relationships justify continued partiality, without explaining why it is that these relationships involve special responsibilities, and why they have a right to continue in the face of impartial moral reasons.

4.3 What Resonance Excludes

Kolodny tells us that there are no reasons to respond to arbitrary relationships, because there is no history on which to draw. Relationships such as having a kidney of the same weight will not meet the standards of personal relationships that bring them under consideration in the first place. There is no practical importance if you and I have kidneys of similar weights - no reasons that come out of this shared event (if it can be called an event). And so there is no sequence or history of rational responses to these non-events and obviously, no further importance to this relationship.

Resonance is applicable however to relationships that are in some way negative. Kolodny cites two kinds of negative relationships: externally negative relationships, and internally negative relationships. Since I will have much to say about the demands of negative relationships in a later chapter, I will only discuss these here with reference to the details of Kolodny’s project.

Externally negative relationships are those with histories where two persons jointly wrong a third party, or act in other ways that are objectionable. They call for apology, and generally making amends, because this would resonate with discrete encounters where two people have wronged a third. Internally negative relationships, like abusive relationships, are disallowed on similar grounds to arbitrary relationships, owing to the fact that there are no good reasons to abuse another, and so there is nothing in the historical dimension to resonate with the present response to the relationships.

In order to see the difference between positive and negative relationships let’s simply focus on the difference between friendship between criminals and friendship between law abiders. Resonance, it turns out, has its normative place in both, so it will be illustrative to consider how partiality principles fall out of the law abiding
case, but not the criminal case.

_Law Abiders_: Suppose that as law abiding friends we collect stamps together. Part of this involves meeting every weekend to compare our week’s acquisition. All of our acquisitions are legal, and are not based on transgression of any moral demands. This weekend I have reason to meet you to show off my new acquisitions because this would resonate with a history of meeting to discuss stamps.

In this case, I have other reasons too, reasons to feel gratitude, for instance, for the time we have to meet and share our interest because this resonates with the gratitude I have had in the past for our weekly meetings. But the example will become impossibly complex if we continue to set out all the reasons I have looking forward to this weekend. We can cover all of these by saying that our relationship supports the same actions over time, and that our attitudes to those actions are more or less stable toward the relationship as well.

Now compare _Law Abiders_ with

_Criminals_: We collect stamps together. Part of this involves meeting every weekend to compare our week’s acquisition. All of our acquisitions are based on transgression of moral and legal demands; part of our activity is based on getting stamps we don’t pay for, or don’t pay much for because we’ve threatened the previous owner. According to Resonance, this weekend I do not have reason to meet you, or, if I do, I have reason to convince you to return the stolen and coerced stamps and apologize for our history of wrongdoing.
Perhaps we want to say that I have reasons to feel gratitude, for instance, for our ability to meet and share our interest because this resonates with the gratitude I have had in the past for our weekly meetings. But let’s set this wrinkle aside. Ignoring the fact that some of our acts will be more of the same, we can rightly say that this weekend cannot, if it is in line with Resonance, involve more of the same in the same way as it did in *Law Abiders*. This is because there really wasn’t reason to collect stamps according to our criminal ethos, and so we have reasons not to continue that behaviour, but reform it.

In this way, only relationships that entitle their parties to *more of the same* will be sufficient to support partiality principles. We may even go so far as to say that having reasons to do more of the same is what partiality essentially involves. But this should not imply that relationships that are in accord with true partiality principles are stagnant. On one line of argument, meeting the condition of more of the same paints a picture of relationships that are deeply impaired, and probably best characterized by ennui. But “boring” and “stagnant” shouldn’t be key descriptors of relationships that justify partiality. So there seems to be a problem.

Kolodny has an easy response. According to resonance, we need to account for the prospective importance of acting in the present. That is, in doing more of the same, we need to account for the specialness of so acting in the present. So, if this weekend is our one year stamp collecting anniversary, then perhaps we should compare stamps while eating cake and wearing party hats. In this way, we can meet the additional condition of resonance of respecting the significance, the significance to one another and our relationship, of acting in the future with more of the same.
If this is the right response, however, it leads to a deeper difficulty with the normative importance of resonance. For, it seems as if all of the true claims about what we should do in the present come from two conditions that are not covered directly by resonance, though resonance does not undermine them. First, the justification for acting in the present depends directly on whether or not the past action was itself reasonable. In thinking about the difference between law abiding stamp collecting, and criminal stamp collecting, we can come up with a principle that explains the wrongness of one, and not the other, and this principle will also tell us what to do in the future cases. Whether or not our partiality to our friends in stamp collecting is justified seems to depend only on whether they pass this timeless principle, not resonance. Thus, if our relationships involve permissible past actions which respect the constraints of justice, or morality, then they will be reasonable in this sense. Let’s call it this feature of the relationship the ‘Justice Condition.’

The other feature of the relationship has to do with how the parties understand the significance of a present action as it reflects the general tenor of the relationship. Like the Justice Condition, this feature doesn’t turn on resonance, but rather on how the parties of a relationship understand the meaning of the action in the context of the relationship. We can call this the ‘Significance Condition’. Once we know that we have passed the Justice Condition, then we can ask how some present action might have significance in the context of our relationship, and what that significance might be.

Suppose that last year’s anniversary went badly. I might know that meeting on our anniversary this year has the significance of demonstrating a deep commitment, on both our parts, to continuing to share our love of stamps. I can think about
how our meeting will be significant for me by thinking about what it means for us to overcome hardships, like the last anniversary, and perhaps what it means for the strength of our relationship, or what it says about the power of stamps. But making sure that our current anniversary respects these reflections about significance does not seem to depend on resonance between the events, but on more ordinary ideas about how to pay attention to the meaning of one’s actions.

If these conditions can be met, as it seems, without reference to resonance, then we have good reason to ask what resonance adds to our understanding of special responsibilities.

4.4 The Significance of Resonance

I claimed in Section 4.1 that the strength of Kolodny’s approach lies in the fact that he has provided us a way to reason to true normative principles that track associative duties without employing deductive reasoning. This makes the account formally adequate. In contrast to value-based accounts which seemed unable to provide an account of the independence of the value of a relationship without taking steps toward reductionism. But now it seems as if we can cover associative duties simply by asking about what significance of our acting in one way rather than another has for our intimates, what it means in the context of our relationship. If we meet expectations for our present actions, then it seems as if our acts are reasonable in this sense. Whether or not our acts will be reasonable in a further, moral sense, will depend on whether our past acts are independently justified from a moral perspective, and whether it is right to continue them, or to make amends.

It might be claimed that resonance actually unites these conditions, and these
seemingly independent senses of reasonableness thus making all acts of partiality, reasonable partiality. This is to deny the step-procedure I alluded to in the last section, where we think about the reasonableness of our actions by thinking about how it would affect others, and its internal effects for our relationship. In order for Kolodny to take this response, he would have to claim that resonance has the dual function of making it true that our relationships are reasonable, as it were, from the inside, from our perspective, and from the outside, the perspective of others.

In order to assess these claims, let’s look at one more pair of stamp collectors.

*Reformed Criminals*: We collect stamps together. Part of this involves meeting every weekend to compare our week’s acquisition. All of our acquisitions used to be based on transgression of moral and legal demands.

Now we collect stamps as in *Law Abiding*.

Suppose at (T1) we were criminals, at (T2) repentant criminals, and at (T3), reformed criminals. Let’s allow that resonance makes it true that our criminal actions at (T1) entail repentant actions at (T2) and that our non-criminal relationship actions at (T1) entail the same at (T3). It must also be true, if resonance has the claimed quality of unification that it prevents us from going back to a life of criminal collecting. Thus, given these entailments, we seem to meet the Justice Conditions, and the Significance Conditions.

But I wonder if we do meet the Significance Conditions. At (T3) our actions look identical to *Law Abiding*, but they are, in fact, different sorts of actions because they have a radically different meaning to us. We do not go on as if we were normal law-abiding stamp collectors, even though the actions we do will look very much the same from the outside, because our actions have a different expressive quality in light
of our past bad behaviour. Some will give us reason to feel repentant, for instance, where that attitude would be out of place in Law Abiding. But resonance will not differentiate between (T1) and (T3) in Reformed Criminals on the one hand, and (T1) and (T2) in Law Abiding. Some of the action pairs will be exactly the same, such as taking turns with the magnifying glass, and this is as it should be. But the central actions that characterize the relationships as discrete from one another will not be the same. If resonance tells us in both cases what actions are due to follow at (T2), it’s hard to see how it sorts between the good and bad relationships.

What sort of relationship we have, whether it is one of internal responsibility, such as in the case of parents and children, or one of restorative responsibility, as in the case of criminals, together with our shared view of the meaning of our actions, lets us determine the trajectory of our relationships. Resonance may help to inform the process of figuring out what happens next, but because resonance is applicable to relationships with no value, or disvalue, it only responds to the idea that there is a relationship, a history with which to resonate, and a trajectory which follows the demands of resonance. Resonance alone cannot pass judgment on the justifying influence of that history, how that history modifies our presumed fidelity to impartial moral reasons. And therefore it does not speak directly to what justifies partiality, but rather, to what a person should do in order that she acts in accordance with the reasons there are.

This leaves us with a question about how our relationships are supposed to justify actions in a larger context of right and wrong actions. In the next chapter I take up this question by looking at some features of the moral psychology of relationships. There I suggest that the best way to understand special responsibilities is in the
context of what is required for true cooperation. The duties of justice on this model are things for which we are jointly responsible.
CHAPTER 5

Cooperation
An account of special responsibilities should detail the sense in which our relationships form a basic deliberative outlook. This idea differs from what I take is the standard view of practical rationality, where an agent’s deliberative outlook is supposed to be singular and where relationships enter into one’s deliberative sphere as side constraints on action. In this chapter I give reasons for thinking that this view mischaracterizes the practical importance of relationships, and in doing so presents an incomplete picture of practical rationality. I offer an account that places relationships at the center of practical deliberation and present arguments for thinking that joint agency is, in a way, more basic than singular agency. I then comment on the implications this has for questions regarding the priority of relationships in the ordering of our moral demands and duties.

5.1 The Action Model

We come to self-consciousness in a relational nexus, pre-fit with a familial relationships which put constraints on what we otherwise may want to do with our time - these are our inherited obligations. The non-reductionist views which I’ve discussed privilege the importance of these inherited responsibilities insofar as they see the natural history of a relationship as the foundation for true normative claims on individuals named in those histories. But the vast majority of our important relationships are, in some way, actively sustained, even those first founded on familial ties. And so a more accurate picture of special responsibilities should present this active component of relationships as fundamental. Understanding the normative importance of relationships therefore should begin by defining the relationship in active terms, as a sustained effort of cooperation.
Let’s call this account of relationships the “Action Model” (AM) of relationships. In contrast to competing views, it does not focus on the historical events that make up a relationship, but on the interpretive significance those events have for the parties to the relationship. Historical descriptions of shared events are not ruled out as irrelevant, but their significance to the relationship according to AM is directly dependent on the opinions and joint opinion of the parties to the relationship. Relatives decide what characterization past events should have, and this affects their joint description of what the relationship requires. Anniversaries provide a good example of this phenomenon. Two people think that a date is significant and so it continues to play a part in future thinking, carrying with it certain responsibilities.

The process of deciding together what is of normative significance is the process of creating a joint narrative of the relationship which sets out, often in under-defined ways, what are reasonable expectations relatives should have of one another. This might give one the impression that relationships on AM are simply a series of implicit promises that are the result of shared activity, and special obligations are merely the reasons we have to discharge these promises. But this is only partially correct. Special obligations connect to expectations and future performance. But more important than performance is the form of reasoning that takes place. We meet our obligations just in case our reasoning respects the ongoing shared activities which constitute our relationships. That is, we think about how our actions reflect attitudes that are meant to be in consonance with our shared aims. Our shared aims and attitudes are sometimes silent, or slight, with respect to our individual actions, and so some of our special responsibilities will therefore be comparatively minor responsibilities. But this model seeks to analyze the overall normative significance of relationships.
which are centrally important to our lives, intimate relationships, and close familial relationships. Therefore, I aim to focus not simply on examples of shared activity, or affiliations, but on what it is to “share a life”.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the concept of a shared life must begin with a firm grasp on what it is to act together. I begin, therefore, by looking at two competing accounts of what it is to act together to give an account of the basic normative importance of cooperation. In Sections 5.2 and 5.3 I present reasons for thinking that there is something special about cooperation in the context of a relationship that is missing from cooperation between strangers. In Section 5.4 I explain how the question of the priority is to be understood on the action model of relationships where I argue that the fundamental practical outlook of agents in relationships must be from the perspective of those relationships, and that this constitutes reasonable partiality. Then, in Section 5.5 I discuss in more detail how AM responds to the main worries raised in Chapters 3 and 4 for the accounts provided by Scheffler and Kolodny. And finally, I consider AM as general theory of practical reason.

5.2 Joint Intentions

A prominent question in the literature on joint action raised by Margaret Gilbert is whether joint action is best understood as a weakly normative concept, reflecting what intentions should be present in order that two people act together, or whether it involves, necessarily, further obligations and commitments held between participants. Gilbert argues that joint action cannot be understood apart from the commitments that structure joint participation. In contrast, philosophers such as Searle and Bratman have argued that the necessary and sufficient conditions for joint action concern
sets of nested intentions, plans, and sub-plans, but not obligation, or commitment.

For instance, Bratman writes that,

With respect to a group consisting of you and me, and concerning joint activity, J, we intend to J if and only if: (1) (a) I intend that we J and (b) you intend that we J; (2) I intend that we J in accordance with and because of (1) (a), (1) (b), and meshing sub-plans of (1) (a), (1) (b); and you intend likewise. (3): (1) and (2) are common knowledge between us.¹

According to this formulation, you and I take a walk just in case we both intend to take a walk, that we so intend because each of us intends, because those intentions are in congruence with one another, and just in case the foregoing is common knowledge between us. A stranger walking next to us does not walk with us, though he may go in the same direction, at the same pace, and along the same route. The reason for this is that the stranger’s intentions make no impact on our plan to walk. He may be walking beside us by accident, or sleepwalking; his reasons for walking, and his interpretation of his actions are of no consequence. But some agent’s reasons for acting are going to matter to other agents. If it turns out that you are sleepwalking, then it will not have been true that we were walking together, in spite of what I might have thought.

