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Attachments and Associated Reasons

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Attachments and associated reasons

Joseph Raz

Over the years we form attachments and lose them - if 'lose' is the right word. Much of our emotional life revolves around them, is focussed on them. The very term 'attachment' connotes an emotional connection, and I am using the term in a common, non-technical way. It is not confined to any specific emotion, or range of emotions, nor is it confined to happy, or willing attachments. There are ones we have in spite of ourselves. And there are ones we struggle to free ourselves from, or are ambivalent about. But they are connections we have to people, or objects, places, or groups of which we are aware. -- I will not be concerned with attachments to ideas, or theories. To simplify I will not consider complex and multifaceted attachments, such as religious ones, and will spend more time on attachments to people than to other objects. -- We may not understand our attachments well, nor know much about their scope and reach. But we are aware of their role in our life. Therefore, however anxious we may be to end them, and however aware we are of their negative aspects, and of the negative emotions they raise within us, unless we hate ourselves thoroughly we have towards them some positive feeling, as they are part of who we are and part of our lives.

Given the emotional aspects of attachments it is inevitable that they affect our concerns, and that means that they affect our perceived reasons, the reasons we think that we have. My purpose in this paper concerns the proper understanding of how it can be that our attachments affect the (non-instrumental) reasons we have. I will neither seek to justify the belief that attachments affect (non-instrumental) reasons nor endorse beliefs about the reasons they constitute or provide. Given the inevitability of attachments for creatures with our psychological make up justification

does not seem to me needed. But uncritical endorsement of our beliefs about what reasons they provide would be rash - while often they provide some reasons there is no general ground to think that we are correct whenever we assume that they provide this reason or that. For the most part my discussion will not reach the question of what reasons they provide, being concerned with understanding how it is that they can provide any reasons.

In many ways my concern merely echoes Barbara Herman's concern in the paper on 'Agency, Attachment and Difference'.¹ Our approaches may be thought to be radically different. She, while not meaning her article 'in the spirit of endless defense of a favourite system' (776) is trying to show that attachments are not inconsistent with Kantian ethics. I, on the other hand, ignore Kantian or any other constructivist metaethics, and consider the issue on the assumption that practical reasons, that is reasons for actions, intentions and other attitudes, are given by the value of performing them, or of having them. Yet, we share an understanding of where the difficulty lies.

The paper will unfold in 5 parts dealing with five questions: first, does the partiality of attachments present an obstacle to their being or giving practical reasons? Second, given a value-based approach to practical reasons, can universal values generate reasons that are specific to their subjects, reasons – say – towards my friends that only I have? Third, do attachments affect what we do independently of any reasons that they provide? Fourth, in what ways do attachments constitute or provide normative reasons, and briefly, how do attachment-related reasons relate to other practical reasons? Finally, I turn to the question of the nature of and justification for partiality to oneself.

1 The Partiality of attachments

¹ Barbara Herman, 'Agency, Attachment, and Difference', *Ethics*, vol. 101 (1991) 775

a Partiality and *pro tanto*

Do attachments give one reasons? 'Why not?' you may ask. 'What is the problem?' Some perceive the difficulty in reconciling the partiality imported by attachments with the impartiality of morality.²

'Partiality' in the sense relevant here designates either an action or a motivational disposition to favour someone. Favour him compared with what? If the possibility that partiality may be justified is not to be ruled out by stipulation, the basis of comparison cannot be 'favour him more than one should, or more than one may'. So I will take partiality to be acting or being disposed to act in ways that favour one person more than others (whether more than some others, or more than all others), when doing so expresses favourable attitudes and emotions one has towards that person.

Given the complex emotional aspects of some attachments, and especially given that they may carry negative emotions, like resentment or anger, they are sometimes perceived to give rise to reasons that do not favour their objects. Partiality³ implies a favouring, so the question of how attachments give rise to reasons is wider than the question of the possibility of justified partiality. There may, however, be special difficulty with the justification of partiality. Such difficulties also affect matters other than attachments. Possibly we have reasons to be partial or to act in ways that are

² One view that I ignore here is that morality consists of those considerations that can be established from the moral point of view, which is inherently impartial – that is what makes it moral. Constructivists are committed to something like this. Without a constructivist foundation a point of view is simply a partial view, defined by what it excludes. If one defines morality as sound reasons other than reasons of partiality then obviously morality conflicts with reasons of partiality. But being interested in the way sound reasons cohere there is no point in our attending to such an artificial restriction.

³ According to the Oxford English Dictionary 'impartiality' means 'Not partial; not favouring one party or side more than another; unprejudiced, unbiased, fair, just, equitable. (Of persons, their conduct, etc.)'. Needless to say morality does not sanction prejudice, bias or unfair, etc. treatment. So if morality is impartial that must mean that it does not sanction favouring some people or their conduct, etc. over others.

partial to our relations or to our country or to our employer, whether or not we are attached to them.

But is there a difficulty about reconciling partiality with morality? There would be if one thought that reasons which display partiality always override those that do not, if one thought, for example, that one's duties to one's children always override those owed to strangers. But this supposition is mistaken. Later we may want to return to the question of what determines the relative force of reasons that do and those that do not display partiality. Here it is enough to note that reasons displaying partiality are, like most others, *pro tanto* reasons. Barbara Herman expresses what is essentially the same thought as follows:

'What the Kantian requires is only that he not view his desire to save his wife as an unconditionally valid reason.'⁴

As desires are not reasons, I feel that the point is better expressed by saying simply that even given the agent's attachment to his wife, the reason to save her is not necessarily conclusive. It is unconditional and valid, but it may be defeated by conflicting reasons. Though my way of explaining how it is that reasons that express partiality are *pro tanto* differs from Barbara's, the two ways are fundamentally at one. She explains:

In the wide range of cases, the role of the Kantian motive of duty is as such a limiting condition: it expresses the agent's commitment that he will not act (on whatever motive, to whatever end), unless his action is morally permitted. Thus, in the case of bringing aid to someone in need, it would be quite ordinary for the action of the normal moral agent to be overdetermined⁵: he might act from the emotion-based desire to help (meeting the other's need would thus be the direct object of his action), *and* he would act from the motive of duty (the permissibility of what he was doing would be a necessary condition of his acting to help).⁶

⁴ Barbara Herman, 'Integrity and Impartiality', *The Monist*, 66 (1983) 234 at 246.

⁵ In commenting on the passage I will ignore its description of the situation described as one of over-determination. That idea implies two independent routes, each one sufficient in itself for the same outcome. But that is not what Barbara has in mind. She describes a situation in which two components generate an outcome, each being necessary and neither of them sufficient to bring it about.

⁶ Barbara Herman, 'Integrity and Impartiality', *The Monist*, 66 (1983) 234 at 236.

Here is how I see the case: in acting to help a person in need for a reason that expresses the agent's feeling for the other the agent at least implicitly endorses the view that the reasons for his or her action are not defeated by conflicting reasons. As you see I am avoiding here the question of what actually motivates, i.e. causally explains the action – a matter to be dealt with later – and most significantly I do not suggest that the agent acts from a motive or reason of duty. It is merely that he or she would not have acted as they did if they thought that the reason for the action is defeated. That is, of course, not a point about their moral dispositions. It merely expresses the fact that the action is not irrational, not akratic, the agents are not acting against their better judgement. Whether this aspect of the nature of rational intentional action gives succour to the Kantians is not for me to judge. It does, however, help remove some suspicion about the relations between reasons that express partiality or attachment and moral concerns. Barbara observes:

[E]ven when morality permits mothers to act for their children first among others ... I do not act for my child because morality permits it, but because I am his mother.⁷

Well, yes and no. The mother is acting *because* of both facts, in that she would not have acted if the reasons for the action were defeated by moral reasons against it.⁸ But things being as they are, the fact that there are no decisive moral reasons against the action is not and cannot be her reason for the action: the absence of a reason is not a reason. The only reason for her action is the undefeated reason to act for her child.

b Partiality and moral impartiality

Given that reasons, actions for which expresses partiality, are merely *pro tanto*, are they suspect in any way at all? Perhaps the difficulty is in the claim that morality is impartial. Barbara thinks that impartiality consists in observing the maxim that

⁷ Barbara Herman, 'Agency, Attachment, and Difference', *Ethics*, vol. 101 (1991) 775 at 780

⁸ It is worth noting that if moral reasons are a distinctive set of reasons they may militate against the action without defeating the reasons of partiality or attachment for it.

enjoins people to treat like cases alike.⁹ However, she believes, as I do, that that requirement is empty.¹⁰ I will dismiss the pedantic observation that since all cases are alike in some respects and different in others the maxim requires one to treat all cases in the same way, but that is an empty requirement because all modes of treatment are likewise alike in some ways (while being different in others). It seems natural to understand the maxim as requiring one to treat alike cases that are alike in that the same reasons for action apply to them. So understood the maxim avoids the pedantic objection. But so understood the maxim does no more than enjoin us to act for reasons that apply to us. We need no maxim for that to be true of us. That follows from the very idea that reasons apply to us. Therefore, unlike Barbara, I do not see the rejection of the maxim as a challenge to the claim that morality is impartial, as I do not think that the maxim is about impartiality. Being empty it is not about anything.

Partiality, to repeat, is favouring. It is possible that one has reasons to favour one person over another. But do such reasons conflict with morality? No doubt, we should be impartial or act impartially in some contexts, and sometimes that would involve a conflict with reasons believed to be generated by our attachments. A teacher whose daughter is one of the children in his class should act impartially towards all his students, and that may be difficult. There would be occasions in which one should avoid being in a situation in which these difficulties are encountered. But is morality impartial in the stronger sense, meaning that all moral reasons are impartial?

It is a difficult question as well as an easy one. Given that there is no theoretically significant body of considerations that constitutes morality one may, as we inevitably do, draw the boundaries of morality in different ways on different occasions, and none of these ways has claim to be *the* correct one. So, for example, some may

⁹ *Op. Cit.* 776.

¹⁰ There are other ways of understanding it, some making it too weak, others too strong. They cannot be considered here.

conclude that duties to one's children, demanding partiality towards one's children, are not moral duties, though (they may say) they are valid, binding duties. Others may take them to be moral and interpret or qualify the thesis that morality is impartial to allow for that kind of partiality. Such disputes about the nature or boundaries of morality seem to me pointless.

It is worth examining, however, one way of reconciling reasons of partiality with the alleged impartiality of morality. According to it considerations that permit or require agents to be partial are moral if derived from, or grounded in considerations that are impartial. For example, it may be claimed that

(1) Favouring one's children is (a constitutive) part of, or contributes to, a parent-child relationship that is valuable or good.

(2) The value of that relationship yields a reason for parents to favour their children.

Therefore

(3) One has reasons to favour one's children

The argument from (1) to (3) seems to me sound and helpful. I will refer to it as the standard argument. It points to the way reasons that express partiality can be established. But does the standard argument show that the more basic moral considerations are impartial? It is claimed that the standard argument entails:

(4) The reason all parents have to favour their children is itself impartial.