Let’s call this view the Personal Intention account of cooperation to reflect the idea, central to this and similar formulations, that when each agent holds the right sets of intentions, two agents can be said to be cooperating.

The Personal Intention account of cooperation is weekly normative. You and I must act for the reasons just mentioned in order to be said to be walking together.

However, there are no further restrictions on what motivating reasons are required for this simple act of cooperation - no commitments or obligations are supposed or implied - the walk ends when either one of us changes our intentions. The individual intentions are simply conditioned on the existence and meshing of the personal intentions of others.

Gilbert argues that this account is deficient because the form of cooperation it describes ignores the normative expectations that are typically reasonable for agents to hold. The alternative she proposes is the *Joint Commitment* account of cooperation which states that

Persons X, Y, and whatever particular others share an intention to do A if and only if X, Y, and these particular others are jointly committed to intend as a body to do A.²

For us to be jointly committed in the way Gilbert has in mind, it won’t suffice for each of us to be personally committed to the same project.

A joint commitment is not a concatenation of personal commitments. Thus it is not formed by virtue of the formation of a personal commitment by each of the parties...its formation is not achieved by the expression of a conditional personal commitment which is met by a clinching expression from the other party or parties.³

Rather, Gilbert thinks that two people must express - either implicitly, or explicitly - their readiness to jointly commit to an action. Once this is common knowledge, the

³Ibid., p. 180.
joint commitment is in place, and the parties to the cooperative act are obligated to follow plan they’ve adopted.\textsuperscript{4}

On Gilbert’s view, if we agree to take a walk, you cannot unilaterally decide that the walk is over by intending that you end the walk. Our intentions must be subject to the constraints of our intending, together, to take the walk; and they must be responsive not just to what you intend, but what we have intended to do together. In other words, if the shared intention is going to change, or be rescinded, we must concur on the what changes should occur. We are obligated to act appropriately given our shared intention.\textsuperscript{5}

But must we concur on our plan of action in order to take a walk together? If I am the guide, then perhaps we needn’t concur. But it seems fair to say that absent certain special circumstances, when you and I are walking together we should agree on our plan of action. Can you decide that you’d rather jog, leaving me behind? Well, suppose you do, would that render the past description of joint activity false, as in the case where I discover that you were sleepwalking? I should think that it does not. And so it seems incorrect to say that our activity requires an ongoing deference to a joint decision making process in order for it to be cooperative.

Imagine you had in mind all along to walk with me until we were through the rough part of town, and then pick up the pace, all the while knowing that I intended to keep walking. This would suggest that we were never really walking together, because we were walking on different terms than we would have agreed to had your running plans been common knowledge. But if this is true, then we wouldn’t have met Bratman’s second and third conditions anyway. And so this is simply a more subtle


\textsuperscript{5}Gilbert, ‘Shared Intention and Personal Intentions’, p.173-75.
example of the class of walks that contains the example involving the sleepwalker.

There is something wrong, however, in my deciding all of the sudden, and on my own, to break into a sprint. But maybe this owes to an under-description of the case. Suppose you and I do not know one another, but are, by chance, walking in the same direction, and we get to talking and then it seems as if we are walking together. I think we would imagine that we are walking together, but that it is open-ended what this entails. And so, when you break into a run, our walk is over.

Where we are strangers, there is nothing to bring together the idea that we have the authority to make decisions for one another. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to call this a case of joint action. Gilbert may complain that in this case we haven’t made a commitment, but this would be question-begging. Better to say that our commitment is weak, and open-ended, than to say that it is non-existent.

Similar considerations militate against the obligation criterion. There are good reasons to think that we are obligated to continue doing what we’ve agreed to do, but not, I think, as a definitive feature of joint action. If you have raised my expectations by agreeing to take a walk, then there is a sense in which your are obligated to follow through. One explanation for this comes from T.M. Scanlon.\footnote{Scanlon, \textit{What We Owe to Each Other}.}

In Scanlon’s discussion of promising he notes that there is a moral prohibition against failing to fulfill others’ expectations we have voluntarily raised. We all have an interest to rely on the information given to us by others, and this gives rise to a duty not to provide false information. In Scanlon’s terminology, there would be good reasons to reject a principle which allowed individuals to mislead others about certain facts, including facts about their intentions. In promising, this basic explanation is augmented by a further interest in being assured of the truth of some fact because
it will be the basis for present or future reliance. Thus, a defensible principle will respond to the interest in truth and the interest in being assured.

Scanlon’s view is plausible because it picks up on the importance of reliance as it concerns future losses that we might suffer from relying on the information another provided. I intend to walk through a rough area of town and am subsequently mugged because you don’t show up for the walk. But if Scanlon’s explanation is correct, it makes trouble for the idea that there are normative expectations created by joint action. This is because a reliance-principle of this sort would be true in worlds where we never act together, on a joint intention or commitment, but only rely on the personal intentions of others to exercise our individual plans. And this suggests that the connection here between obligations and joint action is, at best, tenuous.

Gilbert is clear that her sense of obligation in these cases is not necessarily well understood as moral obligation. If that were the case, she says, two people might be involved in an evil enterprise and therefore owe one another something which is morally prohibited. She therefore wants to draw a distinction between two types of obligation. But this strategy is confused. To say that we are obligated to X is to say that we ought to X. If there are countervailing considerations that count against X-ing, such as the fact that X-ing is morally impermissible, then it is simply false to say that we are obligated to X, not that X is a different kind of obligation.

The central issue here questions whether we can act together without being obligated to do so. And, pace Scanlon, while we should be careful about raising others’ expectations, there is nothing in the views discussed that would require that joint action has obligation as a constituent. What Gilbert must have in mind is that joint action that involves no duties to the other - no extra duties - is not meaningful. If
we were obligated to continue our action, if we were committed in that sense, then there would be something special, something meaningful, in our walking together. Unlike the case of promising, we are able to take a walk together and to, at any time, disclaim our commitment to see it through. But while we are walking, we are walking together.

5.3 Strong and Weak Coordination

Another way of understanding Gilbert's proposal is to say that joint activity entails the authority to decide over aspects another's participation in that activity. Otherwise, there would be no grounds for supposing the existence of either the concurrence or obligation conditions. This is correct in a limited respect. If we are lifting a bench down a flight of stairs, I have the authority to tell you to lift your end higher so I can maneuver without hitting the rail. In this way, acting together gives us the authority to delegate how the plan comes together. And this is what must happen if we are to have a meshing of sub-plans, in Bratman’s terminology.

But at the most basic level joint action doesn’t entail the kinds of normative requirements just discussed, requirements to continue the action. However, it does make sense to say that there are cooperative obligations that enter in against the backdrop of other commitments shared between participants. And more sense to say that these commitments exist in virtue of an existing relationship. This is why the walk described as a walk between friends so much better exemplifies the rights and responsibilities suggested by Gilbert's account.

It seems appropriate therefore to make a distinction between cooperation and coordination, where the latter includes the minimal forms of authority required to
make sub-plans work together, and the former is more strongly normative, capable of respecting the other commitments that structure prior relationships. The main difference between the two lies in the importance given to the underlying rationale of each agent which makes the action attractive to them. In cooperation, we care about more than what one is doing, but why one is acting the way one is, about what Anscombe calls “the intention with which they act”.\footnote{G.E.M. Anscombe, \textit{Intention}, 2nd edition (Harvard University Press, 1957).} This characterization goes beyond both Bratman and Gilbert’s formulations by making the joint interpretation of an action a necessary condition of cooperation.

The necessary conditions for coordination might even be thinner than Bratman’s account would predict. Just how thin depends on what we think of group actions that are based loosely on norms that everyone understands and has little reason to act against. Queuing is a fringe example. No interlocking motives are needed to pull the coordination off, no deep knowledge of what others are doing is necessary. The line may form because each is waiting for the bus, on her own, and knows only that the appropriate place to stand is closest to the bus stop sign. The statement that they are, all of them, waiting for the bus together is still a plausible thing to say, even though there is something accidental about the action: it is event-like.

Suppose a burglar stops a stranger on the street to ask for help moving an object through an open window. There is certainly a sense of joint activity if the person agrees. Just what part the bystander has in the action, however, depends on his understanding or interpretation of the action, what he could have reasonably understood surveying the facts, and what he does afterward. One could think of situations, involving deceit, stupidity, or bad weather, where the bystander and burglar jointly move an object, but only the burglar is party to a theft.
Interpretation is important because it alone gives the action a wide description, which in turn determines how other actions fit into the context of what two people are doing together. The interpretation of what we are doing also determines the boundaries of the action, and what is required of participants to make the action a success. If the burglar and bystander interpret their action as theft, stealth is required; if they are simply moving an object, there is no need for stealth. The fact that we can make the distinction between the bystander being party to a theft, and his being party to a move, means that coordination and cooperation are separate logical categories involving different moral requirements.

In coordinated actions, individuals involved in the activity are directly vulnerable to one another. They extend some form of trust, and are vulnerable to what the other does. The trust in coordination cases is not really full-blown trust; it is what we might call, following Williams, proto-trust (Williams, 2002). One trusts the other will behave in a certain way, but not that she will act for any particular reasons. In other words, quality of will is not centrally important and trust is merely one’s relying

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8Narrow descriptions of actions mostly concern individual events, whereas wide descriptions govern several, sometimes seemingly unconnected events. Suppose I am boarding up my windows in preparation for the approaching storm. On the narrow description of my action, I am hammering nails. On the wide description, when I hammer the nail I am preparing for the approaching storm. Other actions are also appropriate to the wide description, such as checking the batteries on my flashlight. When I hammer the nail, and when I check the batteries, I am in both cases preparing for the storm. The basic difference between wide and narrow descriptions has to do with the interpretation of an action: an interpretation that looks to the context of the action will be a wide description of the action. Sometimes this is formed on the basis of how an action naturally fits into a chain of events. This is to predict the interpretive motives of agents. But agents also have their own interpretation of what they are doing which changes the character of their action, even where the events appear to be the same. Suppose that a storm is coming, but I know that it will not be serious, and that I don’t really need to board up my window. Suppose, however, that my neighbor has complained about other of my preparations for weather, such as the ten foot lightning pole on my roof. He thinks that the lightning pole is unnecessary, and unsightly. I decide that I will board up my windows to annoy my neighbor. Here, when I hammer the nail I am at the same time trying to annoy my neighbor. My intention changes the character of my action, such that it will now be false to say that when I hammer, I prepare for the storm. This is how changes in intention can individuate actions in different ways.
on a belief about another.

However, this is not to say that coordination is not morally important. The vulnerability that comes with coordination, like any natural vulnerability, is of moral significance. But this vulnerability is not so different from ordinary natural vulnerabilities to suggest a separate normative foundation. There are cases where I will be specially vulnerable to you because you are in a position to help me, and there is no one else around. In responding to this vulnerability you display virtues of Helpfulness, and not so much, Trustworthiness. Where we actively rely on one another for good reasons, the requirements to protect another’s vulnerability are redundant with the initial reasons to perform the action. Once these reasons vanish, the other’s vulnerability becomes only as significant as the case where one is in need of help. Despite their apparent second-personal character, the reasons to continue these actions are just those that made the action an attractive option in the first place.\footnote{Cf., (Wallace, 2010: 6) [unpublished].}

In contrast, cooperation relies on the extension of trust to sustain a joint interpretation of the action that is based largely on the quality of will of the participants. This adds a further normative dimension in virtue of this further form of vulnerability. Accordingly, the requirements of joint action are deeper than in cases of coordination, and, in these cases, we have a form of interaction that accords better with Gilbert’s view of joint action.

Gilbert’s mistake was isolating the narrow description of a joint action and taking it to generate certain restrictions on individual actions. We should focus, instead, on the wider description of the action to see how it places constraints on the performance of the narrow activity. People take walks for all sorts of reasons, and the action ‘walking together’ is just a narrow description of these larger interpretations of the
character of the action. The wide interpretations are formed between two people on
the basis of a joint interpretation, not just of the single action, but of other actions
and commitments that are germane to their relationship. The authority to decide over
the narrow descriptions of the actions of one another are granted by the underlying
connections between the agent’s other interests.

In very close relationships, the underlying commitment to represent the other’s
interests gives one wide scope ability to decide on the actions of the other, or to offer
consent on their behalf. This is because we are guided by the interpretation that
they act, and decide together, in service of all common and personal interests. If I
am a parent, the correct interpretation of joint actions with my child are those which
are cast against the ongoing activity of parenting. Parenting provides the source of
authority to make decisions about the individual action because it sets out how I am
meant to be responding to the interests of my child.

In less intimate examples, the interests represented are more limited, and so au-
thority to make decisions may also be more limited. Suppose we are co-authoring a
book. Individually, we are granted authority to decide about certain features of the
shared endeavor. If you are at the same time teaching me to write, and we have other
shared projects, apprenticeship, or student / teacher relationships, it may be better
to say that you have authority to decide how things come together. This respects
the ways in which my interest in learning and yours in teaching informs our shared
writing and casts it as teaching (and learning).

One may complain that in isolating cooperation by reference to interpretive mo-
tives of agents, I am introducing an artificial distinction. In the coordination cases
like that above with unwitting bystander, parties involved in another’s actions are
interpretively vulnerable to the motives of the principal actor. The bystander is implicated as an aid to criminal action. So why insist that there is a difference between this and instances of cooperation?

This objection underrates the importance of prior commitments held and enforced between relatives. The bystander is only loosely implicated in the criminal intentions of the burglar, and may be exonerated by discovery of his true intentions, or simply by his own declaration of his true interests. He has no other commitments to the burglar such that this action can fall under a wider description of a shared plan, or continued relationship. In contrast, the actions and intentions of relatives in a cooperative relationship reflect on the other commitments they hold because they fall under the wide description that is the relationship. The pattern of responses to reasons suggests an underlying rational for the present action, and the operative reasons of that action add to the description of the overall cooperative enterprise.

This response is not meant to suggest that individual actions do not hold interpretive significance for strangers. Sometimes what we do falls, accidentally, into a pattern of action that has interpretive significance for all concerned. Some apparent instances of discrimination are good examples of this phenomenon. One person is served first in a cafe, apparently because of the color of her skin, but actually because the other is obscured by the furniture. In these cases, however, adding motivation, or explanations of underlying motives of agents, does not change the character of what has been reflected by the event, though it may excuse the actor. The natural interpretation continues to have value.
5.4 Priority

In coordination, shared interests are merely contemporaneous, owing to the kinds of beings we are, and the sorts of interests it is reasonable for all of us hold. But in cooperation we own our interests jointly on the basis of our underlying commitments to other interests we share. This essentially involves an exchange of interests. You take on mine, and I take on yours, and, in doing so, we share the discretionary authority of how to pursue whatever projects and actions we take up together. In deeper cases of cooperation - for instance, in intimate relationships - we take on all of the interests of the other as our own, subject to our shared decision making on how they might be pursued. This is what it means to trust another completely.

In friendship, the explanation of complete trust is genealogical.

Suppose Black and Grey are strangers and encounter one another on a train platform. They have no special knowledge about each other’s motivations, but nevertheless trust that they are safe from being pushed into the path of an oncoming train. This trust comes from basic sociality: each expects that the other takes as important the reasonable claims of everyone. Its normativity comes from the reasons we all have to want to be treated in some ways and not in others.

If Black and Grey become involved in some project, say building a wall together, the scope of normative expectations extends to the joint activity of building the wall. Each has reason to expect of the other that he will do his part to build the wall. The trust that they share is deeper than the proto-trust they had when they were strangers on the platform, but it is still limited in many respects. They can only rightly trust one another to perform functions necessary to putting the wall up owing to the supposition of their continued shared interest in the project. The interests that
are derivative of this project, such as the interest in making certain the wall is level, straight, and true, that they are safe when working on it, and so on, are also part of this trust because they are each vulnerable with respect to these interests.

As Black and Grey become friends, they may share more interests, and take part in more joint projects. But more than this, they begin to exchange interests in a new way: seemingly disconnected interests begin to play a role in one another’s attitudes. Black may have a stamp up for auction. Grey has no stated interest in the sale, and yet, he shares in Black’s interest as he hopes that Black will get a good price for his stamp. In this way Black’s reasons become reasons for Grey; and when this happens, Black has reason to trust Grey in this further respect. This process continues as the friendship deepens and each becomes more vulnerable as they trust the other to take as reason-giving more and more of what would otherwise be their personal interests.

Black and Grey edge toward complete trust when the interpretive value of their individual actions come to take on a special significance. This happens partly because certain decisions they have made together entail specific actions and intentions that each must respect. If they have decided to work on the wall when the weather is dry, then it would be inappropriate for one or the other to make plans to do something else on the next dry day. Indeed, it is inappropriate for them to even intend to spend the day doing something else, regardless of whether they do in fact work on the wall. Once made, the initial decision to work on the wall rules out other intentions. When they hold these conflicting intentions, they undermine other held commitments because their actions and intentions reflect an indifference toward their shared project, toward each other, and toward their relationship.

Contrast this with promising. In promising I fail to act if I fail to act as you expect
which includes the expectation that I respond to the promise. My actions and intentions are central to how I meet the demands of making a promise. In the commitment cases, we are less concerned with the actions, and more with the expressed intentions, and how these intentions link up with certain other normative expectations we may have regarding what should be fixed dispositions. These dispositions may sometimes require specific actions in order that we consider them fixed, but this is not always the case. But certain intentions may undermine the possibility of holding certain dispositions, and in this way, intentions can undermine the sense in which one is committed to an activity.

When Black and Grey come to trust one another completely, there are further increased demands placed on what intentions are appropriate for each to hold. This happens in three ways. First, there is the negative sense, just discussed, that their standing commitment to one another and their relationship rules out certain actions and attitudes that are not in consonance with that commitment. Second, there is the sense in which they are each entitled to make decisions for one another, and to make limited pronouncements on their intentions. Both of these aspects contribute to interpretive vulnerability. They are vulnerable to what the other does, and how it reflects on their actions and attitudes, and they are vulnerable to what another rightly judges that they should do.

The third way relationships of complete trust alter one’s control over their attitudes and actions is the epistemic component of the second. As two people become more and more involved, they evolve the right to know certain facts about the other’s actions and intentions. This is seen most clearly in examples involving intimate relationships. Where this friendship evolves into a partnership, where agents can be
said to share their lives. In these cases, their power to influence the decision making of one another might be described as a right, the exercise of which will sometimes involve actively making decisions for one another. And this will often involve the right to know where the other is, and what she intends to do. What would ordinarily be private information becomes common between the two. Other times, the right to decide is merely respected, as when one refuses to make a decision without consulting the other.

This relationship of complete trust is easy to recognize in relations between parents and children where the norm is a set of combined and separate interests evolve over time. Indeed, children often want to know from their parents what it is that we—meaning the family—believe or do. They want to find out what it is that they as individuals are doing by way of asking what it is that the family is doing. Joint action, decision-making, and planning, is the natural form of families. And for most all of us, this is how we first encounter reasons for action and belief, that is, in the context of what we are already taken to believe or be doing.

This is why inherited obligations often seem so important, because they appear to us as things that we’ve already consented to in our thoughts and actions. However, although the cases involving inherited actions and responsibilities are easier to understand, I believe they are not as central as those that require the genealogical description given to friendship. This is because the shared decision-making in families is imperfect in that it is asymmetrical, granting most of the decision-making power to the responsible party. A child’s decision-making power, and privacy, must evolve over time. This has the function of strengthening the reflective importance of individual actions. The child has limited decision-making power, but his or her attitudes and
actions are meant to reflect directly on the parent, such that appraisals of blame and praise attach only lightly to the child, and fall more definitely on the parent.\textsuperscript{10} But where the relationship is between two fully formed agents, there is increased value to acting in certain ways, and of holding certain intentions. The importance is rendered by the fact that agents are fully fledged their actions and attitudes are meaningful in a way not available in the child-parent relationship. The sense in which there is complete trust is the same in both cases, but the risks are higher between friends and partners - the potential for betrayal is real and its effects are more permanent than they are between parents and their children.\textsuperscript{11} In both cases, there is potential for the unique wrongs of indifference, which become a possibility only as we begin to share our lives with one another.

According to the picture I’ve just presented, the widest description of our joint actions is the relationship itself, or the activity of \textit{sharing a life}. This makes joint activity between intimates the central example of joint action, rather than a fringe instance, because it respects the widest possible descriptions of what one could be supposed to be doing.

If I am correct about the relationship between our present intentions and actions, and our standing intentions toward relatives, it reasonable to make a further claim, that everything we do falls under the larger description of sharing a life. There is some evidence of the truth of this claim in how we talk about the activities of our lives. Persons in close relationships tend toward the plural pronoun to discuss broad trends in their lives, their aims, goals, challenges and so on. Furthermore, continued

\textsuperscript{10}I discuss the limits on decision-making and the permeability of blame and responsibility in more detail in subsequent chapters.

\textsuperscript{11}This is not meant to imply that there are no friendships between adult children and their parents, but rather to emphasize that even these relationships must evolve to embody the forms of trust discussed in the genealogical story about friendship.
activities in the context of a relationship can structure one’s responses in a way that is more clearly normative. One might ask, “Why don’t you have another donut?” and receive the response, “I can’t. We’re trying to cut down on sweets.” The reference to an ongoing shared activity explains one reason this person should avoid a second donut, and, in some respects, justifies his abstinence. What this answer represents is a shift in the practical outlook of the agent that reflects the importance of his shared life.

Our lives, our view of ourselves, is bound up with our most intimate relationships. In a very real way, our lives are not ours alone. This is because our actions and attitudes have import for others with whom we share our lives, just as theirs have import for us. We are indifferent to the concerns of strangers just in case we fail to meet a standard of action. In the context of a relationship, we can meet a standard of action while failing to give proper consideration to the interests of our relatives. Our deliberation has a special moral significance. This is what should be understood as prioritizing our relationships, as reasonable partiality.

This is a very broad characterization of reasonable partiality, but it can be narrowed by returning to the concept of attention which is unique in this aspect of human experience. Sharing a life means that we have a standing attitude toward another that makes him or her a fixed reference point in our deliberative outlook: we are, in a loose way, always attentive to what our actions, feelings, thoughts, goals, might mean for those with whom we share a life. This is most evident in our most intimate relationships, but it is also evident in the case of ordinary friendships. It explains the idea that it can matter that another was thinking of us, not necessarily of our interests, but of us. When we hold our intimates in the right regard we see them as
individuals who are connected to us, and we refer to them in terms of their relations to us. And that this is a reasonable thing to expect is what supports the idea that others can rightly depend on us to adjust our practical outlook in light of the lives we share. These normative boundaries are to be respected not simply because they derive from metaphysical (or psychological) facts about personhood, but because they are part and parcel with respecting our relatives.

Sometimes people grow apart, they close a jointly written chapter in their lives. This can happen naturally, and when it does, the other simply occupies a less central place in one’s deliberative sphere. In contrast, sometimes one severs a relationship, without warning, as it were. One is justified to do so just in case it makes sense to say that the two are not still involved in authoring the same story. This may be true in cases where it seems that two people are living different lives because there no consonance between how each understands what should be the practical constraints of the relationship. It seems right in these cases to think that one or the other is justified to make it explicit and make a decisive change. When we are unable to negotiate a life together, we cannot share a life. However, these cases are relatively rare.

In Tolstoy’s early writing career, his wife, Sofya worked closely with him on each manuscript. Their shared life is an obvious embodiment of the form I’ve been discussing because their interests were aligned in an active way: they were both centrally concerned with the same projects. Near the end of his life Tolstoy became the leader of a religious cult. The Tolstoyans wanted to have his will changed to grant the rights to all of his works to the public. Sofya resisted this, mainly because she wanted to
protect the inheritance of herself and her family. Tolstoy, for his part, became a universalist, and thought that he owed as much to a stranger as he did to his wife and family.

This presents an example where an objective good, giving the rights to the people, is set up against a parochial good, making sure Sofya and the family were well taken care of after Tolstoy’s death. The model under consideration helps to sort the responsibilities by drawing attention to the rights both have in deciding over a joint project. There is good sense to the idea that Sofya has the right to continue deciding over what was a joint project, the early works, and that Tolstoy has the responsibility to respect this right, and is minimally required to try to convince Sofya to give the works to the people. This is not just because they are supposed to have joint ownership over the works, but more because the control over the direction of the family’s activities should be at their joint discretion.

This view of the practical moral psychology of intimacy reveals an interesting fact about the content of special responsibilities. Whatever is true to say about the exact specification of special duties, in terms of actions and attitudes, it is basically true that one is responsible to another to meet a minimum standard of consideration, that is, to uphold the practical relevance of the other in their lives and to be clear about the facts one takes to be germane to this standard. In this way responding to other’s trust in relationships is a substantive component of our practical reasoning. And this is all that it means to prioritize the interests of our relatives. Reasonable partiality is a practical mode of reasoning that begins with a thought that we are connected to others in the ways I’ve just described. According to this description, indifference is the most common wrong in relationships.
The development of a shared activity should take place within the context of a shared understanding of permissibility that respects the rights of all persons. In this way, what we get up to with our intimates will have no deleterious effects for our moral outlook. When things go awry, and when another’s vulnerability requires bad behaviour on our part, we can take steps to mitigate their risk. We are not required to wrong others on the basis that the other expects us to continue bad behaviour. Yet, we have a duty to put our relationship on the right track, to help reform his view of what is rightly expected, and to help make our cooperative activity defensible to everyone. This is the route Tolstoy would have done well to take. It is true that the standard of reasonableness for a relationship’s duties are set in terms of our shared activity, but false that it is somehow outside the bounds of morality. Our general obligations can limit our actions by shaping the expression of our cooperative activity, just as our intimate activity can inform our ideas of the best attitudes to take toward strangers.

On the view just presented, special obligations are not centered on actions that one must perform, but rather on the attitudes with which one should perform actions. This emphasis on attitudes provides a powerful response to those who think that there is an intrinsic conflict between morality, or justice, and special responsibility. Because actions are not strictly required in relationships, except as they are necessary to express a certain attitude, and because actions are strictly required as a matter of justice the two occupy different spheres and will not conflict. But there is another pressing concern about how we are to understand the idea that the obligations at play here are reasonably understood as obligations.

What is required in virtue of being in a relationship is a matter of being disposed
to reflect the importance of that relationship by acting on certain interpretive motives. But this is not to say that relationships required us to feel certain ways. The criticism is rehearsed often in the literature. Scanlon puts the point concisely in terms of friendship:

In addition to these intentions and dispositions to behave in certain ways (to fulfill what might be called the obligations of friendship), being a friend involves being disposed to certain feelings: to take pleasure in the friend’s company, to hope that things go well for the friend and to take pleasure in their going well when they do. A friend is not obligated to have such hopes and feelings, but a person who fails to have them, if a friend at all, is a deficient one.12

To the extent that feeling a way is being in a state, rather than acting in a certain way, it is not responsive to reasons in the right way. The fact that it would be good if I had some feeling about my friend isn’t really a reason for me to have that feeling, though it may be a reason to try to bring it about that I have that feeling. I can’t, however, simply intend to have that feeling, because I can’t intend to be in a certain state.