But does it? (1) and (2) are about the value of a type of relationship rather than about partiality or impartiality. The reason asserted in (3) is universal, in that it applies to anyone who is a parent. But it simply calls for partiality to be displayed by all. If partiality has something to do with agents showing favour to some over others and if reasons of partiality are reasons for conduct that favours some over others then (3) states that all parents have reason to be partial. There is nothing impartial about it (the proposition itself is not impartial as propositions can no more be impartial than partial).

c Partiality and the value of persons

Could it be that some writers think that morality is impartial because morally all people count, they have value as people, because they are people? And therefore no one is more valuable than any other? It is not easy to know what to make of this proposition. The value of people as people is a reason to respect them. It does not follow that I should respect my grandmother or that I should respect a great novelist just as much as I should respect a complete stranger who accomplished little in his life. I should respect all of them equally as persons, but not as great artists or as my grandmothers. How much should I respect each of them all told? Respect does not always aggregate, but sometimes the reasons for respect that I have towards some people would require me to do more for them than for the others. By way of contrast we can expect that in some other contexts the cumulative strength or importance of reasons to respect some people will not be greater than the strength or importance of the most important of these reasons. So that taken together, so long as the strongest reason applies to each of the people, they will yield reasons for the same conduct regarding each of them.

Some may object that I have misrepresented the principle that all persons count and count equally. It is not to be understood as saying that apart from their other evaluative properties: being (or not being) beautiful, generous, wise, conscientious, and the like, people also have value simply in virtue of being persons. Rather the principle states that persons enjoy a special status, that of beings that count.

How does that differ from saying that they possess worth in virtue of being persons, as well as worth in virtue of being creative, funny and the like? Is it that having this moral status is a precondition to be met before any of the other value properties can apply to them? This may be true of some properties. One cannot be a good mathematician without being a person, for example. But there are beautiful, loving, creative and funny animals that are not persons. Could it mean that even though non-persons can have those evaluative properties they do not provide reasons for actions relating to them because they are not persons? I see no justification for such

a view, and will continue on the assumption that the value-based approach is so far intact.

The preferential treatment respect may require is not normally thought of as favouring. 'Favouring' connotes action out of a special favourable attitude to the person or object favoured. We may have such an attitude towards people or objects we have reason to respect, but the reason to respect them is typically independent of the attitude. The doubts about the moral permissibility of favouring actions arise when we act as we do because we favour the objects of our actions. Our attitude is somehow taken to give us a reason to act as we do.

This last point may suggest another source of unease about attachments and favouring. Favouring someone because he is *my son* appears to fail the test of universalizability, because an essential part of the reason can only be stated using a singular reference. Favouring someone for the reason that he is John, or Joseph's child, and the like, is favouring them for non-universal properties they have, or for being a particular individual. Moral reasons, we have been taught, cannot be like that. Of course when we deal with people we deal with particular people. We often must identify the individuals whom we have reason to treat one way or another through the use of singular reference. But when we have reason to deal with them as we do that is because their case falls under a reason whose content can be stated without the use of singular reference.

The obvious reply is to invoke again the standard argument –

(3) One has reasons to favour one's children

because

(1) Favouring one's children is part of, or contributes to, a parent-child relationship that is valuable or good.

(2) The value of that relationship yields a reason for parents to favour their children.

That NR is my child is a reason for me to favour him because this is an instance of a reason, namely that parents have reason to favour their children.

2 Personal value: the irreplaceability problem

The standard argument shows that the partiality of attachments is not in itself suspect. It raises no doubts about their ability to provide reasons. But it leads us straight into the real problem. Barbara states it thus:

When I attend specially to the needs of my children and friends because I am partial to them, either I have acted as I ought not (morality requires that I count their needs no more than others'), or I have done what I ought to do, because there are obligations to one's children and friends, but I have done it the wrong way: my actions were expressions of my partiality, not of my moral understanding and commitments. (776)

We can dismiss the first horn of the dilemma. Morality does not forbid us to favour our children and friends, or so I – along with Barbara – shall assume, meaning that while some forms of favouring are immoral, not all are. The difficulty is understanding how it can be right to express our partiality not as an instance of doing our “moral” duty.

At least part of the problem is with the way the standard argument was presented. It seems to explain the value of – say - parental relationships. That value provides reasons for everyone, not only to parents and children. For example, strangers should respect the relations between parents and children. Sometimes, when the relationship is in trouble they should help parents and children repair the ruptures. Governments should help people sustain close relations with their children, and so on.

The standard argument can explain how the value of an attachment provides universal reasons of these kinds. But can it explain, e.g., the value of a friendship to the friends? Assume that the friendship between Abby and Betty is good for both of them. Values being universal, the objection goes, it follows that there can be someone else, call her Carol, such that if Abby were friends with her their friendship would have the value to Abby that her friendship with Betty has. In that case, Abby has no reason not to replace her friendship with Betty with a friendship with Carol, assuming that she can do so. But that is clearly false, and it shows that universal values cannot account for the value or practical importance of relationships and attachments. It follows that universal values cannot explain the reasons attachments

give to those attached. Friendships, one is inclined to say, are with a particular person, not with the bearer of some good qualities. For Abby her friendship is with Betty – with that individual person, not merely Betty as a bearer of some good qualities that Carol may also have, or come to have.