This problem is nicely summarized by Judith Thomson. She writes,

You can do something with the intention of bring[ing] about that you get a million dollars; it is not possible to believe something with the intention of bringing something about - or with any intention at all... Nor is it unique to mental states: it holds of all states. You can go to New York with

12Scanlon, Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, and Blame, p. 132.
an intention; you can’t be in New York with an intention. You can get
yourself to lose weight with an intention; you can’t weigh so and so many
pounds with an intention. Being in a state, any state, isn’t a “doing”, and
it therefore isn’t something you can do with an intention. I add that this
isn’t a deep fact about states, it is right up there on the surface.¹³

These remarks are meant to qualify the statement above about the importance of
attitudes over actions. I do not mean to suggest that all there is to special responsi-
bility is feeling a certain way toward our intimates. There are reasons to feel certain
ways, and we are no doubt deficient, as friends, or lovers, when we fail to feel these
ways. But the standard to obligate individuals to feel one way or another outstrips
their capabilities, and is thus too demanding. Rather, we are required to act with
intentions that represent the normative import of actions and attitudes which have
been constructed and shaped by our relationships. We are required to act so as to
reflect the significance of our shared life.

5.5 Non-reductionism

The Action Model of relationships, and its account of reasonable partiality, helps to
show how a relationship emerges and evolves into one of responsibility. It differs from
other non-reductionist accounts I’ve discussed insofar as it attempts to explain how
a relationship emerges as a part of how it starts to function as a source of reasons.
Individual actions within the relationship are already jointly interpreted in the first
instances. The joint interpretation of the meaning of the relationship is therefore
constructed as the individual events are understood in the context of a broad sense

of shared activity. On this proposal, normatively enters, as it were, at the first level. You and I act together, and interpret our action as contributing to a larger narrative that we are involved in creating together. This means that shared events are imbued with meaning according to how we see them as contributing to our shared experience.

This ground level normativity suggests an answer to the question of how relationships evolve to support reasonable partiality. On other non-reductionist explanations it was mysterious how intimate relationships might evolve from non-intimate relationships (and derivatively, for impaired relationships to generate reasons of repair). The Action Model avoids this problem because actions are essentially prospective: one’s idea about what one is doing puts one’s action in a context that extends into the future. In the case of relationships we act together, we interpret our present actions in terms of where we think the relationship is going. Sometimes we reconsider, and ask aloud: “What are we doing?” And often, we revise our past actions in light of our present conception of the relationship. In this way, actions and joint narratives are prospective and also revisionary. In both forward and backward looking directions they are essentially normative.

This contrasts directly with Kolodny’s focus on events. On his view, events shared between people weren’t interpreted; they were simply a natural fact that two people happened to share. This implies that two people form a relationship as we might imagine what happens to strangers who are likely to attend the same parties: over time, they recognize one another and begin to see their natural relationship as the source of reasons. But to me this does not ring true. Rather, relationships are like friends attending the same parties: at every event, there is a sense that they are there together. This overcomes the generative issues because the norms of the relationship
are in play from the very beginning.

In some ways relationships can even be formed before there are any natural events. Consider parents looking to adopt, or have a natural child. Even before the child is chosen or conceived, they can begin to see the form their relationship will take, they begin to anticipate what they will do together, and how those individual actions will feature in their shared life. And the opposite will also be true. Long after the natural events of a relationship end, the meaning of the actions continue to attach significance to actions which are not, strictly speaking, shared. And this means that relationships don’t really end as such. Rather, they loosen their grip on our thinking as their normative significance changes, and they become less important.\footnote{I'll return to this point in more detail in the next chapter when I discuss membership.}

To be sure, there may be individual differences of opinion about what shared actions mean in the context of the relationship. But this does not mean that every relationship is open to the kind of confusion expressed in the case where one’s stalker insists to the stalkee that they are in love. In that case, there is no joint deliberative perspective to negotiate, no conversation to adjust to respect the views of both stalker and stalkee. In genuine personal relationships, the conversation is made available because the parties are doing something together. They may need to work out just what they are doing together. Negotiating the meaning is part and parcel of the activity of the relationship.

5.6 Reasons

Williams was not just a fierce critic of utilitarianism, he was also a critic of objective reasons. In the two examples that he offers to convince us that motivational reasons
are all that we should call reasons, he brings out the potential conflicts between sources of reasons.\textsuperscript{15} In one example, an agent is confronted with the choice to save his wife, or a stranger, both of which are in peril. If the agent thinks, in this case, that he is justified in saving his wife because partiality is justified in cases of aid that are suitably random such as this one, then he has had one thought to many. In the other example, he puts Gauguin’s familial responsibilities against his life project of moving to Tahiti to paint. Since painting is such an integral part of Gauguin’s view of his self, he cannot but recognize the reasons there are to follow his dream: the familial responsibilities are simply beside the point. In both of these examples, the supposition is that reasons are just what have the firm possibility of motivating one to action, and that there is little sense to the idea that there are reasons external to one’s motivational set.

The second example is less convincing than the first. It may make sense in the context of what I am arguing here if we can allow that there was little to his shared familial life at the time that Gauguin is considering making the trip to Tahiti. I think that it is unlikely that we can make this supposition, and this is why the second example seems comparatively flat. The view I’ve presented emphasizes that reasons to save one’s wife, or to stay with one’s family, rely on the pre-existing relationship of dependence. These reasons may be more capable of motivating than would be reasons derived from external principles, but their normative force derives from their second-personal character: they respond directly to a form of address that is readily available to those in a relationship.

Williams seems to agree that there little sense to the notion that there is reason for Gauguin to leave his family because these facts will not be reasons for them. But

though he thinks we may call Gauguin callous, or a bad husband, but we cannot call him irrational, or deem his actions to offend against reasons. However, I think this ignores the importance of the genealogical story to be told, not just about the evolution of motivating reasons, but about how these reasons are normative. The fact, if it is a fact, that Gauguin cannot find meaning in life if he doesn’t recognize as reason-giving those things which are at the core of his self is important to the general understanding of normativity. But we cannot focus on this fact without recognizing the ways in which Gauguin features directly in other’s lives in ways that are meaningful to them. Relationships have a second-personal character that separate them from other things which are said to constitute our motivational set. This means that the rationale for responding appropriately to our relationships includes the importance those relationships, not just for us, but for others.

This idea helps to put in proper context the notion that moral reasons are second-personal, that the possibility of address is what gives some reasons the force to trump other considerations.\(^\text{16}\) We come to understand reasons in the context of the reasons we share with others to pursue certain actions, or to believe certain things about the world. But to focus on moral reasons as fundamentally second-personal is to misunderstand the importance of the plural first-personal. We imply that second-personal address will be successful because there is a commonality that makes intelligible certain claims about reasons. As each of us evolved into reason-responsive beings we saw that commonality is not limited to the activities of friends and family, but that there are more basic shared interests that provide the same background for address.

\(^{16}\text{See especially Stephen Darwall, The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability (Harvard University Press, 2006).}\)
Plural rationality according to this view is more fundamental that singular rationality. This is a metaphysical claim, but it is also a normative claim. If there are true statements that implicate me as part of a we that has some project or action in progress, then I cannot ignore this shared activity because it does not fit with my individual aims. I must minimally negotiate a kind of exit into singular rationality.
CHAPTER 6

Conflicts
According to the Action Model, the way to understand the main contours of special responsibilities involves seeing relationships as broad cooperative activities, which form the mainstay of interpretation of the actions and attitudes of their members. The parties within a close relationship are responsible to respond to the interpretive vulnerability that develops as each of their individual interests, activities, and attitudes become intertwined and given special significance within the context of a trusting relationship. This model is non-reductionist in spirit, because the central normative aspect of the relationship is derivative only of the participant’s conception of their relationship and their conception of action. This allows us to capture the significance of expectation within the relationship, without reverting to a Contractual Model of special responsibilities, by making the history of the relationship into an active principle, an understanding between individuals of what they have done as part of what they are doing.

In this chapter I address concerns that AM does not put proper restrictions on the conduct of those within relationships, and is therefore morally suspect. First, I respond to the charge that AM will not limit what Niko Kolodny has called “Negative Relationships”: abusive relationships, and relationships of joint wrongdoing.\(^1\) I then provide more detail about how AM categorizes normatively significant relationships.

### 6.1 Relationships of wrongdoing

Externally negative relationships, as Kolodny defines them are those whose history is composed of events where the parties to the relationship wrong some third party. This definition might be extended to include cases where one is an accessory to wrongdoing,

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as it were, after the fact. I’ll discuss accessory cases below. For the present, let’s focus on a simple case of an externally negative relationship:

*Criminal Friends*: White and Grey have intimidated their neighbours for several years, stealing their valuables, and at times demanding protection money. Grey has become weary of this lifestyle, and begins to doubt its moral worth. But she nevertheless thinks she should keep up her part of the extortion as a matter of loyalty to White. White, for his part, is happy with the arrangement, and glad to have Grey as such a good partner in crime. What should Grey do?

It would seem as if non-reductionists who place an emphasis on a shared history must advise Grey to be loyal to White, and continue in her wrongdoing. After all, they’ve shared a history together, and what does it matter to the norms of the relationship if this was a history of wrongdoing?²

Kolodny’s response to this problem is to suggest that resonance will actually prohibit continued wrongdoing. His explanation for this is that, just as instances of wrongdoing resonate with feelings of guilt, and actions of apology, remuneration, and reparation, so do histories of wrongdoing resonate with these actions and attitudes. And so, in this case, Grey should urge White to give up on his criminal enterprise and begin to make amends. And all this from resonance.

Kolodny’s solution is elegant, but perturbing. To say that apology resonates with wrongdoing sounds right, but what makes it right is the truth of other, moral, principles which require agents to try to right wrongs they have done.

²Cf. Gilbert, ‘Shared Intention and Personal Intentions’.
This raises doubts as to whether the relationship is, itself, doing any normative work. It would seem as if Grey should go to White, and try first to convince him that what he is doing is wrong, and this as a matter of correcting what they are doing together, to make permissible their shared life. On both the resonance approach and AM, moral principles are not forgotten. When answering questions about the normative status of relationships the answers given needn’t ignore all other normative principles. But non-reductionists should nevertheless include the relationship as the source of normativity, and here I think Kolodny’s approach leaves the relationship behind in favour of standard moral principles.

Likewise, we might imagine a Kantian variant of AM. A defender might say that any joint action, or any conception of a shared life, which transgresses the Categorical Imperative is not, in the strict sense, an action, because it is not done from Reason, but from inclination. Therefore, histories that we would describe as negative arise out of inclination, and as such, have no action component and are not really histories. And so there is no reason to expect that the form a basic foundation from which one can derive directives. This response overreaches in as much as it makes the possibility of being a personal relationship depend on its being a moral relationship. We should want to all for the possibility at least that our relationships might well require us to do things that, while probably not evil, are not morally best. Acts of loyalty, even when they constitute wrongdoing, would seem to resonate with a history of aid, even granting that acts of reparation are also in order, as a matter of resonance, or harmony.

In fact, most externally negative relationships, to the extent that they are cooperative, will be mixed, requiring both loyalty and reform. But what is still of central

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3See Herman, ‘Moral Literacy’; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. 
importance, and what AM predicts, is the reasons on which the parties act, and what this means for their shared life, and how it reflects past and present shared experiences. This is easy to see if we take White and Grey off the streets and put them into interrogation rooms. It wouldn’t be wrong for Grey to confess, especially if she believes this would help her and White reform, and begin to make amends for their past behaviour. However, it would be wrong for her to confess in order to get a reduced sentence, not, as contractarians would have it, because it is irrational to keep quiet, but because this would reflect an indifference toward White’s concerns, skewing the sense in which they were ever in it together.\footnote{For an alternative explanation, see Gauthier, 1987.}

AM can accept that externally negative relationships do not really require continued bad behaviour. Sometimes one starts doing something and thereafter realizes that there is something wrong with what they are doing. Maybe it is morally wrong, or maybe inconsistent with other aims, or maybe just an ugly way of doing things. Sometimes these reflections can change the character of what one thinks one is doing: All along I thought we were baking a cake, but really we were just making a mess. But there is no principle of stubbornness in AM that demands that actions, and joint actions, be continued in the face of judgments from other normative sources.

6.2 Internally Negative Relationships

Internally negative relationships are a more difficult case. They are characterized, not by a joint wrongdoing, but where parties to a relationship wrong one another. They are more difficult because the norms of the relationship, which derive from a history of shared activity, are called into question all at once. In cases of extreme abuse,
for example, it seems as if the relationship itself provides nothing normative, having failed to meet a basic moral standard. Unlike *Criminal Friends*, where the relationship provides a backdrop to, admittedly bad behaviour, there is a real question with internally negative relationships whether or not there is a relationship at all. And hence, a real question about the status of relationship norms.

According to Kolodny, internally negative relationships do not generate duties in the same way as relationships that are not impaired owing to the fact that histories of this sort, histories of abuse, for example, call for their own discontinuance. Unlike externally negative relationships, where relationships may continue once weeded of their bad activities, internally negative relationships resonate only with a new history, one that does not include those features which make the relationship intrinsically bad.

So for example, suppose that White has been physically abusive to Grey, and that it is true to say that the relationship is in some way constituted by a history of abuse. Since there was no reason for White to harm Grey in the past, it can’t be true that there is a reason to act in similar ways in the future: there is no basic normativity to preserve. Counterfactually, White did have reasons, in fact, reasons not to harm Grey. But he has those reasons now whether or not there were past shared events. And so it doesn’t make sense to say that the reasons he has flow from the relationship itself. And so, they have only to form a new relationship.

There is something to Kolodny’s view. It must be true that internally negative relationships are deficient, qua relationship. But it would seem odd to suggest that all they lack is the resonance capable of supporting relationship dependent norms. It seems as if that internally negative relationships support limited forms of partiality, if only from the dominant party. That is, it seems reasonable to say that White has
special responsibilities toward Grey to make amends for his past behaviour in a way that recognizes the significance of his abuse. It seems wrong to say that there are no reasonable instances of partiality that have their foundation in that relationship. Not every internally negative relationship is tantamount to total dominance, to torture. Rather, some events in a relationship resonate, rightly, with good events in the past assuming that not every part of the relationship is sullied by the continued abuse.