It is not easy to make sense of the objection. Of course the friendship is with a specific individual, but Abby cannot even recognise her friend except through some of her features, features that may well be shared by others. All her beliefs about her friend, everything she feels her friend to be or have, can be expressed as ascribing to her friend some properties that can (in an a-temporal sense) be possessed by other people. Perhaps the objection is that it is wrong to think that the significance of the friendship for Abby is exclusively in Betty's good qualities. She may like Betty because of her awkward gait, her bent legs, her infuriating contrariness, etc. To be sure, people's affection for others, and whatever dependence on them evolves through their common history, does consist of reactions to features that are not themselves evaluative, and not necessarily commonly seen as endearing.¹¹ But if the friendship is good, and if the affection and mutual dependence contribute to its significance, then those features are themselves good in one way or another. It is time to address directly the issues of uniqueness and non-fungibility. Our friendships and other attachments are unique to us. That, however, is consistent with the fact that they are made unique by universal properties. It may be that for Abby her friendship with Betty is special because it was with Betty she had her first satisfying sexual experience, or because it was Betty who nursed her back to health when she had pneumonia, the first serious illness of her life, etc. In each case what makes Betty special and important to Abby is that she relates to her in a way in which many people can relate to one another. Many people were someone's first satisfying sexual partner, many people nursed someone to health from their first serious illness, and many others could have played these roles. Nevertheless, so far

¹¹ A non-evaluative property may be said to be positive if its presence contributes to the explanation of the fact that a good-making evaluative property is instantiated in the conditions then existing.

as Abby is concerned Betty is unique. She relates to Abby in ways in which now no one else can. And these relational properties are, to Abby, significant. They are part of what makes her friendship with Betty unique, and uniquely valuable.

That means that no other friendship will be the same, will have the same good aspects as the friendship with Betty. It does not mean either that that friendship is the best there can be, or that it would be wrong to end it in order to have another friendship, when the two conflict.

I have illustrated the point using the example of dramatic events in people's lives. Many friendships and other attachments do not share such dramatic events, and for those who share them such events need not be the most important aspect of the meaning of the friendship. With time more and more is shared among people, and some of it becomes – for one reason or another, and they need not be important reasons – significant for them, changing, cementing or undermining the ties among the friends. Uniqueness is created by the significant historical-biographical features of the friendship. And the role of all the significant historical features of a friendship or other attachment, is explained by theories that fall within the value-based approach. The objector may reply that while it is true that such historical properties make the relationship unique to the friends, and while they may be valuable properties, they are not the reasons people have for valuing their friendships, at least they are not always among the reasons people have for valuing the friendship. That may be so. The observations above address the familiar tension between the feeling that attachments are valuable because of the evaluative properties that they or their objects have, and the feeling that each attachment is in some sense unique and irreplaceable – we can lose one attachment and acquire others that are no less good and enriching, but they will be different. In some significant dimension we will not be replacing like with like. We may, for example, while conceding that the new attachment is no less valuable than the lost one, and that it enriches our life no less than the lost one did, nevertheless mourn the loss of the lost one (and not merely the circumstances of its loss).

My view of the matter as outlined above is almost entirely consonant with Barbara's *deliberative field model* which defeats 'a picture of an autarchy of ends slotted into a legalistic or merely formal deliberative framework and, ... [replaces] that picture with the idea of the Good as a constructed object of practical agency',¹² replaces it with an account of how the attachments are integrated within the agents' lives. The main difference between us is the absence from my account of a constructivist understanding of that process, an understanding that implies that the value of the attachment is entirely due to (a) its being embraced by the agent and (b) its not falling foul of moral constraints. On my account, expressed in the standard argument, the attachment has to be valuable and its objects appropriate independently of the agents' embracing them. However, they acquire a personal meaning or value to these agents through their biographical place in in the agents' lives and that, those biographical properties of the objects of attachments, makes them unique to the agents, in a way that is consistent with the universalisability of value properties, because there could be similar attachments in the life of other people.¹³

3 Attachments and the right reasons

The conclusion of the discussion so far is that if there is any puzzle about the possibility of reasons that express attachments it is not because they favour some over others, and therefore not because they express partiality to some over others. Such partiality and such favouring are not always defensible, but they are not suspect

¹² *Op. Cit.*, 788

¹³ Another difference between us is that I do not share Herman's view that there is a problem with the plural value view. She writes that the 'problem arises when it looks like "over here" is what I most care about, what I want to happen (and cannot not want to happen), but "over there" is what impartial morality demands. There is then deep conflict and tension. And when impartial morality wins, it is not only at the expense of what I most care about, it provides no deliberative space even to acknowledge my concerns. The fact that I care about my son is in no way to affect the deliberative outcome.' (783). It is part of growing up to realise that some things are not up to us, and they can be the weather, other people's behaviour or our moral duties.

in themselves. When vindicated, the standard argument shows them to be valuable because they are instances of universal values that have acquired a special significance in the life of the people whose attachments they are. I will therefore now return to an examination of attachments only. The puzzle about them (though not only about them) is that the standard argument that establishes which attachments are valuable seems ill suited to provide the reasons that those attachments appear to provide.

To begin we should examine the ways in which attachments affect our reasons. I will consider only one type of attachment, though a large and varied type: friendship. The problem we face now is how to understand personal meaning or value, and how it affects the reasons we have.

a Incommensurability of reasons and the impact of feelings & attitudes

Two broad situations present different problems. In the first one acts to cultivate a new friendship or to enhance the significance of an existing one, or one acts to protect an existing friendship from ending, or deteriorating. In the second friendships exist that do not need repairing, enhancing or defending. The first category involves actions for the sake of the friendship, whereas the second does not. There when actions affect the friends one can be said to be acting out of friendship, one is acting as a friend.

Let me start with a story. Suppose you ask me about Jack: Isn't he an interesting person? Good natured? Fun to be with? A good and loyal friend (to his friends)? I agree with all of that. 'Why don't you befriend him?' You ask. 'I don't know. I just don't feel like it', I reply. About a week later you ask me about Jill, and it turns out that I have the same positive opinion about her. 'How about befriending Jill?' you ask. 'Interesting suggestion', I say, 'I had not thought of it; but now you mention it I think that I will try to become friends with her'. 'Why do you want to be friends with Jill?' you ask. 'You know', I say, 'she is interesting, and easy to get on with, etc. etc.' 'But so is Jack' you say. 'I know, but I just do not feel like being friends with him'. 'Do you mean', you ask, 'that you like Jill better than Jack?' 'No,' I reply, 'I like

them both'. 'Do you suspect', you ask 'that you will be more successful in establishing a lasting, rewarding friendship with Jill than with Jack?' 'No, I have no reason to think so, nor the opposite'. 'So why?' you finally ask. 'I do not know. I just want to'.

I do not suggest that this is a typical story. Often, probably most often, people drift into friendship gradually, not deciding to form a new friendship deliberately as in the story. Nor, when aiming to forge a new friendship, do people typically act in the way the story describes. It is, however, a possible story, and it brings out an important point, a point that is typically present in all deliberate forging of new friendships. It is that people have reasons for their choice of friends, but those reasons are not unique to the people they choose to be friends with, nor do they fully explain their choice of friends. Typically, they just go for one person and not for another. There are no normative reasons for the preference, though of course there are psychological or other explanations, or if you like, non-normative explanatory reasons.

Another story illustrates the point: It starts the same way, with that conversation about Jack, except that when we meet again you do not mention Jill. Instead I tell you that I changed my mind and I am now trying to forge a friendship with Jack. 'Why?' you ask. 'Well as we said, he has so many good qualities one wants to see in a friend'. 'But', you say, 'that was not enough for you last week'. 'Well', I reply, 'I changed my mind'. 'Have you learnt anything new about Jack?' 'No, it is simply that now I feel like being friends with him'.

It is about the same point: I have reasons, but the complete explanation involves more than those reasons. Similar phenomena will be familiar when friends drift apart imperceptibly, until the friendship ends. There are many different ways of drifting apart – sometimes the reasons for the friendship disappear or there are new reasons against it. But sometimes the reasons for the friendship are still there, but the friendship lost its appeal.

Let us turn now to actions within a secure friendship: often people like being with their friends, doing things with them as well as doing things for them. In all these cases what they do are things worth doing and worth doing with someone, whether or not one does them with one's friends. Social intercourse, going on holidays, going to concerts, dances, discussing philosophy, supporting another person materially or psychologically, lending a listening ear, offering sound advice, and so on are all worth while in their own right. In many cases agents have reason to spend time with, do something with or for their friends, and they also have reason to do the same, or to engage in other activities, with others. Often the reasons for none of these various options defeat the others.¹⁴ In some such cases agents will feel disinclined to, and will not choose the option of acting with or for their friends. Sometimes I prefer not to be even with my best friends, and would rather be with people who are not among my friends. And I do not mean just that sometimes the better reason would support such options. I mean simply that faced with incommensurable reasons, and feeling at that time as I do, I would choose an option not involving my friends. By the same token, on other occasions people will prefer, again faced with incommensurable reasons, those options that do involve their friends. Suppose Jill is now a friend. I may feel like spending time with her, doing something with her. Not because she is a friend, but because she is Jill, though I would not have felt like that had she not been my friend.

So far I have emphasised a number of ways in which friendship may be at work, but not as a normative reason. Rather, the web of feelings and attitudes that constitute its instantiation in this person or that causes people to act intentionally, that is for reasons, but the reasons do not involve the friendship, and do not fully explain the action. The feelings and attitudes associated with the friendship complement the normative explanation of the action, and it is they that account for the choice to be or act with the friend.

¹⁴ See my discussion of incommensurability of reasons in *The Morality of Freedom*, chapter 13.

b Friendship as a reason

You may think that in detailing some ways in which attachments can affect our conduct even when they do not feature among the normative reasons for which we act I am trying to minimise the difficulty of explaining how the value of friendship can be a reason for action out of friendship. But my aim is not that, but the need to identify the kind of situations in which attachments, friendships, not only affect our conduct but do so because we act for (normative) reasons, which they constitute. I described two kinds of situations in which our actions are explained by our friendships but where the friendships do not figure among the (normative) reasons for which we act. First, when we act for reasons, but the reasons are not conclusive. They are incommensurable with conflicting reasons, and what makes us choose the option we do are our feelings and attitudes about and to the friendship and the friend, feelings and attitudes that explain our actions without being our reasons for them. Second, there are cases in which we want to do things with or for the person who is a friend but our reason is that he or she is that person: I want to do things with or for Jill, because I take pleasure in doing things with or for her. Not because she is a friend, but because she is Jill. Possibly, I would have felt the same had she not been a friend. As things are, our friendship explains why I feel that way. But that is not part of my (normative) reason. Some of these cases are also cases of incommensurability. But they include cases where the reasons to act with or for the friend are conclusive.

When do friendships constitute or provide normative reasons? Some cases are unproblematic. For example, having moved to a new town in which I know nobody, I may set out to spot possible friends and cultivate relations with them. My reason is the value, the benefits, which a successful friendship will bring. Similarly, even though I am not entirely happy with my friendship with Jack, given that he is my only friend I may try to repair ruptures in the friendship in order to keep it alive, for the sake of the value it has for me. Some reasons of this kind are frowned upon as mercenary (forging a friendship with someone one dislikes to gain promotion at work, etc.). But

they are not all objectionable. However, they do not exhaust the ways attachments provide reasons. The other ways are the problematic ones.