The sense in which internally negative relationships fail to qualify as relationships is only captured when we move from talking about resonance to talking about the quality of the shared action between relatives. White and Grey’s relationships do not qualify as a relationship because there is a vast gap between rights in making decisions that qualify as them making the decision. There’s no joint activity because the crucial relationship descriptors, the widest description of the activities are not joint. Even individual actions are described as conscripted by the decision making power of one party.

The difference between these relationships and the relationship between parents and children is that the interests of the dominated party are not represented by the decision-maker or are represented in ways that frustrate future decision making. In parenting, this is called constraining a child’s options, in normal adult relationship it constitutes dominance and abuse. These relationships don’t qualify as relationships on account of the fact that there is no good way to describe them, or events in their history as joint activities. Put another way, what malfunctions in internally negative relationships is the sense in which each party is interpretively vulnerable to the other’s description of her part in the relationship. The two cannot really be said to be doing something together, when one’s attitudes and actions have a relative independence.
from the others. It is for this reason that there is no resonance between the past and future for both parties together.

Deeply disturbed relationships lack even the preconditions for cooperation, the basic recognition of personhood, and a recognition that is fundamentally second-personal. And here I agree with Stephen Darwall’s contention, that his sense of the basic moral relationship, which is characterized in terms of second-personal address, is required to form the basis of any relationship which will thereafter have the power to generate other responsibilities.\(^5\)

But while I agree with Darwall, that there is a certain centrality to the second-personal standpoint, one that basically distinguishes the other from an object as a subject, the logical primacy of the second-personal standpoint must be qualified. There are often times when the sense of shared activity that provides the basic outlines of a relationship is conceived of wholly from the first-personal perspective of one who is capable of holding the attitudes necessary to call it an activity at all. Here we can think to the prospective cases of relationships, like those between parents and infants. These are cases where the second-personal aspect is projected into the future, or brought forward from the past, and the recognition of the other as a subject is a helpful fiction, the sense of ‘you and I’ is not fully active between participants. The other is conceived of as being an incomplete subject: interests are addressed as interests of a subject, but they are basically conceived in the subjunctive.

There are cases where conceiving of the other’s interest in the subjunctive would be wildly inappropriate, and sometimes so wrong as to begin to constitute an internally negative relationship. The clearest examples of internally negative relationships,

however, are those where one party is in the position to take over the whole of what is meant to be a shared decision-making, and is therefore not properly vulnerable to the other. Relationships which involve some negativity will therefore not be the best examples of internally negative relationships, because they do not exemplify indifference of the sort needed to prevent true cooperative activity.

A comparison of examples will help bring out this point:

**Teasing:** White and Grey have given up their life of crime, but White is now bored. To alleviate his boredom he takes to teasing Grey often about her love of trashy romance novels. White does not intend to hurt Grey with this teasing, but rather hopes to have some fun with her.

**Humiliation:** White and Grey have given up their life of crime, but White is now bored. To alleviate his boredom he takes pictures of Grey while she is sleeping, nude, and posts them around the neighbourhood. He intends to humiliate her as a way to get back at her for forcing him to clean up his act.

I want to say that White is interpretively vulnerable in *Teasing*, but not in *Humiliation*. In *Teasing*, Grey could take White’s poking fun as mean-spirited, and this would undermine his ability to consistently hold his intent at innocent fun. Whereas in *Humiliation*, White exploits Grey’s natural vulnerability without opening himself to the interpretive vulnerability that is central to make acts like teasing work as teasing. There is no open question as to whether or not Grey needs to feel humiliated in the second case in order for White to intend as he does. The public nature of humiliation will secure his intention even if Grey takes this as a joke, and nothing of
which to be ashamed.\textsuperscript{6}

What this suggests is that, on the AM, relationships can involve a great deal of negative activity without dampening member’s reasons to respond to their basic normative importance. This is not to say that they must continue being abusive or hurtful to one another, but rather, that the relationship will provide a context for repairing the damage done just in case there is a sense, at bottom, of a cooperative venture. And this means that there will be relationships that are ostensibly not internally negative, in the sense that the parties are abusive to one another, but whose members live lives so independent from the interpretive scope of the relationship that there is little to suggest that there are any duties of the relationship. These will be relatively rare, but noting this fact gives a more accurate description of what it is to be in a relationship that is internally negative for it has the power to capture within the concept those relationships characterized by strong indifference.

\textbf{6.3 Ordinary Relationships}

Any account of relational duties will need to confront the idea that most relationships, though not clearly negative in either of the senses just discussed, are far from being wholly, or even mostly, positive. Most will involve weakness, pettiness, and selfishness. These may even form the most salient parts of the history of the relationship.

Think for example of the history of Harry and Janice Angstrom, the couple at the centre of John Updike’s \textit{Rabbit} tetralogy.\textsuperscript{7} Harry leaves Janice, when she is several months pregnant with their second child, and takes up residence with a prostitute until the child is about to be born. The child is born and Harry returns to Janice.

\textsuperscript{6}I thank Nate Sheridan for pushing me on this issue.

\textsuperscript{7}John Updike, \textit{Rabbit Angstrom: A tetralogy} (Everyman’s Library, 1995).
Shortly after, he urges her to get drunk, ignoring her past alcoholism, in order to get her to sleep with him. (This, in spite of doctor’s orders that they must wait six months.) His intentions are thwarted, and so Harry leaves Janice again. Janice continues to drink through the night, waiting for his return, and then accidentally drowns her newborn while trying to give it a bath. Harry then seems as if he will take some responsibility for the infant’s death, but at the funeral blurts out that it is not his fault, but Janice’s, and then runs into the woods.

All of this happens within the scope of the first novel. In the novels which follow Harry and Janice are both unfaithful to one another time and again and together struggle with abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, wanton hedonism, and even incest, which are all in some way precipitated by Harry’s famous selfishness. Yet, the reader is inclined to say, in the fourth novel, that Janice owes it to Harry to be at his side while he is on his deathbed, and even, perhaps, that she should have tried harder to help him take care of his health while she and he had the chance. This, after a history peppered with the most outlandish abuses of her trust. The reader retains the sense that they are still very much in a relationship, throughout the calamity and unfaithfulness. And that this relationship carries with it a host of responsibilities.

If we require that relationships must have a positive description, in order to generate additional duties, our stock of real-life examples will run out quite quickly. It is unclear that the Resonance Approach responds well to this thought. Not every history will look like that between Janice and Harry, but many will involve similar points of negativity, and may, at times, have little to recommend their continuance. Following the Resonance Approach, it seems as if we must say that parties in these relationships are entitled to demand very little of one another. In contrast, the AM
tries to emphasizes that the sense in which there is an underlying joint action which recommends a standard of individual responsibility.

The sense of this activity comes out in the Rabbit novels in the description of Harry’s relationship to his escapades, which are often described in terms of what his wife or child might say, and what effect this might have on their future actions. This, even when Harry is completely on his own and has abdicated every responsibility.

In spite of the negative connotation a relationship might have, it will still stand as a wide description of what individual acts relatives do together, and of what individual acts relatives do on their own. So long as this is true, the parties to the relationship are required to meet the general demands of good cooperation and not just the weak demands of a history of bad cooperation. And this will mean acting from a sense that one’s actions will reflect on what others do insofar as they affect the character of those actions. Ignoring this demand is Harry’s most significant problem in the Rabbit novels. It’s not just that he does bad things, but that he thinks that whether or not he does good or bad affects only him, that it is only his salvation that is put in peril. Of all his lies, and cheating, and drug use, and racism, and violence, his myopic view of his own actions is his greatest moral failing.

The psychological pull of describing our activities in terms of how they appear to relatives, even those distant in the immediate frame of our activity is not just attractive, it’s a necessary part of understanding our response to parts of our history that remain active as they are potentials of joint activity. We can’t narrate our lives ex nihilo out of a set of present relationships. And in this sense the mere possibly of putting forward a narrative that describes an ongoing relationship between individuals creates space for that relationship to have an ongoing normative dimension. Whether
or not it is the source of partiality depends on what can reasonably be put forward by parties to the relationship as instances of continuance.

6.4 Arbitrary Relationships

The content of our special obligations derives from thinking about the ways in which relationships make us interpretively vulnerable to one another. But one might think that trust relationships are not restricted to personal relationships, and so we must extend our duties to those with whom we have an association in the more formal sense of the term. Refining the scope of AM’s concept of relationships will help allay these concerns.

It is difficult to rid oneself of deep relationships in large part because they order our practical life by providing context to our actions, attitudes, and decisions. Suppose Harry and Janice plan to live together in a certain neighbourhood in Ocean City. They break up, but years later Janice finds herself looking for an apartment in just that neighbourhood. There is a significance to that action which is difficult to ignore. Janice can try to remain neutral as to the judgment she makes that cast Ocean City in a favourable light; the reasons she wants to be in that neighbourhood now can be somewhat disconnected from her relationship with Harry. But she can’t offer a description of her action that is neutral with respect to the significance of their history, at least while being accurate to the facts. The fact is that she is moving to Ocean City without Harry.

The possibility of this fact’s being true was created by Harry and Janice as part of their initial conversation. When we cannot ignore these sorts of facts, we can feel as if we are doing something with someone even when we would like our attention
directed elsewhere. This is because it is true. Actions in the future will be steps in the relationship, even where they are not, in Kolodny’s terminology, ‘encounters’.

Acquaintances do not have this same grip on our life. Our relationships with them do not order our practical life. This doesn’t mean that our acquaintances are in no way significant. But that the significance of these relationships depend, again, on the cooperative activities that exist. And these may be very minimal. Minimal acquaintance gives us the sense that we are accidentally related, there is little in the narrative of our cooperation: it reads like a chronicle. It has the possibility of being part of a history, maybe a history of a culture, or of an institution, or of something else that provides a meaningful comment on what connects us. But it won’t be the history of our relationship.

Acquaintances may be trusted in ways different from mere strangers for their connection to institutions, cultures, or practices that add to the stock of normative resources. These resources are what Williams calls the machinery of trust.\(^8\) They also include, notably, promises and contracts. Acquaintance strengthens the trust that can exist between complete strangers because the stability of acquaintance suggests that things are working as they should.\(^9\)

Trust between strangers depends on an implicit idea that there is something we are doing together, something more than sharing a life form. Perhaps sharing a nation, or a planet, or sharing in a basic set of ideals. In any case, in dealing with strangers


we do not have knowledge that we are sharing these things, but our acting as if we do is part of what makes sharing those things possible and this makes it a very sensible disposition to adopt.

This might resonate with certain game-theoretical intuitions which suggest that the default must always be a cooperative disposition. However, I do not share the intuition that iterated forms require that we should not cooperate with those who do not share the default disposition. We must take pains to cooperate with everyone; it is the only way we can get along. This doesn’t mean that we must cooperate in the same ways, irrespective of whether or not the other cheats. That would be to let villains thrive. But rather, that we should aim, so far as this is possible, not to treat anyone as a mere force of nature, something to be managed but not worked with. This would also be a good way to think of our relationship with other beings that warrant our concern.

6.5 Membership and Affiliation

Between acquaintance and anonymity lies affiliation. Membership in a trust relationship is not like membership in an affiliation, or an institution, and the practical significance of the two should not be conflated. But a form of trust relationship is at work here that seems to go beyond the mere machinery provided by institutional membership, and it would be good to figure out what it looks like.

There is no one concept of a relationship in philosophy. Sometimes philosophers think of relationships in terms of a relational predicate that can be applied to two

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or more constants, sometimes in terms of two or more things sharing the same kind, or set. Let’s call the first of these a “logical” sense of relationship, and the second a “metaphysical” sense of relationship. Beyond these, there are personal relationships. Personal relationships cannot be reduced to either one of the first two kinds without some loss of content. Specifically, we lose the notion that personal relationships are active, historical, and psychologically nuanced. They are active in the sense that personal relationships require some form of engagement between their participants; historical in the sense that the activity of the relationship transcends individual co-operative actions; and psychological in at least the sense that part of this engagement will involve agent’s thoughts and feelings.

These three kinds of relationship are each, in their own way practically significant. Knowing how to apply the relationship ‘bigger than’ is essential to find the wrench that fits the nut; knowing that two things are of the same kind implies that they have similar properties, and should be treated similarly. The practical significance of a personal relationship is more complex. In one way its significance relates to norms involved in the kind of relationship, father, friend, son, and suggests a form of action that is appropriate to that kind. But more importantly, the significance of a personal relationship tracks back to the history of the relationship. Knowing that one is a father will only take one so far, but knowing the history of one’s relationship as a father provides a richer set of normative resources. We can say, quite generally, that particular personal relationships add to our stock of normative resources. They give us insight into what we should do that goes beyond our general principles of action by drawing our attention to a shared history.

There is one way of looking at personal relationships that shadows the other two
forms of relationships, and makes relationships into relational properties of agents. Harry is a man, a typesetter, a father of Nelson, a friend of Skeeter. This muddies the practical significance of personal relationships because it renders obscure the idea that a relationship is something of an engagement, an activity between persons. It does so in two ways. The properties view adverts to general type norms of relationships leaving aside the history. And, perhaps more importantly it makes relationships look like personal projects, things that we have in interest in promoting for our sake. In personal relationships, the cooperative activity is central, and it cannot be replaced by either of these two modes of understanding recommended by the property view without significant losses.

Harry just didn’t acquire the property of being a friend to Skeeter, he and Skeeter formed a friendship. The same can be said for Harry’s becoming a father - it is something he did with his son Nelson. The norms of both of these relationships cannot be fully explicated with reference to what people typically do in friendship or fatherhood, and are distorted if one seeks to capture them in friendship or fatherhood obligations. Nor are they well understood in terms of Harry’s personal options or projects. A relationship isn’t something someone has, it’s what someone does with another person.