Even when one's action is not taken for the reason that it is directed towards a friend, even when it is merely caused by feelings and attitudes associated with friendship, it does express the agent's friendship with the other. That an action expresses friendship does not mean that it was taken to express friendship. But that an action would, if taken, express one's friendship makes it possible to take it in order to express the friendship, an act that can reinforce the friendship and reassure the friends of their continued closeness.

Moreover, friendship like other attachments is a socially constituted relationship, or rather a range of relationships, as there are so many kinds of socially recognised friendships. To be sure, people mould their friendships to suit their circumstances, feelings and temperaments. But their shaping of their relationships constitutes mere variations on socially recognised themes. That is inescapable with all "dense" social relations, ones involving a wide range of complex interactions and mutual expectations. Their density means that they cannot be entirely created by the people involved in them. Rather the people know the social form, and rely on it while adapting it.¹⁵

It is typical of the social practices that create the possibility of various relationships that they endow some actions with symbolic meaning relevant to the conduct of such a relationship: they signify a desire to form it, express a commitment to its continuation, show the degree to which one finds it important, that one desires to reduce its intensity or to end it, that one feels that the other has failed to live up to its requirements, and so on. These actions sometimes express their meaning whether intended to do so or not, but typically they will be performed to express their meaning – and such actions are actions where the relationship, the friendship in our example, provides a reason, or part of the reason for the action. Valuing as

¹⁵ I discussed this matter in some detail in *The Morality of Freedom* ch. 12.

we do our friendships, caring about them, and about our friends, it is natural that we have reason to express these facts, not only to reassure our friends, but out of the need to express how we feel, to make plain or reaffirm how we feel.

But even though much of what we do within a friendship has that expressive value, and can, and often is, done partly to express our attitudes to our friends and friendships, this is not yet the central case, nor perhaps the most troublesome case. The key to the way in which friendships give reasons lies in the fact that they are social products: constituted by complex interweaving practices. They determine what conduct is or is not appropriate between friends, and the appropriate ways in which we recognise and respect friendships among others. As I mentioned the socially determined patterns of conduct and expectations are malleable, and adapted by people in building their own friendships (though the degree to which deviation from the socially determined factors is permissible varies among societies). But even the private, individual shaping of one's relationships is done against the backdrop of those social practices. They form the point of departure, the baseline that endows variations with their meaning by the very fact that they are variations. The background of social practices is essential. It enables people to know how to conduct themselves within friendships, and what to expect from their friends.

Now we can see the complex pattern that attachments generate: friends act towards each other in the knowledge of what is appropriate or expected, and that of course allows considerable freedom for both the social practices and their personal modifications to determine types of appropriate actions, allowing various degrees of freedom in choosing the specific act one would perform. That choice is informed by any number of other reasons, not necessarily to do with one's relations to the friend (people follow their professional or other interests partly commonly with their friends). The friendship is part of the reason for such action, the part that says that the action is appropriate in the context of the relationship. Sometimes, however, one has no other reason for taking the action, nor is one emotionally

moved to take it. One may even be reluctant to take the action, and take it unwillingly with various degrees of reserve or resentment, simply because one knows (or believes) that one owes it to one's friend.

c Have we solved the puzzle?

You will remember the puzzle I set out to solve. In Barbara's words –

When I attend specially to the needs of my children and friends because I am partial to them, either I have acted as I ought not (morality requires that I count their needs no more than others'), or I have done what I ought to do, because there are obligations to one's children and friends, but I have done it the wrong way: my actions were expressions of my partiality, not of my moral understanding and commitments. (776)

Or, for those unworried about the distinctness of moral reasons: If we have reasons to act with or for our children because of the value of the parent-child relationship, does it not follow that when acting for reasons which express my attachment to my children I am acting for invalid reasons? I am not acting to promote the value of parental relations. I am expressing my partiality, not my adherence to value.

That worry, I implied, is generated by a mistaken view of the way attachments provide reasons. Attachments provide non-instrumental reasons only when they are the fostering of a valuable relationship. Valuable relationships consist in dense patterns of interactions, expectations recognised by those in the relationship and by others. That means that they are constituted by a web of duties and other practical reasons, the basic pattern of which is underpinned by social practices that people are familiar with, and which they modify to suit their personalities and circumstances. The relationships provide reasons because they are constituted by those reasons. People act for those reasons because these are the actions that express the relationships, but they are not necessarily motivated by those reasons. Typically the reasons are not conclusive; there are other actions supported by reasons that are no weaker. Typically, people are motivated by their feelings about and attitudes towards their children, or friends, etc. But many of the actions so motivated are also actions taken for reasons of friendship, or of parental relations,

meaning that those reasons determine what action would express the feelings friends have towards their friends, or parents towards their children.

That is, however, merely a description of the simple case. Often the reasons and motivations will be more complicated – one may have reason to reassure the other of one's commitment to the relationship; one may feel a need to rekindle in oneself the emotions that one thinks one ought or one wants to have towards the other; one may simply be aware that given the relationship one owes this or that to the other and do so reluctantly --- and the complexity of human life and of human emotions guarantees an indefinite number of more complex reasons and motivations.

4 Conflict and aggregation

Some may feel that I have not yet confronted the main difficulty. It is often discussed through examples: May I save my friend, rather than any of the others, just because she is my friend? Or suppose that three are at risk, and I can choose between saving the two on the left and saving the one on the right, and the one is my friend, or my mother, or child. May I save the one rather than the two, just because of my attachment to her? Or, indeed, may I not do so? Is it permissible to save the two rather than my mother?