There is a very strong sense in which affiliations can be active, and so it seems as if the third style of thinking about relationships will be suitable. But though the activity of an affiliation depends on the cooperation of its members, that cooperation is not shared directly between its members in the same way as cooperation in personal relationships. Everyone may be in it for some choice personal option and this weakens the sense of personal relationship between members, sometimes to the point that one
is a mere number. Affiliations where one is a mere number are sick, but they can be repaired by member’s further and direct cooperation with one another.

There may be other cooperative endeavours between members of the same association, some even important to the broad activities of that affiliation, but the sense in which there is direct trust between these members is restricted to the ways in which they cooperate directly. The duties that derive directly from membership - obligations to members qua members - are duties relevant only to the broad cooperative endeavour: what the affiliation owes its members as a matter of how that affiliation makes them vulnerable, and the members should support these duties. The duties between members are thus duties that are mediated through the activity of the affiliation.

In this way, members of an association are not really obligated to the association, or to its active and normative principles, any more than one is obligated to give allegiance to the moral law. There is a sense in which both of these are true, and a good sense to the attitude of reverence found in Kant, but the whole of the story of an association can be told with reference to what members owe other members. Therefore, mere membership does not warrant any partiality that falls outside of the broad activity of the association.

For example, it seems right to say that one member of a Home Owners Association should not hire another member of that HOA for a competitive job simply because she is a member of the HOA. Membership is a property that the applicant has, but it is not itself an activity between members that goes beyond the demands of managing the HOA’s assets and liabilities. To put it another way, the activity of hiring is external to the activity of the association. There may be internal activities that support different demands. It’s hard to think of what internal duties between
members of an HOA, whose relation is anyway just to jointly manage some capital. But we can imagine a secret association, whose secrecy is important to the well being of its members. One should keep another’s membership a secret if open knowledge of it would make put her life in danger. Being secretive is just one of their shared activities.

There are special obligations between members of an association, but they advert not to their shared history qua persons, but to the institution, its norms, and the practical significance it has for its members. Since we can evaluate institutions in terms of general moral concerns, we can safely say that there will be legitimate associative duties between members when an institution is just. However, the fact that an institution is just does not stand as the truthmaker for associative duties; it merely permits an association to operate, associative duties come from the specific operations of the association and the reasonable expectations of the association’s members.\(^\text{11}\)

Membership in an organization may structure one’s practical life, but the form of dependence between associates will not often times resemble the form of dependence in personal relationships. Importantly, members in an weakly cooperative association can be substituted with other members with identical properties. In this way, associative membership looks might like the logical sense of a relationship. The fact that this cannot happen in many of our concrete embodiments of institution, such as university departments, is a testament to the intimacy of such endeavors. It requires people working in those settings to view their obligations as duties of trust, not duties of roles or of stature.

Intimate relationships provide the central case for understanding the significance of cooperative relationships because the form of cooperation, the depth of trust and

\(^{11}\text{See my discussion of Hardimon in Chapter 2.}\)
sincerity, and the deep sense of recognition and empathy, provide an extensive set of normative resources. I’ve argued that trust between members of affiliations, general acquaintances, and between strangers, are degenerate cases of trust in this intimate context. This seems to suggest that once we have good response to the worries about distribution – conflicts between personal relationships, and those most in need – then the strongest case will have already been made for instances involving broad institutions.
CHAPTER 7

Voluntarism
Voluntarism about moral responsibility is the view that one is only responsible for X when one has agreed, implicitly or explicitly, to be responsible for X. As a general view of obligation it seems hopeless. However, as it concerns special responsibilities voluntarism does not seem so far fetched. This view seems positively at home in the Action Model of special responsibilities, where special responsibilities arise out of the demands of an active relationship. In this chapter I examine AM’s voluntarist commitments. First, I look at non-voluntary relationships in an attempt to sort out the general voluntarist leanings of the Action Model. Then, I look at some special cases where special responsibilities are too demanding. These raise the voluntarist question again, not for relationships, but for substantive duties.

Finally, I look at a special case of inherited responsibility. In recent work, David Enoch has suggested that even inherited responsibilities are voluntarist. He argues that a person inherits certain responsibilities, not according to their relationship, but according to an act of will. In some cases, however, although it is fair to say that one is not responsible for some action, it is nevertheless reasonable to say that one is responsible to take responsibility. Once one takes responsibility, one then becomes responsible. I argue against this idea, maintaining that the responsibility to take responsibility comes from the relationship itself, not from an act of will.

7.1 Voluntarism

According to Scheffler, the basic voluntarist claim is that

One’s special responsibilities must always arise from some voluntary act on one’s part: if not from one’s explicit acceptance of those responsibilities, then perhaps from one’s voluntary entry into the group or relationship in
question or if not from one’s voluntary entry into the group or relationship in question, then perhaps from one’s voluntary acceptance of the benefits of participation in that group or relationship.\footnote{Scheffler, Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought, p. 54.}

In other words, simply being a member of a group, or a ‘mere participant’ in an action, will not be sufficient to generate special responsibilities.

On Scheffler’s reading, the voluntarist position forms the basis of an objection to those theories which hold that special responsibilities are a category distinct from, or at least not derivative of, general moral responsibilities. The voluntarist may argue that because the origins of special responsibilities seem always to be voluntary acts, that they are simply derivative of more general principles which state that a person must act in accordance with his or her voluntary undertakings.

In the second chapter, I examined a voluntarist account in the form of what I called \textit{Contractual Reductionism}. According to this account, special responsibilities are explained by reference to the norms governing contracts and promises, all of which are responsive to the basic idea that one must act in order to acquire associative responsibilities. I rejected Contractual Reductionism by arguing that it distorts the importance of events in our relationships. We may say that shared events in a history constitute a relationship, but it would be a distortion of the significance of the relationship to maintain that these events, and only these events, generate special responsibilities. To hold to this view one would need to ignore the sense in which there are some duties provided by the relationship itself, the entire history, which cannot be reduced to individual events.
During the course of my response to the Contractual Reductionist, I suggested that relationships are best understood in terms of an emerging deliberative significance for the agent that is, in some ways, outside the control of the agent. This is in contrast to an agreement model, where responsibilities are formed by a contract, or ceremony, and the under complete control of participants. In the fifth chapter, I qualified these claims by arguing that relationships are to be understood in the mode of agents sharing their lives, an action which forms a wide description of shared events between agents, and events in the lives of individual agents.

There are certainly voluntarist elements in AM. In order to say that two people are in a relationship, there must be an idea held between agents that they are involved in a cooperative activity: they must think that they are doing something together. But the Action Model is less voluntarist than one might have assumed. Relationships are normatively significant when they form a broad interpretation of individual action. However, whether or not this is so has some independence from the wishes of individual agents insofar as attempts to be indifferent to the objective interpretation given by relationships will not render those interpretations moot. Once the action framework becomes intelligible, one cannot simply will that things are otherwise.

In the fifth chapter, I showed why mere membership will not be sufficient to generate duties which are exactly akin to relational responsibilities. There I argued that the sense of activity that is contained by membership is reducible to the activity of the institution to which one belongs, and that this does not make one member responsible to another in ways outside of what could be expected given the aims of the institution. I therefore agree with the voluntarist who cites the weak normative import of mere membership. However, I deny that ‘mere participation’ will be equally
as impotent. The very idea that we are doing something together gives shape to the sorts of reasons which should be eligible for us, given the interpretive vulnerability formed by that cooperation. And so, mere participation is sufficient to generate responsibilities, although these are comparatively minor.

This leaves the class of duties I’ve termed “inherited duties.” Inherited duties are those that we have in virtue of being born into a set of personal relationships. I’ve argued it makes sense to say that one can be in a relationship long before one comes to self-consciousness. A relationship relies on joint decision-making, but participation doesn’t always have to be equal, especially in cases where one party is unable to meaningfully contribute to the decision making. And so a person may find herself committed to a general activity, or relationship, as she develops the abilities needed to make conscious commitments.

7.2 Recognizing Inherited Reasons

It’s easy to imagine a voluntarist who would want to reject inherited duties – filial duties, and possibly parental duties – while allowing for the existence of duties of friendship. We have no choice over who is our family, and what this means for our practical experience, whereas we have some control over who is to become a friend. But the phenomenological experience of inherited responsibilities tells against this reading. We often see inherited duties as uniquely important, even those that derive from relationships with which we are not actively engaged. And so we need a more nuanced voluntarism to capture the normative importance of this phenomenology.

Consider the following example:

*Unknown Son:* White discovers he has son, who is now in his teens.
White’s son shows up on White’s door and demands back financial support for his childhood, claiming that, because White is his father, he should want to make sure his life goes well. Does White owe him special regard simply because he is his biological father? Should he aim to meet his needs in the same way as he’s met the needs of the son he’s raised?

Intuitively, there is some sense to the idea that there is a relationship between White and his son. However, this sense is not captured by the non-voluntarist claim that White must be responsible to his son following their natural history. And neither does it seem fair to say that there is no relationship, because this underrates the importance of the thin natural history between White and his son.

The very fact that there are true statements about White and his son reveals a normative framework they are free to adopt. The question is whether or not they are required to adopt this framework, what I refer to elsewhere as a “generic” sense of a relationship. In this example, White and his son are not required to treat generic roles and responsibilities as constitutive of their relationship. But they are free to interpret their actions with the generic form in mind. When White’s son asks him for support he may overreach in his demands. Yet, White is responsible to accept the interpretation of their relationship, even if he is not required to accept the substantive claim that he owes some financial support. In this way, natural, or objective, interpretations of relationships have a basic normative import. However, if White and his son cannot negotiate the importance going forward, then White’s duties to his son are supported by the general duty not to mislead others. In this case, we might think that White must attempt to refine his son’s expectations, so he’s not disappointed when no money is forthcoming.
A naive reading of AM says that since there is no shared activity between White and his son, it is unclear what special responsibilities the relationship would support. Were there some shared activity, there would be some idea of what one party owes the other, but because they have just met, we have no idea of what White and his son are meant to be doing together. But the more interesting counterfactual claims have to do with what they might have done under the description of father and son. In near logical worlds, they might have, for instance, attended father-son picnics. This distinguishes their relationship from others. For example, in those near worlds, it’s not true that White and I might have attended father-son picnics.

This reading gives a better account of the normative significance of descriptive relationships, without giving up on the sensible aspects of voluntarism. However, it raises other difficulties.

On my view, responding to the demands of a relationship is a matter of expressing attitudes which reflect the sense of joint activity held between relations. But one might think that this feature is not responsive to the idea that we cannot choose to feel a certain way about our relatives, irrespective of whether or not it seems we should. And therefore, AM requires a power that is generally unavailable, the power to recognize and act on certain reasons that may fail to strike one as practically salient.

Cases like *Unknown Son* may not be very common, but the phenomenon they exemplify is, I think, well known. What the unknown son unreasonably asks of his father, in asking him to assume parental responsibility, is to generate attitudes at will. Attitudes can be expressed, and perhaps expressed at will by performing other actions. But they cannot be willed into existence. These sorts of demands might
be familiar to many of us in cases where we deal with relatives who are somewhat distant to us, though are close to other relatives with whom we are close.

In a common example,

Visiting: A child is encouraged to visit a grandparent, but only if she wants to.²

Visiting may express the attitudes that the grandparent expects, but the truth may be that the child is more or less indifferent. The request that an indifferent child should visit grandparents if and only if she would enjoy doing so asks too much. This is because the sense of activity between the child and grandparent in these sorts of cases is far too thin to support a thick motivational interest, and often, such duties are mediated through the parents as duties to the parents.

These last remarks - about deciding to express the character of a relationship to which one is only a party, as it were, descriptively - touch on a more general issue in the theory of practical reasons. T.M. Scanlon provides a compelling rationale to understand why these cases seem unreasonably demanding. He allows that one can choose whether or not to act on certain reasons, but denies that it is open to one to choose what reasons one recognizes as reasons. He writes that

When one sees several considerations as counting in favor of the same action, one cannot choose to act on one of them rather than another unless one downgrades some of the reasons by changing one’s mind about the action in question. Changing one’s mind in this way is a judgment - a decision - but not a choice.³

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²See chapter 5: Scanlon, Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, and Blame, Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other, Astra Taylor, ‘Zizek’, Film (November 2005).
³Scanlon, Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, and Blame, p. 60.
This seems to contradict a central tenet of the Action Model I’ve been discussing. On that model, the requirements of a relationship are that one acts with a certain interpretation of one’s actions, that one acts for certain reasons. But if it is not up to one what one takes as a reason for acting, then this may well seem to be impossible. If the child in the above example sees no reason to visit her grandparent, or only sees it in terms of meeting her parent’s wishes, then how can it be true that she should visit to express her interest in her grandparent. She hasn’t that interest, so how can she express it. This is a deeper objection than the one I discussed in Chapter 5. There, the claim was that AM requires one to have certain emotions at will. Here, the claim is that AM requires that an agent choose her reasons.

Scanlon allows that one can enter into a process of self-manipulation to bring about that one has desirable attitudes. But it would be *ad hoc* to suggest that AM entails that if one does not have the right attitudes, one is responsible to acquire them by self manipulation. The correct way to respond to this concern is, I think, to accurately distinguish the requirements of *Visiting* from the requirements of cases such as *Unknown Son*.

In *Visiting*, it is supposed that the child has some shared history with the grandparent, but simply sees visiting as undesirable. It isn’t as if the child sees no reason, whatever, to visit the grandparent, as if he was simply an elderly stranger their parents thought it would be nice for her to visit. The child can therefore express some recognition of the importance of their relationship by visiting. She is just incapable of expressing the exact importance her parents imagine is required. And though it may seem strained to suggest that the child should enter into self-manipulation, perhaps by focusing on all of the past goods her grandparents have provided, it does not seem

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unreasonable to say that there is reason to cultivate the relationship, to thicken the sense of cooperation, and the sense that the two share life. One can certainly intend to cultivate a relationship at will, and so, even though one may not be responding to the relationship in ideal fashion, one may develop a natural responsiveness to the right motivational content over time. There may be no objective reasons to find something meaningful, but there are objective reasons to respond according to another’s sense of meaning.

7.3 Demands and Other Conflicts

There is a further sense in which relational duties might strike the voluntarist as unpalatable: they are sometimes too demanding. The most compelling examples of this phenomenon are those where the demands of relationships conflict with activities and projects that make one’s life worthwhile.

Recall William’s Gauguin example. According to Williams, Gauguin must decide whether or not to pursue a life of painting. If he decides to pursue painting he will be required to leave his family behind while he travels to Tahiti to paint the natives. If he opts to stay with his family, he will need to give up his life project of being a great painter. (It’s assumed that he can only become a passable painter in France or otherwise succumb to his depression and commit suicide.) Though Williams thinks that it is sensible to say that Gauguin has reason to leave his family and study in Tahiti, he admits that this will not stand as a justification to his family. Yet it seems as if, just as Gauguin has the right to pursue his life project, his family has the right to demand that he stay, and so we have an intractable normative conflict.

One way to characterize these conflicts is just to say that they are tragic, and
that neither one’s life projects, nor one’s relational duties, should trump the other. However, I’m inclined to say that there is a sense in which our relatives are involved in the pursuit of our life projects, and that therefore conflicts between projects and relationships might sometimes be characterized as erzatz. They are ersatz in the same sense that we have conflicts between equally good options in our individual lives which are likely lead to equally good outcomes. Both options advance our interests, though they do so in different ways. Similarly, in cases where we are inclined to view another’s interest as on par with our own, it wouldn’t be quite correct to say that they can be in conflict with our own interests, since they are part of the same set; our “own interests” are also shared. To be sure, since satisfying some shared interest will lead to a different outcome from satisfying some others, and individually these might be viewed as better or worse outcomes depending on what it is we want individually. But this is to say that they are competing interests, not necessarily conflicting interests.

Yet, the fact that there may be some erzatz conflicts does not eliminate the possibility that there may be genuine conflicts, and that between duties to friends and family and duties to oneself. I therefore want to distinguish here between apparent tragic conflicts and genuine tragic conflicts.

Consider the following:

**Memoir**: Janice has wanted for years to write a memoir of her life. She is near the end of her life, and spends most of her time at home. The idea of writing the memoir seems to her something that will give her last years meaning. But she knows that writing of her life with Harry and Nelson will make public some very sordid details. Nelson will no doubt be embarrassed, and hurt, when she publishes the memoir. Must Janice
defer here to Nelson’s vulnerability and give up on her life project?

On AM Nelson and Janice both bear responsibility, and owe it to one another to act in ways that reflect the sense of importance that is appropriate to the idea they are involved in the activity of sharing a life. This means that Nelson has a *prima facie* reason to support his mother in her endeavours to express the sense in which her interests are his. He therefore has reason to forfeit his right to not be embarrassed by his mother’s actions, in order to show his support for an aim that she sees as providing a deep sense of accomplishment in her life, and a deep sense of meaning. Therefore, this is a kind of *erzatz* conflict, because there are competing reasons and responsibilities on both sides that remain undefeated, given that one and other should want to support one another’s interests. Janice should therefore act with a sense of regret, and Nelson is allowed a degree of compunction in his support.

It is an important feature of the Gauguin example that he is considering leaving his family to pursue a new life. Because of this, we are supposed to think that there is little sense to the idea that he will continue to share a life with his wife and children. And so, the example is meant to represent an intractable conflict because it undermines the very possibility of a joint cooperative venture which is capable of supporting responsibilities. This is why Williams’ thinks that Gauguin’s painting career cannot stand as a justification to his family. In more ordinary tragic conflicts, the sense that there is a intractable tension between equally good reasons can be represented to those on the losing end. To borrow an example from Thomas Nagel, when you and I are on the battle-field fighting for opposing armies, I can say to you, as I run you through, “You understand, it’s either you or me.”

aims of our armies, the idea is that there is good reason to preserve each of our lives. However, this rationale is unavailable to Gauguin. He can say “You understand, it’s either us or me” but this hardly seems something his family should accept. The premise is that Gauguin must ignore the interests of his family entirely in order to preserve meaning in his life. And so, it is difficult to read this as an expression of joint activity. But if we are to defend the idea that Gauguin represents an intractable conflict, we need also to defend the supposition that he must make a choice between pursuing painting, and meeting his familial obligations. And this would be perverse.

I may know that in order to attain some goal of mine, that I must abdicate other of my responsibilities, but I am not normally in a position to do so without consequence, without wronging those to whom I am responsible. To say that I have reason to abdicate may make sense, but to see this reason as conclusive requires downgrading the reasons for meeting my responsibilities, and it seems the only way that this can happen in cases involving relational responsibilities, is if the other relinquishes her claims on me, and gives me permission in ignore, altogether, the practical significance of our relationship. The difference between cases is one of degree. Janice might act without permission, perhaps, because in writing her memoir it is not supposed that she will ignore the importance of her and Nelson’s relationship. The permission Nelson would give would come in the form of support. The permission coming from Gauguin’s family would outstrip any ordinary sense of support. And anyway, it is unclear how we are to understand this as an act of support over time, given the idea that Gauguin, and his family, are to be living separate lives.

So tragic cases will not be those where one’s responsibilities provide an obstacle to one’s ability to live a meaningful life through one’s life project. Clear instances of
tragic conflict will perhaps arise only after one meets one’s responsibilities, and later feels some regret for not pursuing other activities.

Sometimes care relationships can require too much of caregivers. Where one agents interests are not recognized as part of a shared life, the relationship will look very similar to the internally negative relationships discussed in Chapter 6. The difference between the two has to do with how the agent is capable of totalizing over the relationship. In internally negative relationships, one of the two parties is not interpretively vulnerable to the other because she does not require the other’s cooperation in order act according to her aims.

Tragic cases will be divided, I think, on the basis of whether or not the caregiver or benefactor can be said to be acting at all. Where the beneficiary coerces the benefactor into serving only her interests, and to the point where the relative contributes little to her own life, I should think there is an internally negative relationship. However, in most cases the beneficiary will simply lack this control. The benefactor may act nobly if she meets her responsibilities, but may be beyond reproach if, in the end, they become too much for her to handle.

7.4 Individualism

My reading of the cases above suggests that the central voluntary act in discussions of special responsibilities is not one of creation, but one of acceptance. The shared activity between agents gives each the power to accept responsibilities, but this activity itself, though not involuntary, does not require some strong sense of control. We may say that the acceptance of responsibilities may be laudable in some of these cases, without holding that the contrary is blameworthy. This constitutes one half of
a theory about taking responsibility – about accepting the responsibilities relationships give us. The other half to the theory lies in more nebulous normative space, and requires an analysis of the conditions necessary to say that a person is responsible for her relative’s actions.

Strict individualism about moral responsibility holds that one is not responsible for an action done by another. On the face of it, strict individualism seems a compelling voluntarist doctrine. After all, it seems wrong to blame or praise an agent for actions that were not hers.

However there are at least two sorts of cases in which the doctrine is inadequate: cases where an agent’s friend or relative acts badly, or well, and cases where agent’s group, institution, or country, acts badly or well. These are cases where an agent is so close to the action that it makes sense to say that she is somehow responsible for the action. It is meaningful to question whether she can take full, or partial, responsibility, whether she should take responsibility, and whether she is in fact responsible once she has taken responsibility.

The idea that one can take responsibility invites us to reject, or at least modify strict individualism. David Enoch thinks that individualism can be saved, though not in the strict form. Enoch focuses on the significance of taking responsibility as an action that is clearly connected to a singular agent. As an action, taking responsibility may be appropriate (wrong, good, blameworthy) and, according to Enoch, this makes it possible that one can take responsibility. Once one has done the taking, one acquires responsibility. But one’s relationships cannot make one responsible, it is by act of

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will that one becomes responsible.

Enoch’s strategy upholds the central tenant of individualism – that agents are responsible only for their own actions – while accommodating the thought that one can become responsible for actions not strictly under one’s control. To be clear, according to Enoch, a person’s relationships cannot make her responsible for another’s actions, but it may nevertheless be true that she should take responsibility for another’s actions. It is a primitive fact in cases of affiliation that a person should take responsibility for an action to which they are meaningfully connected.

I am sympathetic to the basic individualist claim, but here I think a singular focus leads us astray. We should think instead about the ways in which an agent is already involved in the actions of another through her relationships, and understand these cases of taking responsibility in terms of cooperative agency. This view can accommodate the phenomenon of taking responsibility, but is less voluntarist because it entails that a person can take responsibility only because the singular action falls under a wide description of joint action. On this view a person can inherit another person’s actions according to their shared life and its constitutive commitments. This is necessary partly required as a matter of mitigating the ways in which one’s relationship makes one interpretively vulnerable, and partly as a matter of expressing commitment to the relationship itself.

7.5 Taking Responsibility

Enoch’s argument begins with an intriguing suggestion that we include within the set of cases of taking responsibility standard moral luck cases, such as the following:

Driver: You are driving home from a conference. You are careful to obey
all posted instructions, and your car is in excellent repair. Suddenly, a woman jumps in front of your car; you hit her and she dies immediately. You couldn’t avoid her, and you are not responsible for her death. But still, you seem as if you are in some way responsible, at least to feel a certain form of regret that Bernard Williams calls agent-regret.⁷

On Enoch’s explanation, the reason you should feel agent-regret is due to the fact that you are responsible to take responsibility: you should take (at least some) responsibility for the death of the stranger. It is the truth of this meta-responsibility claim that is all important. Once you take responsibility you are responsible and should feel regret. If you do not take responsibility, you are not responsible for the death, though you may yet be held accountable for not taking responsibility.

Enoch notices that this way of understanding moral luck helps to sort out the thought that there is a difference between agents who feel regret and those who do not. Only the former takes responsibility, and this is what makes her regret appropriate. This strategy still allows us to say that there is something wrong with one who never feels agent-regret; it just adds that what is wrong with never feeling regret is what is wrong with never taking responsibility for events to which you are causally connected. Enoch adds that this view has the upshot of helping to distinguish between someone, A, who injures the pedestrian, takes responsibility, and visits her in the hospital until she recovers, and B, who, after taking responsibility, visits only once. Neither A nor B continues his life as if nothing has happened; they both take responsibility and no doubt feel some regret. But, A responds well to his new responsibilities and B responds poorly, and is thus the proper subject of blame. This feature of Enoch’s

individualism is meant to mitigate the voluntarist leanings implicit in the description: once one has taken responsibility, admittedly through an act of will, one cannot will things be otherwise.\footnote{See also David Enoch, \textit{Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism} (Oxford University Press, 2011).}

But what makes the initial act of will possible, what allows that an agent can take responsibility, remains obscure on Enoch’s account. Surely, a bystander could not take responsibility for the woman’s death. Or could she? On the brief description above, it seems as if the only thing that allows one to take responsibility is that one is \textit{in} on the action, as it were. Why can’t the bystander take responsibility for the death on account that she did not shout, “Watch out!” in time? Are there any restrictions on her taking responsibility for the death? What are these restrictions?

Enoch seems to think that the normative claim that one should take responsibility arises, as a kind of primitive. In order to clarify his sense of taking responsibility, he draws an analogy between that phenomenon and the duty to promise. There are circumstances where it seems incumbent on us to promise something, where we are responsible to promise, and where we are rightly blamed if we refuse to do so. In Enoch’s example, a dying friend asks you to promise to take care of her dependent child. While Enoch says that you are not responsible in the first instance to take care of the child, that you may be responsible to promise to do so to alleviate your friend’s anxiety. And once you have done so, you become responsible for taking care of the child according your promise.

Cases where one should take responsibility have the same form. There are instances where we are not responsible for X, but responsible to take responsibility for X. The fact that we should implies that we can, and so, just as in the case of promises,
we can acquire a duty to X by fulfilling a duty which generates that duty to X.

Enoch admits that in making this analogy, he implicitly asserts something about the voluntary character of taking responsibility, that with an act of will one can create a duty for oneself. This distinguishes his picture of taking responsibility from other accounts, such as those given by Susan Wolf and Fischer and Ravizza. On Enoch’s view, taking responsibility is an action; it is not a matter of holding a certain set of attitudes, but is active, a matter of will, something we do. But this voluntarism is meant to be mitigated by fact that the power to take responsibility will depend on the truth or falsity of claims about whether or not one should take responsibility. It would seem, following the analogy, as if only we can only take responsibility in cases where it is true that we should take responsibility, but it is yet unclear whether this is so.

The fundamentals of the Action Model can provide an explanation of the moral luck case which explains the difference between the bystander and the driver. The difference between the two cases relies on what can be a common interpretation of omission. In the case of the driver, we can interpret the event as an action, indeed this is what the surviving relatives must accept if they are to allow the driver to accept responsibility – they must give up on the idea that the event just is an accident. Yet, it is controversial whether or not an omission is ever an action. And so the interpretation of the bystander’s responsibility requires first, a standing interpretation that omissions can be actions, and then the interpretation that the omission in this case is an action that contributed to victim’s death.

Why should we ever interpret accidents as intentional actions? The only explanation can be that we have a basic interest in having events be attributable to agency. Intentional causal connection is the hallmark of control which constitutes an event as an action. But whether or not an event is intentional, or accidental is a matter of interpretation. In moral luck cases, however, the objective interpretation is that the event was an accident. And so, an agent, or community, must construct the intentional interpretation. Since this serves the general interest of making events meaningful by attributing them to an agent, it can sometimes be the right thing to do.

Moral luck cases provide an interesting background for thinking about what should be the basic commitments of individualism. However, the worries of individualism come out more clearly in cases where person is thought to be responsible for another’s action because she is connected to the person or institution which performed the action. The concern here is that it would be unfair for me to blame you for something which you did not control, but which another agent did control. But there are common cases, involving intimate relationships, where this seems entirely appropriate.