That possession of other evaluative qualities provides reasons independently of being a person, does not in itself entail that the strength of the reasons they provide is greater than the strength of the stronger reason among them. It is possible that the reason not to kill Jane because she is a person is as strong as the reasons not to kill her due to the combined facts that she is a gifted musician and a person. But unless one assumes that none of the other evaluative qualities of persons makes a difference to way one should conduct oneself towards them the question is one of detail: a question of when favouring is justified rather than whether it can be (non-instrumentally) justified.

A value-based account is one according to which reasons are provided by the value of things, by the fact that certain actions, people, events and more possess value properties of a variety of kinds. As we saw, evaluative properties are 'impartial' in being universal. Given that being persons endows people with value, in as much as people count because they are persons they all count just the same. But they possess other non-instrumental value properties, and these differentiate between people. In as much as they differ in their evaluative features we have different reasons to behave differently to different people.

5 Partiality to oneself

It is frequently assumed that whatever one's verdict about other partialities, partiality to oneself must be justified for it is inevitable, or rather it can be avoided only by suppressing powerful natural motivational dispositions, and by distorting one's existence as an agent. I believe that partiality to oneself is never justified and that it is often thought to be justified because it is confused with agential asymmetry. As this is an important point I will take some time to explain it.

Every person is both the agent of his own actions, and in some cases, one of their objects, one of those affected by them. Other people are merely the objects of his actions (though joint action is another important category, with mixed roles for others). That is the obvious, but nonetheless the basic asymmetry. It explains some of the phenomena that are often mistaken for partiality for self. Agents are sometimes affected by a variety of motivational dispositions a few of which can be confused with a disposition to be partial to oneself. Take, to start with, the common belief that people are naturally partial to themselves in that they are liable to choose the action that, they believe, will better serve their own interest, even when aware that the alternative is supported by better impartial reasons. It is at best only partially true, and to the extent that it is, that is for reasons other than those assumed by those who hold it.

It is not clear, for example, to what degree serving one's self-interest shows partiality to oneself. What is in one's interest, or self-interest, to do or have is – normally – that which will secure the means or the preconditions for the realisation of one's ends, or will realise a constitutive part or aspect of one's ends, assuming that they are worth pursuing.¹⁶ Thus it is in one's interest to have adequate accommodation, more money, good health, and the like. Some of these would be of non-instrumental value as well. But it is inappropriate to describe whatever is of intrinsic value only as being in one's interest. Listening to a Bach Cantata, listening to it for no ulterior, no further reason or end, is not something which could properly said to be in my interest, though having a ticket to its performance is. To say that listening to it is in my interest implies an ulterior purpose that will be served by doing so. It may impress my new friend, or it may advance my goal of listening to all Bach's Cantatas, etc. Given that actions whose value to their agents is purely intrinsic are not properly described as being in their interest, we can conclude that what makes something be in the interest of the agent is not its intrinsic value. To simplify let us concentrate on those actions that are in the agents' interest because they are instrumentally valuable in serving the agents' (worthwhile) goals. There is no general reason to think that these goals are or will all be self-regarding, that they are or will be the pursuit of pleasure by the agent, or the pursuit of knowledge by him, etc. At least some of them may be other-regarding goals like looking after one's children, contributing to political causes, studying to become a doctor in order to have a socially useful job, etc. Whether or not preferring one's interests displays partiality to oneself appears to depend, at least to a degree, on what one's goals are. It may do so if the goals are self-regarding, but not otherwise. Of course, if one's goals show partiality to one's children or others, then one's

¹⁶ I am putting the point crudely without due qualifications and refinements.

preference for doing what serves one's interest, while not manifesting partiality to oneself, may be infected by partiality to one's children.¹⁷

A disposition to prefer one's interests does not amount to a disposition to favour oneself. Possibly, however, action that serves one's interests may be due to a different disposition, one that can more properly be described as a disposition to favour oneself. Agents sometimes have a preference for being active, and for being in control. Imagine a simplified situation: we can either achieve a certain result by our own action, or let someone else secure the same result, perhaps getting him to secure it by paying him to do so. Not infrequently one has a preference for achieving the result oneself, and such preferences may lead one to take the wrong action, that is to try to secure the result oneself rather than get someone else to do so, when the latter would be better. More indirectly, the preference for being in control may lead to action, sometimes unjustified action, furthering one's own interests. As we saw, successfully furthering one's own interests is empowering. It enhances one's ability to achieve one's goals. But it is important not to confuse the preference to favour one's interests which results from a preference for being active and in control with taking oneself, implicitly or explicitly, as deserving special favours, or as counting for more than others.

The preference for being in control is but one of the motivational malformations that may afflict agents. It is paralleled by an opposite preference, also often to be found, namely the preference to avoid responsibility, a preference for not being in

¹⁷ Here another complication comes into play. Reference to interest is at home when the action supposed to be in one's interest either serves a self-regarding end (getting a ticket to the performance of the Bach cantata) or serves an unspecific end, as most self-interested actions do. These actions serve or will serve unspecific goals which one has or will come to have: one saves money now to have the means for whatever one would want to do in 20 years time, etc. That is, when the self-interested action is taken, that it will advance the end that it will, in the event, serve is not the reason for taking the action. Suppose I borrow a car to be able to take my child to school. It would be odd to say that it was in my interest to borrow the car. Though agreeing to have my friend's car for my own use next week may well be in my interest. I will find ways to make use of it. Its possession may even lead me to adopt ends I would otherwise not be able (i.e. rationally able) to adopt.