Here is a common sort of example:

Misbehaving I: You and your young child are at the market. Your child is bored and, to amuse himself, picks up a jar of mayonnaise and smashes it on the floor. An employee meets you in the aisle. You explain the incident to him, offering to take full responsibility for the mishap, and offering to pay for the broken jar.

\[10\text{This is not to say that it is subjective. There is an objective interpretation which can assign intentionality insofar as it is correct. Even so, accidents and unavoidable consequences of actions naturally reflect back on one's self-governance, and on what one appears to think about the demands of recognition.}\]
Enoch’s idea about examples of this type is to draw attention to a subset of all substantive directives regarding what agent’s should do in response to the situation, which target an agent who is not clearly responsible for the initial action. You should take responsibility for your child’s actions. And, once you do, you become responsible.

But I believe that you are required to take responsibility because it is reasonable to assume that your child is party to a pattern of past decision-making that led to the disposition to break jars. In this way, the broken jar is an event in the context of the broad activity you share with your child. And, since you are not just a party to the decision-making, but are the principal decision-maker, it’s natural to attribute the responsibility for the action to you. This is not the same as the case where you roll a snowball down an incline which gathers mass and does damage to a nearby car, but it’s close.

One might suggest to the contrary that your shame and embarrassment at your child’s behaviour are independent of your actions, and it is merely your role - a responsible parent, the guarantor of your child’s actions - that makes you liable for your child’s actions. But the problem with this interpretation is that it hews to closely to the legal importance of one’s relationships. A parent might experience pride, or shame, at actions which do not have an essential connection to responsibility as liability. For instance, suppose a child is meant to do some exercise in writing, which he can do carefully, or carelessly. The idea is that how he writes results from a cultivated disposition, which itself is a result of the network of action relationships held between child and parent, the recognition of certain facts as salient, or reason-giving, and of the relative importance that they put on certain dispositions. You accept responsibility in these cases, not because it is foisted upon you as the because
of default, but in recognition of your continued agency through your child’s actions.

In these cases, you have the right to take responsibility because of the ways in which you are connected to the partial agency that led to the event. In this sense, you are already responsible before you claim responsibility. The point comes out more forcefully when we consider cases where it is unclear whether or not you should take responsibility.

_{Misbehaving II:_ You and another customer are at the market, arguing about some important matter. Incensed, the other customer picks up a jar, smashes it on the floor, and walks out of the store. An employee meets you in the aisle. You explain the incident to him, offering to take full responsibility for the mishap, and offering to pay for the broken jar.

In _Misbehaving I_, we get the idea that you are responsible because there is a sense in which breaking the jar is something you are doing together. This is mainly because it reflects on other of your actions, and commitments as a parent. In _Misbehaving II_ whether or not you should take responsibility depends on our view of the argument as a shared activity, the consequences of which are meant to be the shared responsibility of both parties. This is essentially interpretive. The judgment that you are responsible does not require that you should accept responsibility for the broken jar. You may be responsible for continuing the fight, but breaking the jar is not, on most interpretations, a natural end to _that_ activity.

Even still, we can imagine friends in a similar circumstance where one friend ought to take responsibility for the other’s bad behaviour. In part, this is a matter of solidarity and loyalty, demonstrating that small slip-ups, like breaking a jar, are not a deal-breaker for the relationship. But more than this, it is a statement as to what
actions may be included in the course of the relationship which do not undermine
the sense that the activity is jointly recognized and, in the end, supported. More
serious violations of general responsibilities may not enjoy this tentative support as
they make continued activity and association so undesirable as to seem impossible.

In *Misbehaving II* we may say that it is admirable for you to take responsibility
given that it is unclear whether or not you should. But this is not so in the first
case. In both these cases, the idea that one is responsible does turn on the idea that
one should take responsibility. I agree with this part of Enoch’s argument. But both
of these claims turn on what is the correct interpretation of joint agency. One can
disclaim or accept joint agency in the second case, but one cannot do so in the first
case, at least while upholding the idea of a relationship.

### 7.6 Normative Powers

I reject Enoch’s attempt to save Individualism because I think that the normative
claim that one should take responsibility does not entail that one is responsible if one
accepts it. Rather, the explanation is the other way around: if one is responsible, then one should take responsibility. The cases involving relationships are not those
that lie on the edges of one’s agency, like those of moral luck. They are central to
one’s agency because they relate to the cooperative endeavors that shape our sense of reasons. When we refuse to take responsibility for another’s actions, we effect a change in our relationship with that person.

Without a prior relationship, or prior cooperative activity, we are unable to take responsibility for another’s action. We might be said, in these cases, to lack the *normative power* to take responsibility. Most arguments for the existence certain
normative powers turn on a transcendental argument: we have the normative powers we do because it is a good thing that we should have them. But on my reading, the normative power to take responsibility comes from the normative framework given by the relationship and other commitments and responsibilities which constitute the relationship.

This point undermines a principal analogy in Enoch’s argument. Recall that in the promising example, you are meant to promise your dying friend to care for her child in order to relieve her anxiety. The reason that your promise will work to relieve anxiety owes to your relationship with your friend. But this relationship would also support the idea that you are responsible to care for the child, perhaps only in limited ways, if you had never been asked to make the promise. When you promise, you simply claim ownership for this pre-existing disposition to help, and make it more concrete and directed. This is dependency of promising on relationships is, I believe, a general feature of promising. It accords with a view of promising that puts it into the context of a decision-making practice.

Consider for instance Shiffrin’s account of promising. Her view is what she calls a ‘rights transfer view’. A and B are friends. A is headed out of town, and needs someone to look after her dog ‘Rufus.’ B promises A to walk Rufus. In doing so, B transfers to A the right to decide who will walk Rufus. Shiffrin says that in intimate relationships, the power to promise is a mechanism for sharing and transferring discretionary powers. And she is keen to note, our intimate relationships would be severely impoverished without it.

This seems right, but Shiffrin underrates the significance of the relationship for

\[11\text{See David Owens, } \textit{Shaping the Normative Landscape} \text{ (Oxford University Press, 2012); Shiffrin, } \textit{‘Promising, Intimate Relationships, and Conventionalism’}.\]

\[12\text{Shiffrin, } \textit{‘Immoral, Conflicting and Redundant Promises’}.\]
giving this power real effect. The power to promise itself depends on a shared history, a sense that the two are already involved in the practice of deciding together, of sharing discretionary powers. Not everyone has the power to promise A to walk Rufus. Imagine a stranger C meeting A on the street and promising to walk Rufus. The absence of a relationship between A and C makes the act of promising lame. This is because the success conditions, the conditions under which an agent has the power to promise, turn on something having to do with the relationship itself. There is something between A and B, that is absent between A and C. Otherwise, it is unclear why B’s attempt at a promise to A is likely to succeed, where C’s is likely to fail. It is not as if C has no power to promise, it is simply that this power is amplified where there is a real relationship.

This is what makes Enoch’s promising example seem plausible: the friend and parent have a relationship, which already grants limited rights and responsibilities to decide over parts of their lives. And this generates and sustains the power to promise. Without the relationship, one hasn’t the right to transfer discretionary powers, one cannot make the promise, and there is no sense to the idea that one should make the promise. There is an analogous condition in the case of taking responsibility. One can only take responsibility where one is entitled to take responsibility. What gives one that entitlement? Not simply the commitment to take responsibility. The natural answer seems to me the right one: the relationship, the shared history between persons, is what gives one that entitlement.

Often, it will not be immediately clear which individual actions fall under the wide, joint, description of sharing a life. Substantive decisions must be made about whether an action reflects on a particular relationship, and what that reflection means. Some
actions will fall under the purview of the broad plans and intentions that form the network of facts germane to how we deliberate about questions of meaning. When an action does fall under this purview, both actors have an entitlement to the action through the wide description of what they are doing. And these are cases where one may take responsibility.

### 7.7 Summary

I’ve tried to qualify the sense in which the Action Model of relationships is committed to a voluntarist thesis about responsibility. I resisted the idea that our relationships have for their genesis some voluntary act, but allowed that some sense of activity is required if our special responsibilities are going to have any content whatever. In response to concerns about the overly demanding aspects of relationships, I held that, in spite of the fact that there may sometimes be intractable tragic conflicts, most conflicts between personal development and relationships will be *erzatz* conflicts. This is because there is a close connection between the interests of both agents, and to the point where they will often share one another’s interests, and share in one another’s activities.

This led me to consider a further thesis about responsibility, questioning the sense in which one can be held responsible for another’s actions. I argued that there is good sense to the idea that a person can take responsibility for actions which were not, strictly speaking, theirs. But held, against Enoch, that this happens not as a pure act of will, but in virtue of powers granted by the interpretive vulnerability at the centre of the relationship. In doing so, I tried to emphasize the importance attributing responsibility on the basis of a shared life.
CHAPTER 8

Conclusion
I’ve argued that special responsibilities are best analyzed by focusing on interpersonal relationships using terms appropriate for categorizing the difference between joint and singular action. The reason we have special responsibilities to our relatives has chiefly to do with shared decision-making: I have authority to decide what my relatives may do in a way distinct from what I may decide about what anyone may do. This is according to a broad plan that we’ve negotiated together, which includes future actions and attitudes that are based on our joint interpretation of our past shared actions and other things that are important to understanding the general course of our relationship. This is what it means to share a life. In contrast, I have the authority to decide over some of the actions and attitudes of strangers as only they relate to the constellation of rights everyone has according to the sorts of beings we are. This is what it means to share a life form.

The scope of duties that are attached to sharing a life are, on my account, somewhat different from those implied by other conceptions of partiality, and which give rise to the thought that partiality is in opposition to morality. Most important is my conception of self-governance with respect to our relatives. I’ve argued that we should act so as our actions accurately reflect our shared understanding of the meaning of certain attitudes for other things with which we may be engaged with our relatives. What constitutes good self-governance is in this sense interpretive. There is also a subtle logical element to the account, according to which the rationale for present individual action necessarily entails different, and sometimes adverse descriptions of the lives and actions of our relatives. However, this is not meant to replace the importance of interpretation, but only to highlight the connection between our actions and the lives we share with our relatives and to raise doubts about the primacy of
individual action and practical reasoning.

The implication for my conception of partiality is that not just any action will constitute reasonable partiality according to its traditional role. And this allows the account I defend is primarily deflationary with regard to the conflict between morality on the one hand, and partiality on the other. It does so in two ways: First, the joint action model emphasizes and reiterates the point that we needn’t think of our relationships as existing outside of morality. In forming and reforming the contours of our relationships we are required by the reasons given by morality to incorporate moral principles into the central aims and action sequences that make up the main features of relationships. Second, it suggests that action groups which are most associated with reasonable partiality, importantly, transfers of wealth, do not necessarily retain their traditional importance. This is because the common notion that these actions are legitimate forms of partiality depends on a substantive assumption that one cannot be supportive of one’s relatives without such actions. Formally, the meaning of any action is only set our by the procedure of sharing a life in the context of the importance of sharing a life form with many others.

As such I argue that the action model avoids worries about unreasonable favoritism, and unreasonable partiality. Those relationships that fail to respect some moral principles in their application of the demands of cooperation must be reformed and can survive reformation. While relationships that are organized to support unreasonable demands from their members may seem to require these attitudes and actions essentially, I maintain that these forms of partiality are not essential to carry on a cooperative relationship as the meanings of those and other actions can be reformed. Accordingly, the necessary features of a good cooperative relationship are
just the practical mode of accurately assessing the importance of certain actions, which crucially involves shared decision making.

The account I present is also somewhat revisionary with respect to individualistic accounts of action and responsibility. On my view the connection between our individual actions and the lives we share with others is tight, and this has two effects. The first I’ve already discussed. It is the effect our relationships have on the meaning of our individual actions, and vice versa. The second concerns shared responsibility. I’ve argued that because our relationships encourage us to have a basic practical outlook which is shared, it is reasonable to claim that relatives are responsible for one another’s actions.

This conception of shared responsibility is not meant to be completely revisionary: we may retain the sense in which the performance of an action is rightly attributable to agents according to the ordinary application of questions about who did what. Yet the ultimate assessments of responsibility go to the kinds of lives cultivated between relatives, and to the attitudes and action patterns which are central to these shared lives. Moreover, a relationship depends, importantly, on the endorsement of attitudes between relatives, and when such endorsement cannot be secured, even in part, for the past actions and attitudes of one relative, the quality and strength of the relationship diminishes. As such, I believe it is reasonable to expand the conception of responsibility in ways complementary to collective responsibility, which rely on some notion of endorsement. However, because relationships depend somewhat essentially on a share-decision making process that contains endorsement, as it were, *inter alia*, the forms of appraisal that are appropriate in these cases will more closely mirror ordinary individual assessments of special responsibility.
While I hope to have demonstrated cooperative reasons are fundamental in a normative sense, in terms of their importance to how we deliberate, I’ve only alluded to the idea that they’re fundamental in a further sense, fundamental to all practical reasoning.

This is important. There is an obvious sense in which all practical reasoning is joint. This is just the sense that all practical reasoning begins ‘at home,’ reflecting a genealogical explanation of how each of us come to be reasoning beings. However, there is a deeper sense of this idea found in some of the work on internal reasons which highlights the inability of agents to reason outside of there existing relationships and life projects. Those arguments rely on motivation. However, it appears as if there is a second line of argumentation that does not rely on motivation, but on the logical relationship between one’s self conception as an agent, which may be essentially relational. This thought begins with the idea that reasoners are not just part of a reasoning group or life form, but they are part of a nexus of actual, extant, reasoners. And whereas theoretical reasoning may proceed from an atomistic conception of the self, it’s hard to see how practical reasoning may enjoy such separation.

It would be worthwhile to determine whether the ultimate explanation for what appears to be the motivational element of our relationships is a purely practical element. To see, that is, if reasons rely for their intelligibility on discrete relationships of individuals, and not just on the abstract relation between the individual and the community of rational beings. Underlying this inquiry is a conception of action that is more robust with respect to the influence of the nexus of personal relationships which are central to the conception of self.
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