charge or in control, but letting others deal with the matter at hand. That preference, when allowed to dictate one's choices, will lead one to try to achieve one's goals by getting others to do so, rather than doing it oneself. A single person may well display both conflicting preferences on different occasions, or even at the same time. Neither of them constitutes favouring oneself, both being simply examples of the large number of motivational or executive malformations to which agents are susceptible. The distortions and wrong actions to which these preferences lead do not necessarily favour the agent. Often enough they affect agents when choosing between different ways of pursuing moral objectives where neither option favours the agent. Yet the motivational malformations, either the preference for being in control, or for avoiding direct involvement and responsibility, may well determine the agent's choice. When the choice is between an option that favours the agent and one that does not, the malformations may well lead agents to make choices that disfavour them. Thus it would be a mistake to think of these motivational preferences as dispositions to favour oneself. Favouring one's interests and favouring being in control and active can be colloquially described as displaying partiality to oneself. But they do not show the ethically interesting or suspect partiality. What exactly is the ethically suspect or interesting partiality to oneself? One obvious answer identifies this partiality with favouring the advancement of one's own well-being over other ends that, on the relevant occasion, one believes oneself to have a better reason to pursue. I have argued that normally, advancing or safeguarding one's own well-being is not a reason for the agent concerned.¹⁸ But partiality to oneself need not manifest itself in giving undue weight to an alleged reason to serve one's own well-being. It could consist simply in choosing an option that favours one's well-being when whatever reasons

¹⁸ See X. Scanlon agrees with this view: reference

support that option are defeated by reasons for an alternative and incompatible one.¹⁹

If so then partiality to self has to be treated as a motivational malformation. But why assume that it is unjustified? Why not assume that one should, or may, be partial to oneself? Because that way of understanding the partiality is inconsistent with the combination of (a) the view that agents do not have a reason to promote their own well-being, and (b) the view that partiality to self consists in favouring one's own well-being. Without rehearsing the full argument for (a) it may be helpful to lift the veil and look at its main presupposition, which is that our well-being consists in the whole-hearted and successful pursuit of worthwhile ends – to repeat the sound bite I repeated many times before. One's well-being may consist in alleviating poverty, treating the ill, defending the oppressed, just as it may consist in going on wine tasting holidays, textile tours of South-West China, or other self-regarding activities and pursuits. It all depends on what one's goals are.

The result is that one cannot choose one's non-instrumental goals to serve one's well-being. Rather one chooses one's goals for their merit, in light of one's tastes and inclinations, and they determine what one's well-being consists in and thereby also what serves it, what is in one's interest. It also follows that partiality to self, understood as favouring one's own well-being, need not mean preferring self-regarding activities and goals over other, e.g., over moral goals. Whether it does depends on each person's ends in life.

Perhaps we should understand partiality to self as a tendency to favour self-regarding ends. For all I know some people may well have such a tendency. But I do not know of an account that suggests that such a tendency may be justified. Nor do I know of an account that gives such a tendency the appearance of plausibility which

¹⁹ Alternatively the partiality could be action taken because one falsely believes that one has a reason to pursue one's well-being. Such false belief does not itself manifest any partiality. Mistakes manifest partiality only when they are the result of partiality, that is if they are caused by one's partiality. And that brings us back to the considerations discussed in the text above.

would warrant attributing belief in its justification to anyone. There are, no doubt, other possible ways of understanding partiality to self. It may, for example, be a tendency to keep with the pursuit of one's well-established ends, rather than deviate from them when weighty considerations point to an overriding case for doing so. A person settled in his work, with his family and other pursuits, may well not respond to the need to help others afflicted by an earthquake or a flood, or whose plight is not sudden but is now pressed upon him. So understood partiality to self becomes a conservative tendency, a tendency to stay with the familiar, a disinclination to change course when there is good reason to do so. Yet again, such a tendency is probably fairly wide-spread, and yet again it need not lead to action that favours one's well-being. A doctor looking after AIDs patients in Uganda may feel the same reluctance to disrupt his moral activities in order to improve his education, or in order to keep up a romantic relationship with someone back home, in Denmark, even though his contribution to his patients in Uganda is now minimal and the better reason is to take the more self-regarding options. As with other ways of understanding the so-called partiality to oneself, it is more appropriately understood as an agential distortion, as motivational malformation.

Some writings express the fear that unless there are limits to the demands of morality one's life as an agent is cramped and distorted. One is merely a device for converting moral inputs into moral output, and one does not have a life one can call one's own. A certain partiality to self is a consequence of the fact that 'concerns and commitments are *naturally* generated from a person's point of view quite independently of the weight of those concerns in an impersonal ranking of overall states of affairs'.²⁰ This is a way of understanding Bernard Williams' integrity objection and it may well constitute a valid objection to some moral theories. But it does not justify partiality to self. Our concerns and commitments do arise out of the belief that they are valuable, and drives and desires which are entirely '*natural*' and

²⁰ Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (OUP, 1982, rev. 1994) 56. I use Scheffler's formulation to identify a concern, using it in a way that is somewhat different from his, and against a target different from his.

not sensitive to our view of what reason there may be (e.g. hunger, urge to move one's limbs, need to be alert to one's environment) are rational, for while they are not as sensitive to reasons as our appreciation of literature, their biological sources and role mean that there are reasons to satisfy them.

I conclude that the phenomena normally identified as partiality to self are motivational biases, and I assume that there are various kinds of them, and that they do not necessarily manifest themselves in choices that favour the agent's own well-being, nor are they due to belief that one counts more than others do.²¹

²¹ Though confused people may think that they presuppose belief that one counts for more than others.